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June COVID-19 Landscape: SRHR and Gender Issues in Asia

As the public health effects of COVID-19 have been intensifying throughout the world, the Center, along with its key partners and allies, has been working to protect sexual and reproductive health care. Because health systems are strained, these services seem to have taken a backseat in order to tend to the growing pandemic. Below is a brief overview of the current landscape of SRHR resources in Cambodia, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, and Sri Lanka as reported in the month of June. In addition, this also provides a brief snapshot of the social and economic issues many women and girls are facing during this crisis, calling for a more nuanced and gender-based approach to safety measures. This document does not aim to reference every SRHR development in the eight Asian countries.

Please click [here](#) for the Center's COVID-19 related resources page.

**If you have relevant SRHR news and resources that you think we should have included here or should highlight in our next newsletter, please email them to asiaprogram@reprorights.org*

Cambodia

The maintenance of essential health services is critical during the pandemic in order to protect the gains Cambodia has made in these past few years concerning maternal and child mortality. These issues could “increase by 35 to 50 percent over the next year as essential services are disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic”. There are currently 77,600 women without access to healthcare facilities and expanding universal healthcare to make it accessible to more women should be a priority. [\[Cambodiansess\]](#)

Bangladesh

In the last month across the country around 13, 494 women and children faced domestic violence according to the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) report. The organization also emphasized to law enforcement that protecting children and women should be more of a priority during this crisis. [\[The Business Standard\]](#) In addition to domestic violence, the pandemic has created severe burdens on families economically as well. According to BRAC, 95% of people across the country suffered a loss of income, with another 51% saying that their household income was reduced to zero in late March. [\[BRAC\]](#)

The Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh are facing further increases in gender-based violence, however Rohingya women are serving as front-line workers through their production of masks to fulfill a gap of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the market. “Over 50,000 masks are being produced and the manufacturing is being managed by partners in UN Women's five multi-purpose

Women's centers in the camps, engaging 16 Rohingya women and girls with 46 families run as single female headed households." [\[Asia Pacific UN Women\]](#)

India

Maternal mortality is a major issue in India, and a pregnant woman died in an ambulance because no one would admit her and her child. This was after a 13-hour hospital trek and going to almost seven hospitals. [\[Emergency Live\]](#) COVID-19 continues to worsen the problem of maternal mortality and medical negligence.

The Delhi High Court declined to listen to public interest litigation to protect women against violence and discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, and said it was "for the purpose of news bites." [\[Tribune India\]](#)

Maternal mental health is a public health problem in India. "It is estimated that 10–35% of women around the world including India suffer from depression during pregnancy and postpartum. Pregnant women and new mothers are at an elevated risk of suffering from mental health problems. It has been observed that the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 has led to higher levels of depression among women during and after pregnancy." [\[National Center for Biotechnology Information\]](#) In addition, the lack of health facilities and access to trained health workers has heightened this distress, and without this treatment it could create long-term effects on maternal and infant health.

At the beginning of the lockdown there were many migrant workers left without food and shelter, or employment. Of those workers almost half were women, creating major health risks for those that were pregnant. The impact on women in rural India is even more dire. Local health workers cannot reach these areas due to the lockdown and social distancing, so many women are treated in groups, or without medical care. Adding to the challenge is the involvement of the limited rural healthcare providers in COVID-19–related work. [\[National Center for Biotechnology Information\]](#)

The Ipas Development Foundation India did a study on the short-term impact of COVID-19 on access to abortion services in India. They estimated 47% or 1.85 million abortions were compromised due to the increased burden on the healthcare system. This was a result of shifting priorities to Covid-19 treatment centers, staff, and the supply chain on contraceptive medicines. Also, a woman's ability to travel during this time to go to a shop not in their neighborhood has been impacted. The foundation recommended streamlining the supply chain to ensure availability of these contraceptives, provide access to both public and private facilities, and identifying geographic distribution of these facilities. [\[National Center for Biotechnology Information\]](#)

Myanmar

During the pandemic, the United Nations Population Fund has been working with the Department of Social Welfare to give trainings and support to case managers regarding gender-based violence and mental health and psychological support. In addition, the UNFPA has provided dignity kits for women and girls that can provide essential items and focus on conflict areas and quarantine centers. [\[Myanmar UNFPA\]](#)

Nepal

In Nepal there is already existing geographic, economic, and social issues which prevent access to healthcare services for women in Nepal, and the coronavirus pandemic has further exacerbated these issues. “In Nepal, even before the pandemic, only 58 per cent of births were attended by skilled personnel where others were left to face serious risks if any complications arose during childbirth (UNFPA, 2016). Now, women are facing additional barriers to accessing maternal health care, including movement restrictions, transport challenges, and anxiety over possibly being exposed to the virus.”

[\[Online Khabar\]](#)

The lockdown is to prevent and control the spread of COVID19, but it has resulted in citizens being deprived of regular health services. “At least 56 new mothers died in the past two months, whereas around 60,000 women were deprived of much-needed check-up and other services due to the lockdown.” As a result of this The Women and Social Committee of the House of Representatives directed the government to ensure people’s access to regular health services during the lockdown period, and the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens requested the Ministry of Health and Population to prioritize the issues of pregnant women and lactating mothers. [\[The Himalayan Times\]](#)

With continuous extensions of the lockdown, one-third (9018671 V/s 6043615 on January to May 2019 and same period of 2020) of contraceptive use has been on the decline in Nepal. As a result of this decline there are higher chances of unplanned pregnancies. There will be a rise in unsafe abortions and maternal deaths, health experts warn. “Many are hesitant to attend a clinic or a health facility due to fears of COVID-19. Also, the supply chain of contraceptives has not been maintained. This is why there has been a decline in the use of contraceptives,” said Naresh Pratap KC, former director at Family Welfare Division. Many clinics, general practices and health facilities have also been closed because of the lockdown. “There is a chain reaction of unmet needs, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions and hundreds of maternal and newborn deaths when family planning services are halted,” said Kabita Aryal, chief of Family Planning and Reproductive Health unit at Family Welfare Division.

