

CENTER *for* REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

July – September 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. Because health systems are strained, these services seem to have taken a backseat 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, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam as reported over the period from July to September 2020. 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 twelve 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 jhanson@reprorights.org*

Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

Women and girls continue to face difficulties across the region in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. Experience from past epidemics – such as Ebola and Zika – demonstrate that attempts to control outbreaks often divert resources from routine health services and exacerbate the often already limited availability of sexual and reproductive health services [[UNICEF](#)].

In September, the government of Nepal adopted important Regulation under the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act of Nepal. The Regulation provides crucial healthcare standards and procedures for access to reproductive health services in Nepal including maternal health and abortion. [[Public Health update](#)] [[Local News](#)]

Contraceptive and Abortion Services

A Guttmacher Institute study found that COVID-19 could have the impact of an up to 12-15% decline in essential sexual and reproductive health care – including contraceptive services, maternal care and abortion. [[Share-Net Bangladesh](#)]

Curbs on movement due to the pandemic resulted in low access to reproductive and maternal health services in India. [[Population Foundation India](#)]. According to Marie Stopes International (MSI), India has 1.3 million fewer women accessing their reproductive health services since last year (the worst hit country). It is predicted to see an additional million

unsafe abortions, 650,000 unintended pregnancies and 2,600 maternal deaths due to lack of access to MSI services alone. [\[Marie Stopes\]](#). Perceived availability of abortion services in India fell from 61% to 44% in India. Almost a third of women reported increased barriers to access and need for contraceptive advice and services. [\[Marie Stopes\]](#)

Manufacture of contraception in the region has also been impacted by the pandemic; with factory closures and migrant workers sent home, this has implications for the availability of essential resources. [\[UNICEF\]](#) Accordingly, UNFPA Pakistan has called for Health and Population Departments to plan for contraceptive security. [\[UNFPA\]](#)

The unmet need for family planning in Vietnam is likely to increase, but will impact different population groups in different ways depending on their existing access to contraception – this is expected to have a more limited effect due to already high prevalence of contraceptives. [\[UNFPA\]](#)

In Malaysia, UNFPA have partnered with the National Population and Family Development Board to provide sexual and reproductive healthcare outreach services to low income households. [\[UNFPA COVID-19 Situation Report No. 8\]](#).

In a number of countries, online clinics and services are being set up in order to continue to educate and access vulnerable communities. In Indonesia, sex education classes are being provided using an online content management platform. [\[UNFPA\]](#).

The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPASL) have been holding weekly virtual meetings to access local communities. [\[IPPF\]](#)

A study undertaken by the University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has revealed that the inaccessibility of family planning and maternal health services in the Philippines is likely to result in an increase in both unintended pregnancies and maternal deaths for 2020. The study has estimated that the pandemic has caused 220,000 additional pregnancies and this figure could reach up to 750,000 if the lockdown lasts for the rest of 2020. [\[UNFPA\]](#). In an attempt to prevent these unintended pregnancies, social media is being used to provide advice on contraception. [\[MS Magazine\]](#) Women's rights advocates are calling for urgent decriminalisation of abortion. The Philippine Safe Abortion Advocacy Network (PINSAN) have launched a campaign and draft bill. [\[VICE\]](#)

Maternal Health Services

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis there has been a significant reduction in the uptake of maternal and new born health services in Bangladesh, with only 33 out of 63 hospitals performing all key functions of emergency obstetric care. [\[Relief Web\]](#)

COVID-19 could have a considerable impact on maternal mortality figures in Vietnam for all groups. [\[UNFPA\]](#)

With maternal mortality one of the leading causes of death for women aged 15 to 49 in some Mekong countries, such as Cambodia, the need to quarantine or self-isolation increases risks

for pregnant women unable to access healthcare. [[UNICEF](#)] Equally, if a woman is able to spend time recovering in hospital, women in Pakistan are generally reliant on relatives for food and care, making infection control measures difficult [[UNFPA](#)]

