

COVID-19 and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Asia

January - March 2021

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 advance sexual and reproductive health care.

This newsletter contains 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 January to March 2021. It 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.

Please click [here](#) for the Asia program's COVID-19 related resources page. This is our sixth newsletter on the impact of the current health crisis on the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in the region.

This document does not aim to reference every SRHR development in the twelve Asian countries. 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.

I. Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Several reports which reveal the extent to which GBV has increased during the pandemic have been published recently. These include:

- a report released by UN Women, United Nations Population Funds ("UNFPA"), Women Count and Quilt.AI titled "COVID-19 and Violence Against Women: The Evidence Behind the Talk – Insights from big data analysis in Asian countries", which reveals the extent to which violence against women has risen during the pandemic by analysing online data and searches. The study reflects the significant increase in individuals searching the internet for help against GBV during the lockdowns [[reliefweb](#)];
- in Nepal, UNFPA have launched the "Response to Gender Based Violence in the COVID-19 Context in Nepal" project which aims to support 133,784 people (beneficiaries and service providers) in efforts to ensure the availability and access of essential prevention and response services for all (but particularly GBV survivors) in the targeted locations during and after the COVID-19 lockdown [[UNFPA](#)];
- in Indonesia, the United Nations Development Programme ("UNDP") and Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab South East Asia ("J-PAL SEA") have released a study "Understanding the Welfare and Livelihood of Society During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia" to assess the impact the pandemic has had on GBV and domestic unpaid roles. 42% of those surveyed reported having experienced some form of GBV during the pandemic [[UNDP](#)]; and
- in Pakistan, the Aurat Foundation released a report stating that between January and December 2020, there were 2,297 reported cases of violence against women from 25 districts across the country [[ANI](#)]. It has also been reported that domestic violence has risen by 45% during coronavirus lockdowns in north western Pakistan [[Arabnews](#)].

One out of 4 adult Filipinos recognized that the various forms of violence are among the most pressing problems of women during this pandemic.

Commissioned study by the Philippine Commission on Population and Development, March 2021

As lockdowns ease, the National Commission for Women in India have noted that hotlines have received more phone calls from women since the loosening of lockdown restrictions, as victims become less fearful of being caught by their perpetrators. In response, the Kerala government have set up a 24-hour WhatsApp line to help report cases and the National Commission for Women have also launched their own WhatsApp helpline [[Outlook](#)].

In February 2021, consultants and social workers in Vietnam attended a three-day course on combatting domestic violence during the pandemic, co-organised by UN Women and Vietnam's Centre for Women and Development and funded by the Australian Government. [[VietnamTimes](#)].

In the Philippines, UNFPA continue to work with local partner Mindanao Organisation for Social and Economic Progress Incorporated ("MOSEP") to implement the "Cash for Protection" program. This provides victims of GBV with a financial safety net of approximately USD \$200 which is hoped to allow women to leave violent relationships with less initial worry about financial insecurity [[UNFPA](#)].

In March 2021, the Philippine Commission on Population and Development released a survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations which revealed that one in four adult Filipinos said that violence is the most pressing issue for women during the pandemic [[Philippine News Agency](#)]. Similarly, the World Bank have carried out a phone survey on GBV in Indonesia. Out of those who took part in the survey, 83% reported an increase in "Intimate Partner Violence" in their communities as a result of COVID-19. The survey also revealed that among respondents, the key aggravating factor for GBV during the pandemic have been food insecurity [[The World Bank](#)].

II. Sexual and Reproductive Health

UNFPA published a report titled "The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Fertility in the Asia-Pacific Region", which assesses mortality rates, access to family planning services and reproductive services [[UNFPA](#)]. The WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA have also published report on the "Impact of Covid-19 on SRMNCALH (sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health) Services, Regional Strategies, Solutions and Innovations", noting the disruption to services across the region throughout the pandemic [[qualityofcarenetwork](#)].

Additionally, the International Community of Women Living with HIV Asia Pacific (ICWAP) have undertaken a survey of the impact that COVID-19 has had on women and girls with HIV in countries including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines. 90% of respondents reported mental health issues, with prevalent causes being financial hardship, intimate partner violence and lack of access to treatment or information regarding HIV and COVID-19 [[Apcorn](#)].

