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GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF COVID-19 IN THE PHILIPPINES

Photo: UN Women/Louie Pacardo

GENDER SNAPSHOT: APRIL – JUNE 2020

The Philippines is among the worst affected countries in the South East Asian region in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic – it has experienced the highest number of new confirmed cases per day, second highest number of deaths, and third highest rate of infection. This second Gender Snapshot highlights the situation of women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic in the period of April to June 2020.ⁱ

Women and girls in the Philippines continue to face high levels of discrimination and inequality. Gender-based violence in private and public spaces, a lack of economic opportunities, as well as unsafe and unfair labour practices, and the threat of armed conflict, have all been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, placing women and girls in the Philippines at heightened vulnerability.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines introduced Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). While restrictions are being eased to General Community Quarantine (GCQ) in some areas, certain *barangays* (villages) remain on lockdown and subject to targeted testing and contact tracing.

WHEN HOME IS NOT A SAFE PLACE

The introduction of ECQ measures had the consequence of trapping women and girls with abusive family members and perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence. Mobility restrictions have reduced the ability of women and girls to seek assistance from law enforcement and women's organisations, or access alternative shelter.

Instance of sexual and gender-based violence, and crimes against women and children, reported by the Philippines National Police (PNP) and Department of Justice, during ECQ include:ⁱⁱ

- On average, eight people a day are sexually assaulted.
- Over 1,200 cases of crimes against women and children were reported during March and April.
- 602 rapes from 17 March to 23 May.
- Three-fold increase in tips received about online sexual exploitation of children from March to May.

Bantay Bastos: Using social media to curb online exploitation of women and girls

A group of women activists and advocates banded together to address the spike in online (and offline) exploitation of women and children during the ECQ. The Bantay Bastos Group, a private Facebook Group created by Every Woman and the Young Feminists Collective, calls for the tracking and reporting of posts that promote cyberpornography, violence, sexism and rape culture on social media. It has successfully drawn public attention to the issue of online exploitation of women and children. In May, Bantay Bastos reported 45 accounts to Facebook and five cases to the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division of the PNP.

Socio-economic impacts are increasing negative coping mechanisms. Through the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) Subsidy and the COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP), the Social Welfare Department and the Labor Department respectively are supporting individuals facing economic hardship and displaced workers. However, not all citizens are entitled to such support, and there have been reports of irregularities in food assistance delivery, further exacerbating economic hardship.

As public services are disrupted and government resources stretched, responses to gender-based violence and exploitation have been critically affected. In April, the Government announced that "all Barangay Violence Against Women Desks and Barangay Council for the Protection of the Children shall remain active and fully functional during the ECQ." This was reiterated by local governments, the PNP, and the Commission on Human Rights, who assured that hotlines for reporting gender-based violence remain accessible at all times

UNSAFE PASSAGE FOR WOMEN

Quarantine passes are required to enable a single individual in a household to buy goods and supplies or do errands, such as pay utilities. These passes are extended to heads of households, who are usually men, or to a family member not considered vulnerable under the health protocols set by the Health Department. Checkpoints are usually staffed by male law enforcement officers or barangay officials, conducting pass and temperature checks, and questioning the purpose of travel.

Women have reported sexual harassment by law enforcement officers and officials at checkpointsⁱⁱⁱ. Women have been requested to provide their personal information, such as their name and phone number, and threatened with arrest if they refuse. Following release of personal information, women have reported receiving incessant phone calls. In the Philippines, women make up only 12% of law enforcement, and as a result, women officers are not commonly present at checkpoints.

There have also been cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of women in prostitution by checkpoint officers in exchange for safe passage, transportation, money or essential goods, including food^{iv}. Women have reported being raped before proceeding to work, with some coerced into giving a portion of their pay to officers.

While calls for filing cases against erring officers were called for by the PNP^v, women survivors often opt to remain silent for fear of losing their privacy, retaliation, lack of resources to pursue the case, and arrest as prostitution is illegal in the Philippines.

The Safe Spaces Act (2019)

In 2019, Republic Act No. 11313 or the Safe Spaces Act was adopted to address gender-based sexual harassment in public spaces, such as streets, public utility vehicles, privately-owned places open to the public, and online, among others. It is an enhancement to the current law on sexual harassment.

Under the Safe Spaces Act, it is illegal to relentlessly request personal details, such as name and contact number, social media details or destination, comment on one's appearance or ridicule on the basis of sex or sexual orientation, persistent telling of sexual jokes, or invade one's personal space. Violators of such offence can be penalized by fine and imprisonment of up to 30 days.

