

CENTER *for* REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

October – December 2020

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 and rights. Because health systems are strained, these services seem to have taken a backseat to tend to the ongoing pandemic. Below is a brief overview of the current landscape of SRHR resources in Cambodia, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam as reported over the period from October to December 2020. In addition, this resource 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, however, does not aim to reference every SRHR development in the twelve Asian countries.

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

The Center for Reproductive Rights collaborated with the Collective for Social Science Research to conduct a fact-finding on the impact of COVID-19 on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls in Sindh province, which includes Pakistan's largest city of Karachi. The fact-finding was conducted from March to August 2020 and included tracking of media reports, key informant interviews, as well as a consultation with reproductive health experts. Access the full report [here](#).

**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 jhanson@reprorights.org.*

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

In mid-October, senior representatives from the Myanmar Government (including police, Supreme Court, and relevant government departments), UN agencies, and civil society came together for a 'roundtable' to discuss strategies for increasing coordination on GBV in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic [[UNFPA Myanmar](#)]. UN Myanmar called on the Assembly of the Union to adopt a comprehensive Protection and Prevention of Violence against Women Law [[Relief Web](#)] which is also a criticism raised by Progressive Voice Myanmar [[Progressive Voice Myanmar](#)]. Also in Myanmar, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is providing basic GBV and mental health and psychosocial support trainings to 4,000 volunteers working at the quarantine centres in areas most hard-hit by COVID-19. [[Relief Web](#)]. International Development Law Organization (IDLO) have been adapting outreach methods in Myanmar to take their efforts to combat GBV online during the pandemic. They have also distributed pamphlets to over 11,000 individuals and have been running livestream events [[IDLO](#)]. UN Women have published an interview with Minara, a community

outreach volunteer and Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh from Myanmar about her work assisting Rohingya women and girls during the pandemic [[UN Women](#)] and UNFPA have published an update on their work supporting women and girls who are experiencing GBV in Myanmar [[UNFPA](#)].

In Nepal, the Delegation of the European Union to Nepal (EU) has invested €0.7 million to launch a two-year project in Province 2 and the Karnali province (Province 6) to strengthen and accelerate efforts to prevent and respond to GBV by addressing the emerging challenges and pre-existing gaps that have been worsened by COVID-19 [[developmentaid](#)] [[UNFPA](#)]. Additionally, the Health Ministry's 'One Stop Crisis Management Centre' and 'Khabar Garaun' (Inform Us) helplines support to GBV survivors during the pandemic due to disruptions of pre-existing referral services [[World Bank Blog](#)]

A Dialogue on the Ratification of ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work was also conducted virtually in December 2020 by the Forum for Women, Law, and Development, VSO and International Alert. Speakers included representatives from Nepal's House of Representatives and Parliament, ILO Country Office and its Governing Body, UN Working Group of the Human Right Council on Discrimination against Women and Girls, and International Alert. ([FWLD](#))

In Thailand, Twitter launched the hashtag #thereishelp to redirect users experiencing GBV to local hotlines to seek help [[WorldBank](#)]. In November, the UN and EU's 'Safe and Fair' programme held a workshop for the Thai Government's 1300 Hotline team to share knowledge and experience on how to better handle an increased volume of GBV cases during the pandemic [[UN Women](#)].

In Indonesia, the Legal Aid Foundation of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice has recorded a huge spike in the number of monthly recorded cases of GBV. Reports of domestic violence and online GBV cases were most common. [[The Jakarta Post](#)] A survey conducted by [Plan International](#) revealed that online violence has increased, with 32 per cent of those surveyed reporting to have experienced violence on social media and 56 per cent having witnessed violence on social media. [[VOA News](#)]. A survey undertaken by the Indonesian Women's Coalition (KPI) and the Association of Indonesian Women with Disabilities (HWDI) in August asked 50 disabled participants (made up of 48 women and 2 men) about their experiences of violence during the pandemic. The survey revealed that 80 per cent of respondents had experienced violence during the pandemic – 70 per cent said they had been sexually abused; 15 per cent had been raped and 10 per cent had been sexually exploited. [[The Jakarta Post](#)]

In Malaysia, Talian Kasih (the national crisis public hotline for social issues) have recorded a 57 per cent increase in calls relating to domestic violence. [[The Malaysian Insight](#)]. Also in Malaysia, the Women's Centre for Change (WCC) reported their highest monthly total of telephone counselling cases of sexual violence against children in September 2020. The WCC have highlighted how the pandemic has made children extremely vulnerable to sexual violence committed largely by family members and trusted persons. [[Aliran](#)].