A cross-sectional study from a tertiary centre in Nepal has found that the need for safe abortion services and contraception has increased during the pandemic but the lockdown caused inaccessibility. Psychological distress and fear of COVID-19 has become a common reason for termination of pregnancy [[F1000Research](#)]. Similarly, despite India being top of the list of nations forecasted to experience a 'baby boom' due to the lack of access to contraceptives, current data does not

In its report on “*The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Fertility in the Asia-Pacific Region*”, the Asia-Pacific Regional Office of UNFPA noted that, “policies to improve work-life balance, particularly for women, will be important to reduce constraints on fertility choices in the context of COVID-19.”

UNFPA-APRO also found that “COVID-19 has exposed economic insecurity as an existing constraint on fertility choices.”

suggest that this has been the case; anecdotal stories suggest that this might be due to an uptake in clinical and medical abortions [[thePrint](#)].

Thailand has made changes to the country’s criminal code, giving women full abortion rights in the first trimester of their pregnancy; whilst this signifies progress, the Center notes that more needs to be done to ensure women can access their right to abortion in practice [[Al Jazeera](#)].

Health start-up 'Yesmom' has launched Asia's first at-home blood testing kits for female fertility [[mobihealthnews](#)]. Also in the tech world, the app 'Uvi Health' was launched by Mehak Malik with the aim of remotely providing Indian women with knowledge, tools, and a safe space to discuss reproductive and sexual health concerns [[YourStory](#)].

In February, the American public radio network NPR published an article on the disproportional impact of the pandemic on Thailand's sex workers – in particular, those in the tourist spot of Pattaya [[npr](#)]. Similarly, it has been reported that because sex workers in Bangladesh and Myanmar have not been allowed to work, the additional strain on families has led to an increase in GBV. This issue is prevalent across the Asia-Pacific region because sex workers are generally excluded from social protection [[UNAIDS](#)].

Two advocacy groups in Bangladesh - Marie Stopes Bangladesh and Shushilan - have been working with local governments through the Advance Family Planning (AFP) initiative to ensure family planning services continue to be delivered [[AVAC](#)].

The United Nations Population Fund and the Government of Japan have agreed to support the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health to strengthen the country's access to SRHR services. This initiative is part of the UNFPA's "PROMISES" project which, supported by the Government of Japan, aims to improve access to SRHR to women and girls [[UNFPA](#)].

III. Maternal Health

A report commissioned by UNICEF titled "Direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and response in South Asia" has revealed that the outbreak of COVID-19 "may have contributed to an additional 239,000 child and maternal deaths in South Asia". The report addresses the impact the pandemic has had on maternal and child mortality and children's education in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka [[UNICEF](#)].

During the pandemic, the Nepal government has been distributing misoprostol to women 8 months pregnant who cannot reach a health facility to give birth, helping to prevent post-partum haemorrhage [[The Lancet](#)]. However, after a misoprostol shortage threatened this progress, Pfizer donated more than 34,000 doses of misoprostol in late January [[reliefweb](#)].

In Myanmar, the pandemic created issues with carrying out routine services that prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to child. UNICEF, the Ministry of Health and Sports and the Ethnic Health Organisation have been working together to promote the continuation of these services throughout the pandemic. This included adapting services such as providing patients with longer prescriptions of drugs to reduce their visits to the healthcare facilities [[UNICEF](#)].

Also in Myanmar, a report of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) revealed that many women have refused to access antenatal services due to a fear of contracting COVID-19. This, in turn, is expected to lead to increased maternal and infant mortality [[ReliefWeb](#)].

The Philippines is experiencing a baby boom as a result of the pandemic [Los Angeles Times]. Lawmakers have urged for more help to be provided to vulnerable mothers and babies. The Department of Health has committed PHP100 million to feed pregnant women and infants up to 24 months old [[Philippine News Agency](#)].

In Vietnam, the UNFPA have provided 64 foetus monitors and PPE worth USD\$300,000 to healthcare services in Vietnam to help to continue sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic [[UNFPA](#)].

IV. Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health

UNFPA has published "Young People and the Law: Laws and Policies Impacting Young People's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the Asia-Pacific Region" which reports that the impacts of COVID-19 on young people's access to SRHR and HIV services include: interruption to the supply of SRHR and HIV prevention and treatment commodities, mobility restrictions affecting access to services and the ability to provide outreach services, diversion of financial resources from SRHR to COVID-19 responses, and the additional pressures on health staff and facilities associated with the pandemic [[UNFPA](#)].