The passage of the law was informed by learnings from UN Women's Safe Cities Project, which was piloted in Quezon City and the City of Manila. The project raised the issue of sexual harassment in public spaces and enabled the passage of city-wide ordinances to address the issue.

LGBTIQ AT RISK

The LGBTIQ community regularly experiences stigmatisation and discrimination, with the COVID-19 pandemic heightening these occurrences. One such incident involved three LGBT individuals whom a village official accused of soliciting sex and breaking the ECQ. As punishment, the official publicly humiliated them by ordering them to kiss, dance, and do push-ups on a live video broadcast on social media. Their identities were also revealed. The video of their punishment went viral, adding to their harassment.^{vi}

Given the rise of violence against women and LGBT individuals, Quezon City, one of the localities that pioneered the protection of women in public spaces, reopened its protection centres and continued its hotline for reporting gender-based violence.

Violations against LGBTIQ people and others during the pandemic highlights the need for increased civilian oversight, including oversight by women civil society, and accountability to ensure respect for human rights during the COVID-19 responses and emergency measures.

Young Feminist Collective

The Young Feminist Collective (YFC) began as a support group for young feminists, and transformed into an active platform for advocacy and collaboration on feminist issues. After the introduction of ECQ, YFC raised funds to provide hygiene kits for 250 mothers and food packs to 450 mothers in Jose Fabella Hospital, the national maternity hospital, catering to impoverished communities in Metro Manila.

YFC also provided support to 270 garbage collectors in Makati, 170 in San Juan City and 305 in Malabon, as well as 200 hygiene kits to COVID-19 isolation facility in Quezon City, and items for 12 children rescued from online sexual exploitation.

Asked why YFC focuses support to mothers and marginalized sectors, “we aim to reach the most vulnerable that are often un-reached by mainstream relief and recovery efforts. We want to reach those in the fringes of society,” said Shebana Alqaseer of the Young Pinays, a member organization of YFC.

undervaluing of healthcare professionals. The deployment ban has since been modified to allow health care workers to leave, provided their contracts had been forged before 8 March.

Coalition Against Trafficking-Asia Pacific

Since the ECQ, the Coalition Against Trafficking-Asia Pacific (CATW-AP) has provided food packs, cash assistance and other necessities to 267 survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation, widows and orphans of extra-judicial killings, across Metro Manila and six provinces.

CATW-AP is a feminist organization that promotes women’s human rights and assists victims of trafficking and all forms of violence against women in the Asia-Pacific region. It has successfully lobbied for the passage of Republic Act No. 9208 or the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, as well as the definition of trafficking in line with the Optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons.

Jean Enriquez, Executive Director of CATW-AP, says “most of the vulnerable women we organized have fallen through the cracks of the government’s Social Amelioration Program subsidy. We have to sustain our support to them. Women do not want to go back to prostitution; they want real livelihood without sexual abuse.”

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

As of June, 32,037 Filipinos have been repatriated. Repatriates are placed in government-assigned quarantine facilities or, for sea-based workers, requested to stay aboard ships. Eight of the almost 100 repatriated overseas Filipina workers who were pregnant, gave birth while in quarantine facilities.

The closure of international borders, contraction of business operations, and fears of imported cases, have meant that many Filipino migrant workers have lost their livelihoods. For migrant workers who remain overseas, many have found themselves without work and medical support, and vulnerable to eviction from their employer’s accommodation. As of the end of May, 5,184 overseas Filipino workers had contracted COVID-19, with 339 deaths.

A deployment ban for Filipino health care workers, the majority of which are women, was imposed in May. The ban was issued “to prioritize human resource allocation” in the country’s health care system in the midst of the pandemic. Currently, the Philippine health care system is short of 290,000 healthcare workers to address the demands of COVID-19. The Philippines is a well-regarded source country for healthcare workers, with many medical professionals seeking overseas employment due to low remuneration in the Philippines. Since the deployment ban, healthcare workers in the Philippines are being required to volunteer for the pandemic, sparking public outcry on the