In Vietnam, criticism of the low level of fines for sexual harassment is growing [[SCMP](#)]. A report into the impact that the COVID-19 lockdown had on domestic violence in Vietnam has recently been published by The Institute for Social Development Studies and Hanoi School of

Public Health, sponsored by Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung [[Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung](#)]. UN Women, with the sponsorship of the Australian Government, have been running projects on community education to prevent violence against women and girls in Vietnam, which is an issue faced by 2/3 of women and girls in the country [[Vietnam News](#)].

On 24 November, the "White Ribbon Breakfast – The role of men as frontliners in violence against women and children prevention and response under the context of COVID-19 pandemic" was hosted by the Department of Labor - Trade Social Affairs and the People's Committee of District 1, the Department of Tourism of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. The purpose of the event was to call for greater support from men against GBV [[Vietnam Times](#)].

GBV is also on the rise in Bangladesh due to the lockdown and yet support for survivors is more restricted [[Care Evaluations](#)]. Rape cases are also rising, recently the Bangladesh government adopted an amendment to introduce the death penalty for rape cases in an effort to bring down cases [[NCBI](#)] as there are concerns about the effectiveness of the current legal response to such violence [[The Organization for World Peace](#)]. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) have been building a focused response to GBV in Cox's Bazaar. This includes continuing to provide face to face case management services and conducting a four-day training on Clinical Management of Rape and Intimate Partner Violence for 50 health care providers [[IOM](#)] and The Elders have published a case study of Arofa, highlighting the safety issues faced by women in the Cox' Bazaar camps and the work being undertaken to help women in these situations [[The Elders](#)].

The highest amount of complaints of domestic violence in the last 10 years were made in India this year [[The Hindu](#)]. The National Commission for Women (NCW) launched a WhatsApp number to report domestic violence during the lockdown and the Government of Kerala have launched tele-counselling and tele-medicine facilities. Women police stations and helpline numbers have been set up across states to create a safe space for women to have better access to justice [[IGC](#)]. Efforts are also being made to keep existing services available [[The Times of India](#)] including Jugnu Clubs [[UNSDG](#)]. UNHCR India have made an appeal to include refugees in national schemes supporting victims of domestic violence [[LSE](#)]. The first phase findings of the 5th National Family Health Survey on key indicators, including domestic violence in 22 states was published in December 2020 [[Report Fact Sheet](#)].

In the Philippines, UNFPA, in partnership with Coalition Against Trafficking of Women – Asia Pacific (CATW-AP) have put together six GBV online training modules to be presented by local partners in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) region. Organisations in this region, co-led by UNICEF and UNFPA, have continued to work together with the Ministry of Social Service and Development (MSSD) to ensure they have an adequate response system to cases of GBV [[Relief Web](#)].

Sexual and Reproductive Health

The International Health Policy Program of the Thai Ministry of Public Health noted that Thailand has successfully maintained healthcare service provision during the pandemic. Provision of both standard antiretroviral therapy (ART) for persons living with HIV, and cervical screening, were increased in 2020 [[WHO](#)]. Additionally, on 23 December 2020, a cabinet-sponsored bill that seeks to legalise early-stage abortions (up to 12 weeks pregnant),

without specific justification (e.g. that the mother was raped or her life was threatened) passed its first reading and is set to be implemented by 19th February 2021 [[The Pattaya News](#)].

In Nepal, Ipas conducted a telephonic survey of 254 Ipas-supported facilities from 19 districts and found that during the initial phase of lockdown local governments had redirected the responsibilities of 50% of health facilities that provide abortion services to COVID-19 response [[T&F](#)]. However, some local governments in Nepal have started to provide door-to-door services related to family planning and reproductive rights [[Ipas](#)].

