



## **Six-Country Survey of the Situation of Healthcare Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic in West Africa**

*Conducted by: The Organisation of Trade Unions of West Africa (OTUWA) in  
Partnership with Six of its National Labor Center Affiliates*

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## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

Access to health care is one of the most pressing challenges for social protection in West Africa. Coverage by statutory social security schemes is only enjoyed by workers in the formal economy and their families, while the vast majority of West African workers are in the informal sector. More than a right, access to health care is not just a social, but also an economic necessity because it contributes to the reduction of poverty, vulnerability and inequalities. Understanding health as a human right creates a legal obligation on States to ensure timely, acceptable and affordable health care of appropriate quality. A rights-based approach to healthcare requires that health policies must prioritize the needs of those furthest behind, a principle that has been echoed in the recently adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Universal Health Coverage.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest challenge the region has faced since World War II.<sup>1</sup> Its economic impact will be felt for years in reduced national budgets and by workers and their families. The healthcare sector is among those hardest hit, with healthcare workers laboring on the frontline courageously combating the spread of the virus and managing infections. In this context, the Organization of Trade Unions of West Africa (OTUWA), with the support of Solidarity Center, conducted a survey to assess the impact of the Covid-19 health crisis on workers in this sector and the different health systems in six West African countries: the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. While not claiming to be statistically significant, the survey provides us an important window to understand some key needs and opportunities to bolster healthcare as West African countries combat and hopefully recover from the coronavirus pandemic. It aims to serve as a conversation starter with unions that represent health workers, national union federations, local and national governments, health ministries and regional bodies responsible for advancing development goals, such as ECOWAS.

## **2.0 SURVEY OBJECTIVES**

The primary purpose of the survey was to acquire information from healthcare workers across West Africa to better understand their situation during the current pandemic as part of the larger OTUWA campaign of "Healthcare is a Human Right." The secondary goal of the survey was to create awareness among the healthcare workers in the West African sub-region that OTUWA is leading a healthcare advocate with its theme, "Healthcare Is a Human Right."

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

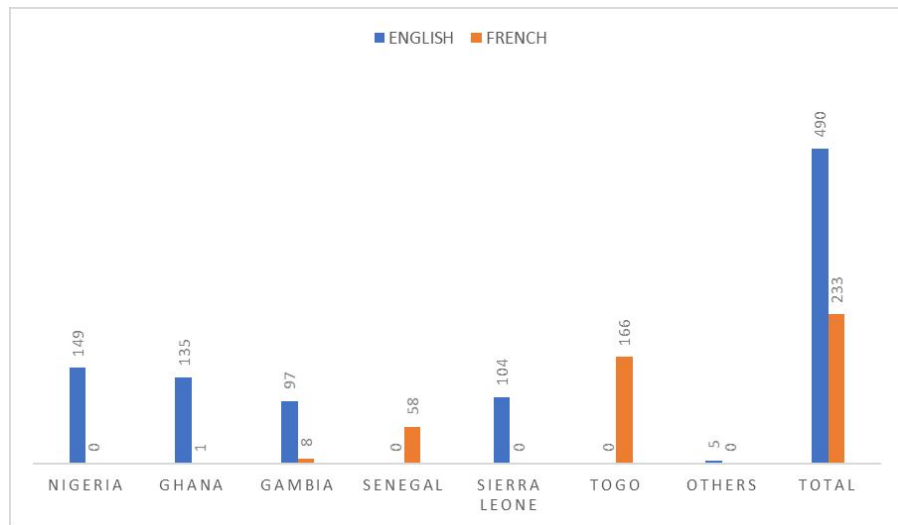
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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

The survey was administered electronically, using Google Forms as a data collection instrument to reach respondents across the six selected countries. The link was shareable via email, text and WhatsApp. Each of the six countries had an assigned representative who was also a part of the survey working group; their responsibility was to initiate circulation of the link in their respective countries. Anyone with a smartphone could fill out the survey. The adoption of this instrument conforms with the World Health Organization (WHO) Guidance on maintaining social distance. The survey questionnaire was drafted in French and English.