WOMEN-LED MICRO, SMALL, AND MEDIUM-SCALE ENTERPRISES

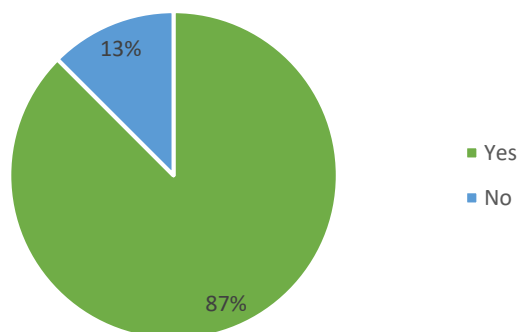
In April, an online survey with 16 women-led companies, conducted by UN Women-WeEmpowerAsia and Investing in Women, revealed 87% had been significantly impacted as a result of the pandemic, particularly in relation to cashflow and business operations. Two companies indicated that they had received financial support from their headquarters to manage their liquidity. Three companies had ceased operations, while eight shifted to partial operations. Almost half of the respondents anticipated that it would take more than 6 months before they could fully restore operations.

Among the immediate measures companies undertook to reduce the risks associated with COVID-19 were: 1) allowing employees to telecommute or work from home; 2) providing technology support for work from home arrangements; and, 3) providing personal protective equipment and supplies to employees. Other measures undertaken included accessing the Labour Department’s subsidy for displaced workers and supporting online learning.

The companies likewise expressed that they needed support on: 1) improving flexibility in the workplace, which may include

revisiting contracts to make work from home arrangements easier; 2) flexible terms or low interest rates for loans; 3) a supportive regulatory environment; and, 4) improvements to IT infrastructure.

Has your women-led business been negatively impacted by COVID-19?



The COVID-19 pandemic likewise affected the employees of women-led businesses. Companies observed the balancing act of paid and unpaid work for both women and men employees, noting that while men were now actively involved in household work, the majority is still undertaken by women. Additional concerns raised by women employees included health risks and mobility restrictions due to the pandemic, with some pregnant employees unable to seek regular check-ups.

Specific measures undertaken by women-led companies in support of women employees included: 1) prioritizing women in the work from home arrangements; 2) advance payment of salaries of 1.5 months before allowing them to use their leave credits; and, 3) daily pop-up virtual meetings and a buddy system to check-up on each other.

For women micro-entrepreneurs, the story is quite different based on a separate survey conducted by SEDPI, a microfinance institution, with support from UN Women-WeEmpowerAsia between April to May. Due to the ‘micro’ nature of these enterprises, ‘bouncing back’ is perceived to be much easier due to low capital needed to continue or resume operations. Out of the 4,269 respondents, 85% said they were confident that they would have access to supply to restart their operations. 49% said that customers would return as soon as operations resumed.

Women microentrepreneurs prefer to avoid taking out additional loans for fear of being unable to repay loans on time and accompanying penalties and interests. 47% of the respondents prefer to continue repaying their loans without the need for restructuring or refinancing. Cash assistance, however, would be beneficial to allow them to continue operations and recover from the socio-economic shocks of the pandemic. The majority of the respondents said they could recover their livelihoods within two months’ time.

As of September 2019, microfinance is a PHP 335B industry that serves as a lifeline for microentrepreneurs around the country. 98% of microenterprises are women-led and the availability of microfinancing is crucial for the survival of their enterprises. Women microentrepreneurs are usually involved as food stall vendors, farmers, backyard animal raisers, fisherfolks, *sari-sari* store owners, and dressmakers, among others.

WOMEN DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY

Prisons and other custodial settings are at increased risk of becoming COVID-19 epicentres due to their overcrowding, poor sanitation, and lack of access to adequate healthcare. The Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) reported that its 467 jails are at 534% capacity, as of 19 March 2020^{vii}. Women account for almost 9% of prison populations.^{viii}

More than 130,000 people were arrested for violating ECQ measures, during the period of 17 March to 18 April.^{ix} Initially, violators were released on grounds of compassion and due to a lack of detention facilities, and limited availability of prosecutors. Local governments, however, have continued to detain violators, ballooning out prison populations, and making social distancing impossible for those incarcerated.

In late March, a pregnant woman was detained at the Quezon City Police District for a drug-related offense. After giving birth in a hospital she tested positive for COVID-19. As of May, there were 77 women inmates that had tested positive for COVID-19 and two deaths^x. In addition to COVID-19, women continue to face a risk of gender-based violence in detention facilities. In late March, two women reported they were raped by two police officers while in custody.^{xi}

Appeals have been made to issue early release orders, especially for pregnant, elderly, and vulnerable inmates. The Justice Department has simplified requirements and procedures for applying for parole and pardons, and the Supreme Court issued a directive to release inmates detained longer than their minimum penalty and awaiting trial, reiterating its decongestion guideline released in 2014^{xii}.