Equally, in Pakistan, whilst mobile sexual health outreach services were on hold, outreach providers were deployed as door-to-door health visitors and the COVID-19 pandemic increased expansion of injectables (Sayana press) as a contraceptive method [[IPPF](#)].

During the pandemic, a reproductive health helpline that provides counselling and support to women across the country free of cost has launched in Pakistan, but not many people know about it. Operated by experienced medical consultants, it offers advice and counselling on topics such as family planning, emergency contraception and abortion care [[Samaa](#)].

Both Pakistan and Indonesia signed an anti-abortion declaration "Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family" (Geneva Consensus Declaration) on 22 October 2020 [[HHS.gov](#)]. The signing of the Geneva Consensus Declaration has faced strong opposition in Indonesia from women's rights groups who have deemed it "unconstitutional". [[The Jakarta Post](#)].

The National Population and Family Planning Board in Indonesia have recorded a decline in the use of contraceptives, with one million fewer visitors coming to health facilities to seek advice relating to contraception. This is thought to be both a combination of suspended health facilities as well as visitors fearing that a visit to a health facility is not safe during the pandemic [[The Jakarta Post](#)].

In Vietnam, a comedic video is being used to raise awareness around family planning and contraception to prevent the rise in unwanted pregnancies that has become an increasing issue during the pandemic. The video was created by the artist Huỳnh Lập. [[VietNam News](#)]

Women in Bangladesh face increased difficulties accessing reduced sexual, reproductive and maternal health services during the pandemic [[Care Evaluations](#)] which may have the consequence of increasing the birth rate [[Relief Web](#)]. A team of volunteers from local NGOs have been making door-to-door visits to Rohingya women throughout the pandemic to inform the community of available health facilities to try to encourage more women and girls to access these services [[Relief Web](#)]. Plan International has continued to provide services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh [[Relief Web](#)].

The Foundation for Reproductive Health Services, India have estimated that 26 million couples will be unable to access contraceptives in India and disruptions could lead to an additional 2.3 million unintended pregnancies and 800,000 unsafe abortions [[Economic Times](#)], particularly since the Indian government only clarified later on that abortion was an approved service to continue during the lockdown [[Ibis Reproductive Health](#)]. An increase in unplanned pregnancies is increasing strain on other areas of the system [[Firstpost](#)]. It is estimated that lockdown related travel disruption led to 1.85 million abortions being compromised (47% of the total scheduled) [[Durham University](#)]. The Indian government has placed a limit on the

export of 26 pharmaceutical ingredients, including hormone progesterone used in contraceptive pills and IUDs. This has had a disruptive effect on the global supply chain of these drugs [[BMC](#)].

In the Philippines, the Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM) have reiterated the rise in unplanned pregnancies as a result of the pandemic [[ABS CBN News](#)]. The lockdown has prevented women from accessing birth control and therefore the University of the Philippines Population Institute and the United Nations Population Fund have predicted that there will be approximately 214,000 unplanned births in the country in the next year [[BBC News](#)].

Maternal Health

Nepal missed its 2020 target of reducing maternal mortality to 125 per 100,000 live births from the country's current rate of 239 deaths per 100,000 live births [[The Kathmandu Post](#)]. This appears to have been exacerbated by lockdown, as a study on the effect of COVID-19 on maternal and neonatal health services in Nepal found notable increases in institutional stillbirth rate and neonatal mortality, and decreases in quality of care. Some behaviours improved, notably hand hygiene and keeping the baby skin-to-skin with their mother [[The Lancet](#)]. Dr Banerjee, director of the WHO's Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health and Ageing, suggested that women put off accessing maternal health services due to fear of being infected with COVID-19 [[New Statesman](#)]. Accordingly, UNFPA estimates that the pandemic could double or triple maternal deaths in Nepal by next year if women continue to avoid accessing maternal healthcare [[Journal of Quality in Health care & Economics](#)].