COVID-19 is compromising gains made in recent years to help women from Rohingya households to have a better diet, to improve their ability to breastfeed their children. [[Medium](#)]

In the Philippines, the UNFPA are helping pregnant women in the provinces of Southern Luzon who are not able to access birthing facilities by supporting a 24-hour helpline. [[UNFPA COVID-19 Situation Report No. 8](#)]

In Indonesia, women have reported being denied labor and delivery services in instances where they have tested positive for COVID-19. [[The Jakarta Post](#)] UNFPA are working with the government to ensure that pregnant women are able to access the healthcare services they need. [[United Nations Indonesia](#)]

With the pandemic and lockdown measures also likely to negatively impact SRH in Nepal, a recent article in the Journal of Nepal Health Research Council highlighted the Governments' duty to ensure that women and girls' needs are met. [[JNHRC](#)]

Local newspapers in Nepal continued to report on challenges in access to maternal health and accessing health care services to pregnant women due to Covid- 19. [[Local News](#), [Local News](#)]

Other services

Pro-democracy protestors in Thailand have highlighted the topics of reproductive rights, the price of menstrual products, sexist school dress codes, the wage gap, and rape culture during rallies. [[Possibl](#)]

Improvement of water quality is important to improve women and girls' reproductive health in Bangladesh as poor sanitation disproportionately affects women. Water quality has been impacted by the pandemic due to improper disposal of medical waste and wastewater. [[Population Foundation India](#)]. In addition to issues with improvement of water quality, falling incomes, reduced privacy due to confinement to the home and a lack of supportive environment in households are all issues which have been caused by the lockdown. [[WaterAid](#)].

Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health

Across the region, a soar in unemployment rates coupled with school closures have led to expert predictions that vast numbers of children in Asia and the Pacific region will not return to school after the pandemic. In a survey published by [Room to Read](#), 49 per cent of the girls who took part in the survey were revealed to be at higher risk of not returning to school once they have opened. This in turn is believed to result in an increase in GBV and early forced and abusive marriages. [[The Guardian](#)]

Childline has reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage of girls this year compared to last year. Many schools are still closed in India which meant that many students have lost a space where they can reach out to teachers and friends for help when facing pressure from their family. [[BBC News](#)]

One in ten girls in Vietnam are married before 18. Economic concerns (exacerbated by COVID-19) are playing a part in some of these marriages. [[South East Asia Globe](#)]

In Indonesia, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection have revealed that the number of child marriages in the first six months of 2020 had doubled from the same period in 2019. [[Reliefweb](#)]

UNFPA Pakistan reported that 40 youth led organisations received a sensitization training on the importance of youth SRHR and the impact of COVID-19 on it. [[UNFPA](#)]

In an attempt to reduce teenage pregnancy, the Bureau of Reproductive Health in Thailand has launched an official LINE account called "Teen Club" to provide correct information about reproductive health, birth control, and other useful information. [[Bangkok Post](#)]

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

COVID-19 lockdowns have increased the incidence of domestic violence worldwide.

Big tech companies are partnering with UN Women In India to make information and resources available to survivors of gender based violence. [[Philanthropy Women](#)]

Women in Myanmar face high risk of GBV and have little legal protection. They have also been largely shut out of the COVID-19 decision making process. [[Griffith University](#)]

Support is especially needed for the Rohingya women living in Cox' Bazar, many of whom will not leave their tents to obtain medical care, food or firewood for fear of sexual violence. [[MS Magazine](#)]. Violence against women in the camp has increased during COVID-19. [[Amnesty](#)]. The lockdown has increased symptoms of depression and anxiety and exposed more women to intimate partner violence in Bangladesh more widely. [[The Lancet](#)]

In Vietnam, reports of GBV have increased by 20 per cent in 2020 in UNFPA supported hotline services. [[VN Express](#)]

The United Nations have reported that domestic violence has increased by 40 per cent in Malaysia. [[Urbanet](#)] The government have implemented the Talian Kasih hotline to provide support to victims. [[The Leaflet](#)]