A personal account of a recent trip to the rural areas of Bangladesh revealed a shift in child marriage practices. While previously poor parents would encourage young girls to marry, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, young girls are turning to marriage as they see no other future for themselves now that schools are closed [[The Daily Star](#)].

The Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia have called for increased support for teenage mothers due to the increase in teenage pregnancies during the pandemic [[FMT](#)], while Plan Indonesia have launched their "Let's Talk" program in West Nusa Tenggara in an attempt to combat child marriage and teenage pregnancies [[Plan International](#)].

Save the Children, in a recent Spotlight Series, have released data on the current situation of child marriage and gender inequality in Indonesia. Their recent work revealed that they estimate in 2020, the economic impact of COVID-19 will put an additional 61,000 girls at risk of child marriage and 118,000 girls at risk of pregnancy in East Asia and the Pacific. In South Asia, there will be an increase of 191,200 girls who will be at risk of risk of child marriage and 138,000 who will be at risk of adolescent pregnancy. (Global Girlhood Report) [[Save the Children](#)].

Save the Children Philippines have expressed their concerns that children are at risk of online sexual abuse as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families are resorting to this type of exploitation in order to make money. As reported by the Department of Justice, cases of online sexual abuse against children have been recorded to have increased by 264.6% from March to May 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 [[reliefweb](#)].

By 2025, the economic impact of COVID-19 will put an additional 305,000 girls at risk of child marriage in East Asia and the Pacific and an additional 956,000 girls in South Asia.

*Save the Children,
Global Girlhood Report, 2020*

V. Gender Equality

The International Labour Organization have produced a report into COVID-19's detrimental impacts on workers in the garment sector, approximately 75% of whom live in Asia and the Pacific and 80% of whom are women [[ILO](#)].

UNFPA Philippines (working with 23 other organisations) have published a report titled "Gender & Inclusion Assessment (GIA) of the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Vulnerable Women and Girls in the Philippines". The report reveals that those most severely impacted are those from the "hidden household" i.e. "the homeless, internally displaced, indigenous, LGBT and the geographically isolated" [[reliefweb](#)].

It has also been reported that, prior to the pandemic, 15 million girls were out of school in East Asia and the Pacific, and a further 1.2 million girls (from pre-primary to upper secondary) are at risk of dropping out due to COVID-19 and may never return to school [[Global Partnership for Education](#)]. In Myanmar, the OCHA report has revealed that the continuing closure of educational centres has disproportionately affected women's access to work and employment. [[reliefweb](#)].

In India, the digital divide between men and women has worsened (63% of women own a mobile compared to 79% of men but only 21% use mobile data compared to 42% of men). This is problematic due to remote online teaching, access to telemedicine and general participation in the growing digital economy and workforce [[Asian Development Blog](#)].

In Cambodia, UNFPA provided 4,880 dignity kits to assist the government in supporting vulnerable women and girls (including migrant returnees, pregnant women and victims of GBV) affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent flooding caused by tropical storms in Cambodia [[KhmerTimes](#)]. Also the NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW) released a report which identified challenges Cambodian women face during the COVID-19 epidemic, including those related to health, rights, and education [[Phnompenhpost](#)].

Women in Pakistan held the 'Aurat March' on International Women's Day 2021, calling on the government to increase the health budget to 5% of GDP; implement a COVID-19 plan for women and minorities; tackle violence against women; assign equal recognition to women's labour; and allocate more health resources for women and transgender people [[TheGuardian](#)].

Gender equality groups in Nepal have also been taking action, including starting a radio advocacy programme to facilitate conversations and increase awareness on girls' education (the importance of which is especially vital to stress after the disruption caused by the pandemic) [[UNESCO](#)] and opening a women-only quarantine centre run by WHR (Women for Human Rights) in collaboration with the government and with support from UN Women (providing masks, hand sanitizer, and food) [[One](#)]. Additionally, V4Action in Nepal is raising awareness of the discrimination faced by transgender people in the distribution of relief food material from various agencies as many require an ID and many transgender people do not have an ID which matches their gender identity [[UN Volunteers](#)].