In the Philippines, the 'Maternal, Newborn and Child Health and Nutrition Strategy' policy (also referred to as the "no home birth" policy, has become increasingly problematic during the pandemic as women living in remote areas who do not own a car are struggling to get to hospital. [[NPR](#)]

As of November 2020, there was only one hospital treating pregnant mothers who have or are thought to have COVID-19 in Sri Lanka [[Relief Web](#)].

Roving midwife groups have been introduced in Bangladesh in an effort to boost support during lockdown. [[Relief Web](#)]

India has the largest number of stillbirths globally and pregnant women have faced reduced mobility and access to healthcare services [[Down to Earth](#)]. There has been sharp spikes in maternal and neonatal mortality at the start of the COVID-19 crisis in India. Some new technological solutions are being used to provide access to services where women cannot access hospitals for monitoring pregnancy and providing pre-natal care [[Times of India](#)] but in rural India, most antenatal care services were provided in small groups, which has not been possible during the pandemic and as a result many mothers are left without care [[ResearchGate](#)].

In October, nutrition services were provided to a number of children and pregnant and lactating women by UNICEF's Rakhine nutrition partners in Myanmar. 4,000 infrared thermometers were distributed to the Department of Social Welfare and the government has been assisted to expand the existing Maternal and Child Cash Transfers and Social Pension programme. [[UNICEF](#)]. The government of Myanmar has been successful in the reduction of maternal deaths over the last year, but the UNFPA notes that there is still progress to be made. [[UNFPA](#)]

Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health

A CARE study found that girls' use of family planning services in Bangladesh fell by 62% from January-May 2020 [[CARE](#)].

Issues with adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services during the COVID-19 pandemic were noted by a number of organisations [[Inter Press Service](#)]. A mobile gaming platform targeting adolescents aged 15 to 19 in India called "Game of Choice, Not Chance" has been launched which combines an "interactive story-based video game, reproductive health education e-learning tools, and portal features that link players to health products and services in real time" [[UNICEF](#)].

In the Philippines, a new research paper undertaken by Plan International Philippines titled 'Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women', has revealed how the pandemic has impacted Filipino young women and girls disproportionately. [[Relief Web](#)].

Cambodia and Bangladesh have implemented measures to reduce harmful practices primarily affecting girls (such as female genital mutilation and child marriage) set to increase due to the COVID-19 crisis [[Save the Children](#)]. Cambodia's Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) has targeted ethnic minority provinces to conduct child marriage prevention awareness campaigns. Equally, the Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission has issued advisory letters to the Ministry of Women & Children Affairs to strengthen monitoring mechanisms to prevent child marriages [[World Bank](#)].

There are also concerns about rising child marriages in Bangladesh due to closure of schools [[Protom ALO](#)] with the rates in the country already being the highest in South Asia [[UNICEF](#)]. Plan International have published a report on the issue including a call for reform of the law, particularly the 'special provision' under which marriages of girls under the age of 18 may be permitted under certain circumstances [[Humanitarian Response](#)].

Although India had become a world leader in reducing child marriages, there are concerns that the contraction in its economy due to the pandemic will cause an increase in child marriages [[The Lancet](#)].

Gender Equality

Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, highlighted that since the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been an increase in the number of hours many rural women spend on unpaid care and domestic work; with 31% spending more than 6 hours a day in Cambodia [[UN](#)], and 63% of women reporting an increase internationally [[Save the Children](#)].

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, women are less likely to directly receive information about COVID-19 compared to their male counterparts. [[accountabilitylab](#)]. For example, there is a common misconception that mothers who test positive for COVID-19 should stop breastfeeding [[Population Council](#)], as well as generally facing stigma and suspicion from their community as to how a woman who spends most of her time at home could have contracted the illness [[Unicef](#)].

In Nepal, young female activists trained by CARE's Tipping Point project participated in COVID-19 survey data collection to examine the mobility of girls in the community. The report draws upon available country data from CARE's work as well as external sources in order to highlight the initial impact of the pandemic on the health, well-being and safety of adolescent girls as well as their access to, and involvement in, essential services. [[Care](#)].

