



## PRESS STATEMENT

### **CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOUTHERN AFRICA MINERS ASSOCIATION (SAMA) CALL ON SADC TO ENHANCE THE PROTECTION FOR OLDER PERSONS DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC**

*14 May 2020*

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The Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria and the Southern African Miners Association (SAMA) (comprised of the undersigned organisations), are gravely concerned by the recently published SADC [Regional COVID-19 Response Report – Bulletin 2](#) which omitted to set out clear guidelines on how older persons right to health should be protected during national lockdowns. This is particularly alarming considering the vulnerability of older persons to COVID-19. This susceptibility is further heightened for older persons who used to work in the mines with pre-existing occupational lung diseases and weakened immune systems due to ageing. Without a clear regional response that involves working together across communities, organisations and countries, which targets the protection of the most vulnerable, the spread and minimisation of the virus cannot be suppressed.

Mr Vama Jele, Executive Secretary of Swaziland Migrant Mineworkers Association (SWAMMIWA) recently said *“ex-miners are old and die from TB, silicosis, asbestosis, chronic obstructive airway diseases, in pains without dignity and inhumane. With no food or income and unable to get medical attention due to COVID-19, ex-miners are all in the old age group and excluding them is clearly politics without principle”*.

As of 14 May 2020, 4.3 million COVID-19 cases have been reported globally with almost 300 000 deaths and all 54 African countries have reported cases. Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director Europe, noted that 95% of COVID-19 deaths in Europe occurred in those older than 60 years and more than 50% of all fatalities involved people aged 80 and above. Dr Kluge also noted that reports were showing that 80% of deaths were occurring in individuals with at least one co-morbidity, in particular those with cardiovascular, hypertension and diabetes, but also with a range of other

chronic underlying conditions. The SADC region should learn from regions that were forerunners of the COVID -19 disease, on its spread and nature.

The SADC region is known for its mining industry, with most of its economies sustained by mining activities. These contribute greatly to the gross national product and employment. However, mining contributes to the high prevalence of tuberculosis (TB) and silicosis due to various risk factors including exposure to silica dust, labor migration and weak public health systems. The high prevalence of occupational lung disease is high amongst older persons who were gold mine-workers, making them highly vulnerable to and at risk of COVID-19 complications due to pre-existing lung conditions and age. The majority of older persons who used to work in mines, from the SADC region are sickly. The SADC report's recommendations place primacy on member states' economic recovery. This is in sharp contrast to the absence of any attention given to health measures to protect mine workers and their communities and the social determinants of health, which include the right to social security, coordination on health surveillance and cross-border disease containment strategies, that reflect principles in the SADC Protocol on Health.

Measures adopted by SADC member states have not considered the right to health of older persons, particularly those most vulnerable to COVID-19 owing to the impact of their current or former occupation as miners. This is evident in the slow pace of ratification of the [Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa](#) (Older Persons Protocol). It was adopted on 31 January 2016 to provide for comprehensive protection of the rights of older persons in Africa. Article 15(1) of the Older Persons Protocol requires state parties to guarantee the rights of Older Persons to access health services that meet their specific needs. The right to health is considered to fall within the cluster of social protection rights extended to older persons including historical miners and espoused under various SADC legal and policy frameworks. The fact that the SADC report overlooked this key population in its regional response measure, is indicative of the level at which it places older persons issues in the list of its immediate priority matters, in the COVID-19 response. In Africa, older persons have generally been over-looked and deprioritised in health policies. The majority of the existing public health laws, policies, programmes and services exclude older persons.

Although SADC recognises this demographic in its various instruments, adoption and promotion of the Older Persons Protocol at regional level is still lagging behind. The current regional response and its omission on targeted health interventions towards this key and high risk populations on account of increased vulnerability to COVID-19 due to underlying conditions, shows a lack of care and clear derogation from the principles of the Older Persons Protocol other than supporting regional protocols.

**We, therefore call on the SADC Secretariat and its Member States:**

- to respect, promote and fulfill the rights of older persons in general and their right to health in particular during their national containment efforts.
- to ratify the Older Persons Protocol.
- should ensure that labor sending countries with high prevalence of older persons suffering from occupational lung diseases as a result of working in mines, extend special protection to these older persons in their health policies.
- to revise its COVID-19 regional response report to include special regional response measures for older persons including those with a history of working in the mines.
- to encourage governments to raise awareness and develop tailored information on COVID-19 for older persons and make use of community structures and local languages to disseminate this information so that older persons are fully informed about the COVID-19 disease, its prevention, protection and treatment measures.
- should encourage governments to include the unique needs and rights of older persons in any training and capacity-building activities currently ongoing in various sector such as health, violence and abuse, local authority and humanitarian sectors among others, due to the higher risks they face because of the pandemic.

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The undersigned:

**Association of Mineworkers Mozambique (AMIMO), Botswana Labour Migrants Association (BoLAMA), Ex-Miners Association of Malawi (EMAM), Ex-Wenela Mineworkers Association of Zimbabwe (EWMAZ), Lesotho Ex-Miners Association (LEMA), Mzilikazi Ex-Miners Association Namibia (MEAN), Mineworkers Union of South Africa (MUSA), Swaziland Migrant Mineworkers Association (SWAMMIWA) and The Centre for Human Rights University of Pretoria**

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For more information, please contact:

**Mr Kitso Phiri**

Coordinator

Botswana Labour Migrants Association

Tel: +267 5910611, 72877854

Email: [kpxphiri@gmail.com](mailto:kpxphiri@gmail.com), [kitsophiri@bolama.org](mailto:kitsophiri@bolama.org)

[www.bolama.org](http://www.bolama.org)

The Centre for Human Rights has embarked on a [#AgeWithRights](#) campaign to highlight the situation of older women in Africa. Part of this campaign is calling on African governments to ratify the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Older Persons. This Protocol was adopted in 2016 and requires at least 15 States to ratify it before it can come into force.

For more on the Centre for Human Rights Campaign on the rights of older persons visit:  
[www.chr.up.ac.za/AgeWithRights](http://www.chr.up.ac.za/AgeWithRights)

The Protocol on the Rights of Older persons visit:

[https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32900-file-protocol\\_on\\_the\\_rights\\_of\\_older\\_persons\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32900-file-protocol_on_the_rights_of_older_persons_e.pdf)

For more information, please contact:

**Ms Patience Mungwari Mpani**

Manager: Women's Rights Unit

Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria

Tel +27(0) 718094939

Email: [patience.mpani@up.ac.za](mailto:patience.mpani@up.ac.za)

[www.chr.up.ac.za](http://www.chr.up.ac.za)