[\(The Himalayan Times\)](#)

Pakistan

The economic uncertainty that has resulted from COVID19 has highlighted the large gender inequality that still exists for women both economically and socially. Informal jobs, many of which are in the home, account for most women’s employment. These jobs have disappeared, and other sectors have suffered as well, and have created concerns that some of these gains women have fought are for will be lost. The World Bank is working with the government to develop projects focusing on microenterprises, and women-owned businesses.

[\[World Bank Blogs\]](#)

In addition to gender inequality, women also have a higher risk of suffering gender-based violence in the country compared to others. “Pakistan ranks as the sixth most risky country in the world for women, with rampant cases of sexual and domestic violence. The situation calls for a gender-responsive emergency measures to mitigate the harmful impacts of COVID-19 on protection of women.”

[\[Daily Times\]](#)

Philippines

Due to the coronavirus disease and subsequent lockdown and quarantine it is estimated 214,000 babies from unplanned pregnancies will be born next year according to the Commission on Population. In addition, 1 in every 3 women will not be able to get the family supplies they need, around 600,000 women. This is a result of transportation issues, the lockdown, and lack of access to supplies and delivery of those supplies. [\[Philstar Global\]](#) As a result of these unplanned pregnancies the government has increased its family-planning programs. These programs specifically target communities that are susceptible to these unplanned pregnancies. The cost of pregnancy is almost a third of a Filipino family budget, and nearly 3 out of every 10 pregnancies are unplanned. [\[Bangkok Post\]](#)

This boom of pregnancies can create potential economic issues and induce poverty. “Before thinking about raising a family, the couple must think through a lot of considerations. Based on their earning capacity and increasing cost of living, how many children can they provide for? How would they ensure the best for their children—physically, mentally, and spiritually?” [\[Manila Standard\]](#) The Commission on Population and Development has set up help lines to provide further support and guidance and has staff available to answer these questions on family planning, sexuality, COVID-19, and gender-based violence. [\[Manila Standard\]](#)

Sri Lanka

The government response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka has been strengthened by a grant agreement of CAD 400,000 between Canada and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). This agreement will provide vital services related to sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence during the pandemic. “this new funding will enhance the capacity of hospital care centers to support survivors of domestic violence, undertake a media campaign to combat gender-based violence, procure medical equipment for maternal health, and conduct an analysis on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on women and girls.” [\[Asia Pacific UNFPA\]](#)

One ongoing issue is the digital divide that exists in countries like Sri Lanka and the impact it has on rural and economically challenged students. Women and girls are particularly affected as they have less accessibility to internet and technology because of the structural inequities built into a patriarchal society. [\[Mangalorean\]](#) In order to lessen some of these barriers to health services and counseling The Youth Advocacy Network of Sri Lanka is creating a database to make it more accessible for young people and more user friendly. [\[Mangalorean\]](#)

General Updates

- UNFPA Asia & the Pacific
[Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Pandemic UNFPA Global Response Plan \(June 2020 Update\)](#)
UNFPA's Report details the updates for June 2020.
The 3 strategic priorities include:
 1. Continuity of sexual and reproductive health services and interventions, including protection of the health workforce
 2. Addressing gender-based violence and harmful practices
 3. Ensuring the supply of modern contraceptives and reproductive health commodities
- UNICEF
[UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Region - Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Situation Report No. 8 \(Reporting Period: 23 May – 5 June 2020\)](#)
In East Asia and the Pacific there were over 217,694 cases COVID-19 cases and 8,821 deaths with Indonesia and the Philippines being the most affected. However new cases are on the decline in most countries across the region, and many governments are loosening the lockdown restrictions.

UNICEF is taking the following actions in the region:
 4. Supporting governments with the "Back to School Campaign", 12 countries have gradually reopened schools
 5. Partnered with governments for their infection prevention and control measures to reach over 741 million people with COVID-19 information in the region
 6. Social assistance measures which has covered over 15% of the total regional population
- Mashable SE Asia
[Violence against women is on the rise during lockdowns. Here's what Twitter is doing about it.](#)
There has been a surge in gender-based violence around the world during this pandemic. In the region as many as 2 out of 3 women face some sort of violence in their lifetime. Women can find themselves more isolated and have a lack of resources to help them. In India the gender-based violence has doubled in four states in the north, and Malaysia there was a 57% increase in hotlines for women in children. Because of this Twitter has launched a campaign across several Asian Nations to address this problem.

"Building on its #ThereIsHelp notification service on mental health and suicide prevention, vaccination, child sexual exploitation and COVID-19, Twitter has announced that it's launching a dedicated gender-based violence search prompt. These search prompts will serve as hotlines that will be available to users in their local languages in Asia Pacific. Twitter is working closely with UN Women Asia Pacific who play an advisory role, as well as leading NGOs and government agencies that provide critical emergency care, support and counselling."

This service will be made available in Malaysia and seven other nations including Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, and will expand to other countries in the coming months.