UN Women Nepal published their COVID-19 Response Strategy in October 2020, highlighting increasing incidents of maternal deaths, precipitated by lack of, or delayed access to services, rising care burden for women and girls, and swelling statistics on GBV, including violence against LGBTIQ+ people, can rapidly erode the significant gains made on gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal [[UN Women](#)].

In Bangladesh, over half of girls have reported spending less time on their education during the COVID-19 pandemic than before and 94% have reported spending increased time on household chores and childcare [[World Bank](#)]. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the garment industry, 80% of this workforce is made up of women [[ILO](#)]. Santwana Roy, a martial arts champion who campaigns against child marriage in Bangladesh, has been training young girls who have been forced out of education by the pandemic [[Thomson Reuters](#)]. There has also been an increase in women in Bangladesh taking out loans and having to cut back on food during the pandemic. [[BSR HERproject](#)].

In Indonesia, UN Women's 'Women's Count' initiative have published "Counting the costs of COVID-19: Assessing the impact on gender and the achievement of the SDGs in Indonesia". This report reveals how the pandemic has widened pre-existing gender inequalities due to women's economic vulnerabilities [[UN Women](#)].

In India, the community division based on caste deepens structural issues for women and deters them from coming forward, leaving most sexual assault cases in India unreported [[We Are Restless](#)]. In Kashmir, there is a mental health crisis with women being particularly affected. Doctors Without Borders have set up helpline numbers for affected women in the area and have noted an increase in the number of calls about domestic violence [[Relief Web](#)].

A Centre for Catalyzing Change survey from four states in India suggests that more girls had their studies disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic than boys and with only 22% of the girls surveyed having access to their own phones and knowing how to use online learning resources. 51% of girls also lacked access to necessary textbooks [[Times Now News](#)].

Sweden has announced a new \$1.5 million contribution to UNFPA's Women and Girls first programme in Myanmar [[UNRIC](#)] which is also being supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation [[Relief Web](#)]. Myanmar is also experiencing a high number of homecoming migrant workers as a result of the pandemic [[Spotlight Initiative](#)]. Women migrant workers face many challenges, particularly violence and a lack of safe migration channels. Calls have been made for gender sensitive approaches to labour migration issues to be developed [[UNSDG](#)].

General Updates

- **UNFPA Asia & the Pacific**

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 9 for UNFPA Asia](#)

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 10 for UNFPA Asia](#)

UNFPA's 9th and 10th COVID-19 Situation Reports provide an update for the period covering 1 October to 30 November 2020.

Over 14,053,116 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed and over 258,445 deaths have been recorded in Asia and the Pacific Region as of 30 November 2020.

India, with over 10 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, has the second highest number recorded globally and the highest in Asia and the Pacific Region.

UNFPA have:

- distributed a large number of Dignity Kits including additional items to help women during the pandemic;
- continued to provide sexual and reproductive health interventions across their 22 country offices in Asia Pacific; and
- undertaken sexual and reproductive health and GBV risk communications and community engagement activities in each of their country offices to help educate communities on these topics.

- **UNICEF**

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 13, 16 October 2020](#)

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 14, 13 November 2020](#)

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 15, 11 December 2020](#)

Over the period, schools in most countries in the region had reopened however due to a rise in COVID-19 cases towards the end of the year, many have been forced to close. Whilst open, UNICEF noted that there had been a dramatic decline in enrolment for the new school year.

UNICEF, CARE and UN Women have together published a gender data and analysis report on the impact of COVID-19 in Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The report can be accessed [here](#).

- **UN 16 Days of Activism against GBV**

The 2020 UNiTE Campaign to end violence against women "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence" took place between 25 November – 10 December 2020. The focus of the campaign was to encourage global action to provide essential services for survivors as well as focus on protection and fund raising. ([UN Women](#)).

- **UNESCAP's policy briefing "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Violence Against Women In Asia And the Pacific"**

In November, UNESCAP published a briefing outlining their preliminary views on COVID-19 and violence against women. This can be accessed [here](#).

- **UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF have jointly published "Guidelines on Responsible representation and reporting of violence against women and violence against children.**

The guidelines can be accessed [here](#).