#### 4.0 DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

A breakdown of the figures indicates that 490 of respondents speak English while 233 speak French. These respondents are healthcare workers across various occupational lines. The majority of healthcare workers who responded are nurses followed by medical technicians, 35.5 percent and 31 percent respectively, of

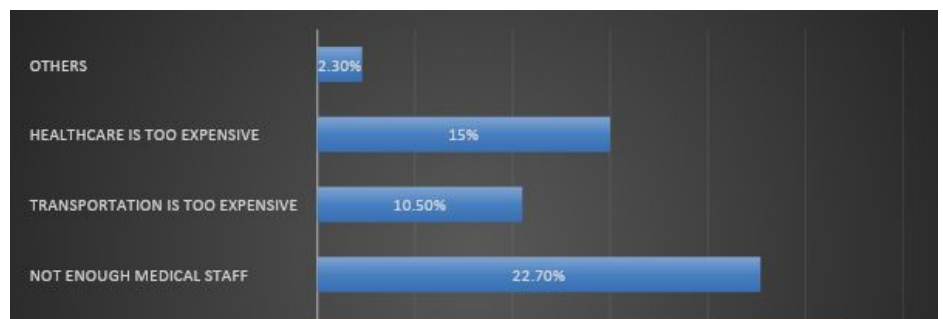


whom 55 percent are in public hospitals while 27 percent are in private clinics. The majority (86.5 percent) are permanent staff. The vast majority of respondents are union members (68 percent) and the gender distribution of the respondents indicates 61 percent male and 39 percent female. The majority of respondents work in urban settings (65.4 percent) as opposed to rural settings (34.6 percent). Interestingly, respondents from francophone countries mostly work in private clinics, while respondents from anglophone countries primarily work in public hospitals.

#### 5.0 KEY FINDINGS

##### 5.1 There are not enough healthcare facilities and medical personnel in many West African countries

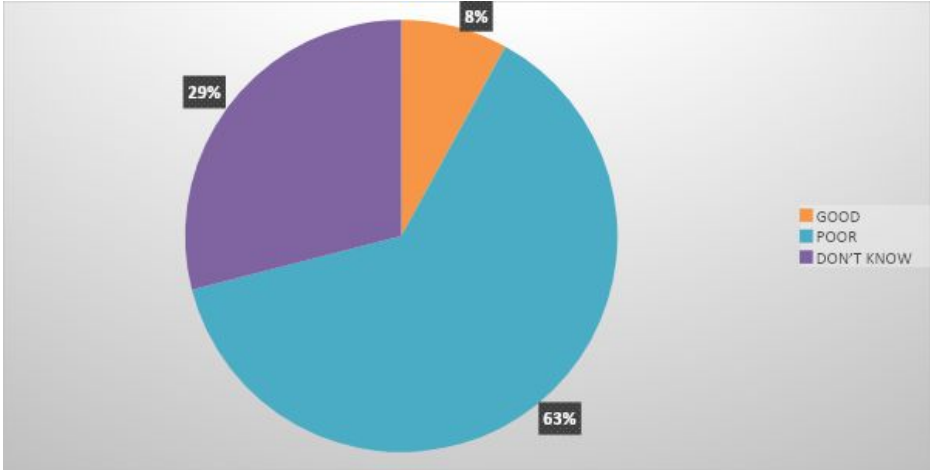
*Healthcare is a Human Right!*



In response to a question regarding the challenges confronting West African healthcare systems, respondents indicated inadequate healthcare facilities, shortage of medical personnel and expensive medical costs as the most pressing issues.

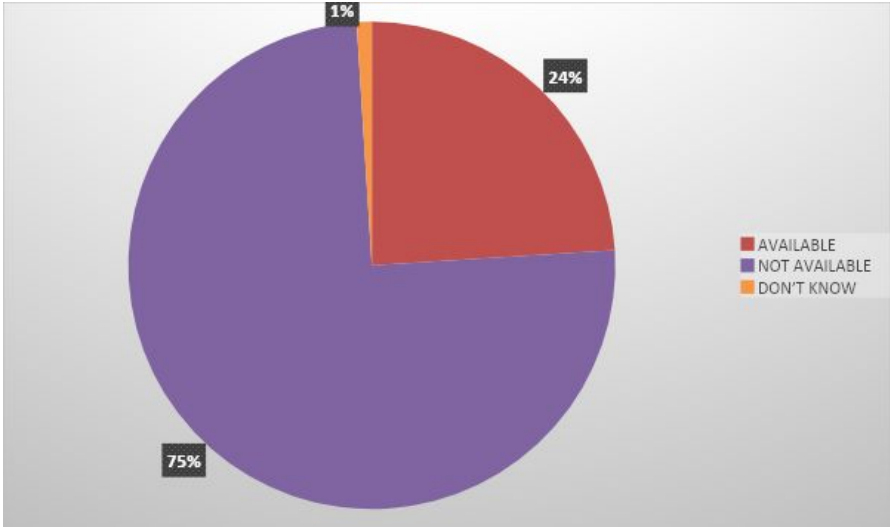
### 5.2 West African healthcare systems performed poorly in their responses to COVID-19 pandemic

In response to a question asking healthcare workers to assess their country's healthcare system response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the health workers reported negatively.