VULNERABILITIES OF OLDER WOMEN

Under Republic Act No. 9994 or the Expanded Senior Citizens Act 2010, certain senior citizens are entitled to a monthly social pension to augment their daily subsistence and medical needs. The Social Welfare Department, however, noted that not all senior citizens receive monthly social pensions – those qualified are “indigent senior citizens” who are frail, sickly, with disability, without pension and without regular support to meet basic needs.

Delays in the distribution of the social pension were already experienced prior to ECQ due to validation requirements by the

Department and local government units. With the introduction of mobility restrictions and ECQ, these delays have been compounded, leaving the already vulnerable elderly population without access to immediate and needed support.

The SAP Subsidy is contingent on profiling undertaken by local government. Elderly women who may not be able to access information or participate in profiling risk being marginalised. In addition, ECQ has meant that some elderly people are in lockdown in other localities than that which they are registered as a senior citizen, nullifying their ability to access benefits.

Elderly people are particularly dependent on support, and are more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 as a result of comorbidities. Unable to access social welfare in a timely manner or share their ECQ checkpoint pass with another household member, elderly people risk being unable to provide for themselves, including by purchasing their own basic necessities or seeking medical assistance.

WOMEN IN DISASTER-PRONE AND CONFLICT AREAS

Peace remains fragile in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). During ECQ, several conflicts have transpired in Maguindanao. From the period of 16 March to 23 April, there were 37 clashes recorded by the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The most recent violence resulted in the death of a 10-year old girl, Aslamiya, and her seven-year old sister, Asnaida, and injuries to their pregnant mother, and 13 others, during Eid'l Fitr marking the end of Ramadan.^{xiii}

Displacement due to natural disasters and armed conflict is also impacting the BARMM's resilience. There are 356,220 individuals currently displaced in Mindanao, the majority of

Women raising their voices against armed violence

In 2019, UN Women supported the Bangsamoro Women Commission (BWC) in localizing the BARMM Regional Action Plan on Women Peace and Security (2020-2022), beginning with the province of Maguindanao. The plan outlines the strategies and actions to strengthen the role of Bangsamoro women in the implementation of the Bangsamoro peace agreements, conflict transformation and protection of human rights in conflict and post-conflict settings. The BWC organized internally displaced women leaders to serve as mediators and negotiators between the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to prevent occurrences of potential conflict.

which are women and children. On 27 May, an armed encounter took place between government troops and non-state actors in South Upi, Maguindanao, resulting in a further displacement of more than 3,000 individuals.

With security forces involved in COVID-19 response, community policing in the context of preventing violent armed conflict is affected. Conversely, threats to security forces and humanitarian workers have resulted in delays in the distribution of food packs and financial aid to communities. On 21 April, government forces securing the Social Welfare Department's team to distribute the SAP subsidy were attacked by communist rebels in Aurora Province, resulting in the death of two troopers. The incident became the government's impetus to cease negotiations with the Communist Party of the Philippines.

Natural disasters remain a threat for the Philippines. On 13 May, Tropical Storm Ambo hit the Samar provinces, Masbate, Quezon and Aurora, affecting or 578,571 individuals, and causing more than 1.5 billion pesos of damage to infrastructure, including hospitals and health centers, and agriculture.

Areas impacted by conflict and disaster carry increased risks associated with COVID-19. With access to basic services limited, including access to healthcare, delivery of assistance and food often delayed, and displacement camps overcrowded, an outbreak of COVID-19 could quickly overwhelm services and have devastating effects for people.

COVID-19 as a driver of recruitment to armed groups

Conflicts between warring clans and armed clashes between government troops and non-state actors have resulted in displacement, and shortages or delays in the delivery of basic needs. Evacuation centers are cramped and unable to provide sufficient food, water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. Due to threats of continuing tension, populations are unable to return home. The presence of police, military and paramilitaries affect people's mobility and psycho-social health. Access to information is limited and unreliable. COVID-19 has exacerbated all of this.

As seen in previous conflicts, disenfranchisement of displaced populations or geographically-isolated areas have been used by non-state actors to recruit to armed movements¹. The longer the delays in government support to those areas, the stronger the calls to join armed groups.