Online child sex abuse in Thailand nears record high during the pandemic [[CGTN](#)], with the Philippines also recording an increase in child abuse through online sexual exploitation throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. The Department of Justice Cybercrime Unit has reported that Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) cases have tripled during the lockdown. [[WITECH](#)]

In the Philippines, the Commission of Human Rights (supported by UNFPA) have developed an online reporting portal for GBV victims. The UNFPA have also partnered with the Department of Health to develop a database to track and analyse the health sector's response to reported GBV cases. [[UNFPA COVID-19 Situation Report No. 8](#)]

In late September, the World Health Organisation (WHO) country office in Pakistan provided technical support to the relevant government health departments to help to scale up the health system's response to gender-based violence. This included training gynaecologists on response to sexual violence, facility-based clinical case management, and care provision. [[WHO](#)]

Violence against women has risen in Indonesia over the lockdown. A study undertaken by the National Commission on Violence Against Women revealed that during this period Indonesian women have been spending an increased number of hours on household chores and have reported being subjected to violence in instances where they have underdelivered. Indonesian women are also experiencing increased violence due to food shortages. [[The Conversation](#)] A protocol on violence against women has been developed in Indonesia by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the police. [[WHO](#)]

A study undertaken by the CARE Consortium has revealed an increase in cases of violence against women in Sri Lanka. A spokesperson from the CARE Consortium noted that many of the victims did not seek help as they did not know where to go to access services. [[IPS News](#)]. Women's rights organisations in Sri Lanka have launched an initiative to encourage women to call the police if their husbands hit them [[CSIS](#)] however, it has also been noted that in instances where women have gone to the police to report violence some have been turned away. [[Orchid Project](#)]

Impact on Gender Equality

A preference for male children in Vietnam has led to the sex-selective abortion of an estimated 40,800 girls every year. Extreme bias against daughters, child marriage and female genital mutilation are identified as the three most prevalent gender-biased human rights violations. [[VN Express](#)]

Plan International Youth Leaders in Australia and Vietnam are calling for COVID-19 to be a catalyst for transforming society into one which better protects the rights of girls and women. [[Plan International](#)]

Women have suffered from a loss of income disproportionately compared to men across the region. A report published by [Care](#) has revealed that as a result of COVID-19, women in Bangladesh are 69 per cent more likely to have their hours cut than men and in the Philippines women are 17 per cent more likely to. This is because industries that have been effected the most by the pandemic (including tea production, garment exports and care-giving services) are predominantly made up of a female workforce. [[GROUNDVIEWS](#)]

General Updates

- UNFPA Asia & the Pacific

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 6 for UNFPA Asia](#)

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 7 for UNFPA Asia](#)

[COVID-19 Situation Report No. 8 for UNFPA Asia](#)

UNFPA's 6th, 7th and 8th COVID-19 Situation Reports provide an update for the period covering 1 July to 30 September 2020.

UNFPA's three main strategic priorities relevant to SRHR focus on:

- Supporting the continuation of SRHR services and interventions by monitoring situations at a local-level and protecting the healthcare workforce.
- Addressing and confronting GBV in UNFPA countries through supporting and investing response plans and initiatives throughout the region.
- Engaging and communicating with communities to share knowledge and create awareness of SRHR topics.

- UNICEF

[COVID-19 Situation Report, 21 July 2020](#)

[COVID-19 Situation Report, 14 August 2020](#)

[COVID-19 Situation Report, 18 September 2020](#)

Over 767,594 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed and over 20,610 deaths have been recorded in East Asia and the Pacific since 18 September 2020. Many countries have begun to see an increase in cases over the last couple of months with Indonesia and the Philippines continuing to be the most severely affected countries.

- UNICEF is continuing to support governments with the "Back to School Campaign" to prevent children at risk of permanently dropping out of school from doing so. Most countries in East Asia and the Pacific have now opened schools.
- UNICEF are working with governments to help prevent rapid increases in cases by providing support to families, communities and the healthcare systems.