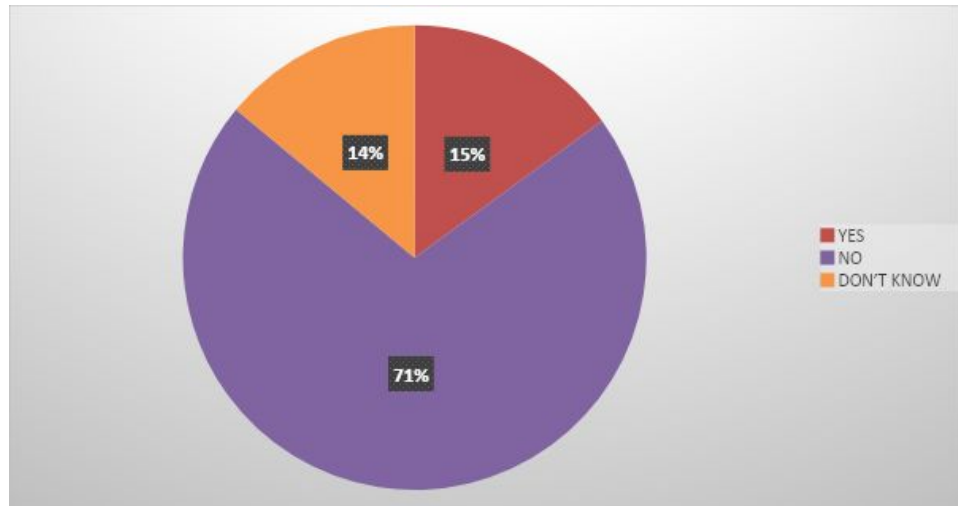
### 5.3 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is not widely available to healthcare workers on the frontline

In response to a question asking healthcare workers to rate their access to personal protective equipment (PPE) at work, including masks, gloves, gown, and disinfectants, the vast majority reported negatively.



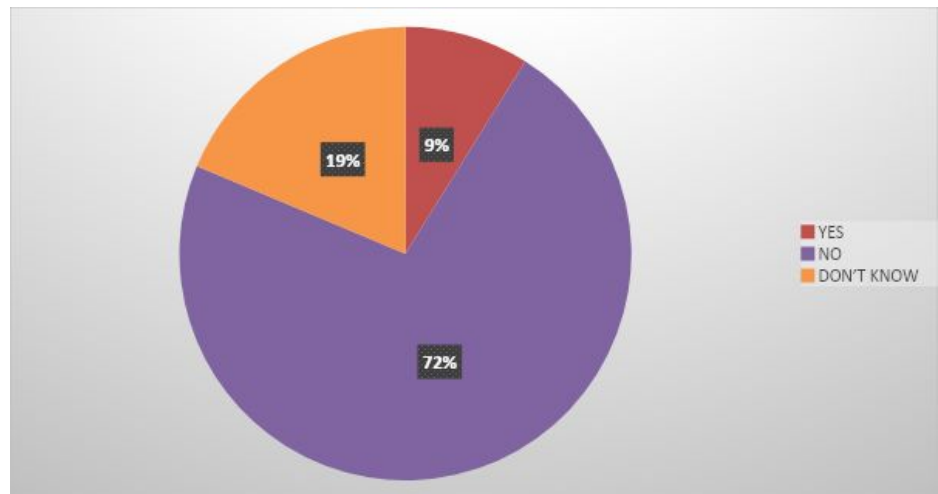
### 5.4 Healthcare workers do not have access to COVID-19 tests

In response to a question on whether there are enough COVID-19 tests available for healthcare workers who want to get tested, a vast majority of the respondents (71 percent) reported in the negative.