It is crucial that women are engaged as peacebuilders and advocates of social cohesion, and that government aid and recovery packages are timely, to support community members to reject recruitment by armed groups.

CALL TO ACTION

All actors undertaking COVID-19 response and recovery in the Philippines are called upon to:

ENSURE COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY IS GENDER-INCLUSIVE

- ✓ Ensure the collection and analysis of sex disaggregated data, in addition to age, disability and ethnicity disaggregated data, to inform gender-sensitive responses, as well as gender-inclusive COVID-19 recovery policies and programmes.
- ✓ Identify and address the underlying disparities between women and men that prevent women's access to food, health, social protection, and other basic needs and essential services, as well as access to justice in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ✓ In line with the Leave No One Behind principle of the Agenda for Sustainable Development, develop/strengthen inclusive measures in COVID-19 response and recovery targeting women and girls from marginalized communities, including rural and urban poor, youth, elderly, indigenous, religious minorities, those with disabilities, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, those living with HIV and AIDS, living in conflict- and post-conflict areas, deprived of liberty, and LGBTIQ individuals.
- ✓ Pass Anti-Discrimination Ordinances for women and girls from marginalized communities.
- ✓ Dissemination of information on the Bangkok Rules to women deprived of liberty and to law enforcement and corrections agencies.

ENHANCE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION + PROTECTION DURING COVID-19

- ✓ Involve women in the decision-making process relating to COVID-19 interventions – from planning and design, programming, implementation, to monitoring and evaluation.
- ✓ Deploy more women police officers in patrols and checkpoints to mitigate, if not eliminate, sexual harassment in public spaces and ensure gender-sensitive responses to family violence, including intimate partner violence.
- ✓ Establish women's desks alongside COVID-19 testing centres to provide information for reporting gender-based violence, including online exploitation, as well as other services, such as counselling, referral to psychosocial, medical and legal services, and shelter, among others.
- ✓ Empower women to call for gender-responsive policies and programmes that would mitigate the impact of COVID-19 at the household and community levels.

SUPPORT WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

- ✓ Engage women in COVID-19 interventions, recognizing their unique expertise and lived experience, as well as the multiple roles they play in communities and the burdens they face. Women are powerful agents of change, leaders and influencers in their communities.
- ✓ Promote women's knowledge, skills and experience on preventing conflict and building social cohesion, as well as relief and rehabilitation, in the context of natural disasters and armed conflict during COVID-19.
- ✓ Engage family members to support women's pursuit of livelihoods and work from home arrangements, as well as male members to contribute to unpaid care work.
- ✓ Support women's digital literacy and empower women to use information and communication technology to facilitate greater access to life-saving information and resources.

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- ⁱ For an analysis of the gender dimensions of COVID-19 from March to April 2020, please see UN Women Philippines' first Gender Snapshot at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/gender-snapshot-covid-19-in-the-philippines>
- ⁱⁱ <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/05/20/1200-crimes-against-women-children-recorded-since-ecq-started-duterte-report>; and, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/05/25/2016374/8-raped-daily-during-quarantine-pnp>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.interakasyon.com/celebrities/2020/03/26/165098/reports-harassment-women-muslim-checkpoints-pnp-afp-bela-padilla/>
- ^{iv} <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/260588-prostitutes-abused-by-cops-first-cross-coronavirus-border>
- ^v <https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/05/22/cops-in-quarantine-checkpoints-tagged-in-sex-for-pass-scheme-pnp-chief-urges-complainants-to-file-charges/>
- ^{vi} <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/08/philippines-uses-humiliation-covid-curfew-punishment>
- ^{vii} <https://www.onenews.ph/804-inmates-qualified-for-release-bjmp>
- ^{viii} <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/philippines>
- ^{ix} <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1100314>
- ^x <https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/05/16/39-covid-19-positive-female-inmates-return-to-ciw/>
- ^{xi} https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/Marikina-police-rape.html?fbclid=IwAR3kVAjDuYa0pWgb7vuCGIjoHkiZ3r5NFZTGk6_Gkzfpahnn1GLV4tARRus
- ^{xii} <https://www.rappler.com/nation/258508-supreme-court-orders-urgent-release-inmates-lapsed-jail-time-shelved-case-coronavirus>
- ^{xiii} <https://www.mzindanews.com/top-stories/2020/05/10-year-old-girl-and-7-year-old-brother-killed-by-mortar-fire-in-datu-saudi-ampatuan-town/>