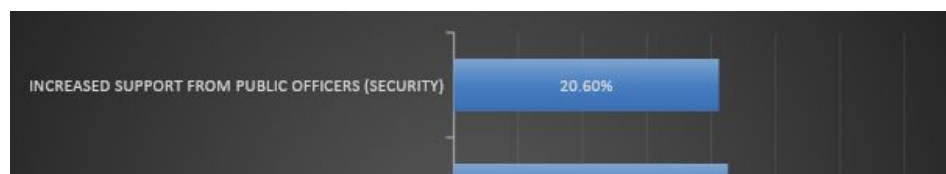
### 5.5 Members of the public do not have access to COVID-19 tests

When asked whether there are enough COVID-19 tests available for the general population who want to get tested, the majority of healthcare workers responded that they were not available.



### 5.6 Access to PPE and training on the use of PPE would make healthcare workers feel safer doing their jobs

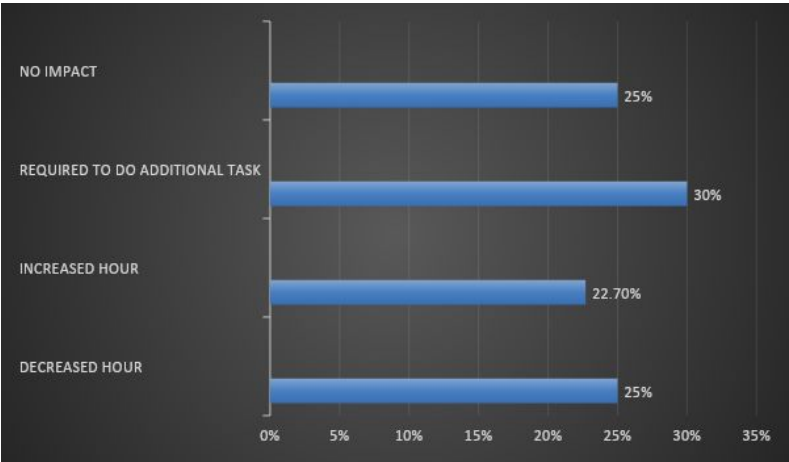
*Healthcare is a Human Right!*



In response to the question of what would make you feel safer at work, health care workers ranked access to PPE and training on use of PPE as the top two measures.

### 5.7 The majority of healthcare workers are required to do additional tasks and work an increased number of hours

In response to the question, how has COVID-19 affected your workload, healthcare workers responded that they are being asked to do additional tasks. While a significant number report no impact, or decreased hours, a high percentage also report increased working hours.



### 6.0 WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS TELL US?

In summary, the findings are indicative of the shortcomings of healthcare systems in many West African countries and the challenges confronting healthcare workers. There is a need for more engagement in the area of improvement of healthcare services, protection of the rights of health workers and development of policies that will ensure that healthcare is accessible and affordable to all. To this end, there is urgent need to constructively engage the ECOWAS structures, national governments and relevant healthcare authorities in the following respect:

- i. Prioritizing and increasing budgetary spending on health facilities and supplies.
- ii. Ensuring access to adequate PPE and other supplies for healthcare workers.
- iii. Intensifying COVID-19 tests for healthcare workers and the general public.
- iv. Protection of the rights of health workers to ensure a sustainable healthcare management across the sub region.

Trends within the respondents themselves indicate areas where unions might conduct greater outreach to include women, non-union members, rural health workers, migrant workers in research and advocacy on improving the quality of healthcare and working conditions for health workers. We take this opportunity to invite national union centers, unions that represent health workers from all professional categories, and organizations that represent healthcare users to join us in this work.

**For more information on the survey process and to join the campaign, contact:**

Comrade John Odah (Executive Secretary OTUWA) on +2348034030777, [jhnodah@yahoo.com](mailto:jhnodah@yahoo.com),  
<https://otuwa.org/>

For country specific analysis of the survey data, please contact the following persons:

COUNTRY	PERSON	PHONE NUMBER	EMAIL
Ghana	Philomena Aba Sampson	+01244258880	adduah@yahoo.com
The Gambia	Marie Antoinette Corr	+2202008904	antoucorr@gmail.com
Nigeria	Precious Mbat  Eyegbaghanren Imole Tina	+2348035474025  +2348062542822	preciousmbat79@gmail.com  imoleeye@yahoo.com
Senegal	Nafisa Samb	+22890899390	nafissasamb@gmail.com
Sierra Leone	Emmanuel Kamara	+23276714713	Sierralabour@yahoo.com
Togo	Adjele Fafa Mensah-A	+22890899390	adjele.mensah@ituc-africa.org

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