



## GENDER SNAPSHOT: COVID-19 IN THE PHILIPPINES

### GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF COVID-19

Women and girls in the Philippines are facing distinct challenges to their safety and well-being during COVID-19, such as access to healthcare services, gender-based violence and other human rights violations, and economic insecurity. While not all the impacts of COVID-19 are fully understood yet, it is evident that the gender and social inequalities that existed in the Philippines before the pandemic are now exacerbated.

Recognizing how health crises affect women and men differently is a fundamental step to understanding the primary and secondary effects of health emergencies on individuals and communities, and for creating effective and equitable policies and interventions. It is therefore essential to address and integrate women and girl's immediate and long-term needs into COVID-19 response and recovery efforts in the Philippines.

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Heightened occurrence of abuse is a pattern repeated in many emergencies – whether driven by conflict, disasters, economic crisis, or during disease outbreaks – Commission on Human Rights.<sup>i</sup>

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### COVID-19 AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Against the backdrop of COVID-19, there has been a global surge in violence against women.<sup>ii</sup> Lockdown and quarantine measures have trapped women and girls with abusive partners and family members, as women's shelters and survivor services are scaled back.

In the Philippines, women and girls face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, more so than the global average. In the Philippines, National Statistics Office data shows that one in five women aged 15 - 49 years has experienced violence at least once in their lifetime, with the most common perpetrator being a current or most recent partner.

COVID-19 is creating additional economic and social pressures, such as loss of livelihood and food insecurity, which in turn is increasing the vulnerability of women and girls as those pressures potentially trigger violence.

Data from the Philippine National Police shows that in the period of quarantine between 15 March – 2 April, there were 391 cases of violence against women and 42 cases of rape reported in the Philippines. While the number of reported cases of violence against women has decreased during quarantine, this is likely indicative of increased constraints on survivors to report abuses, including the ability for women to find privacy from their abusers to seek help from friends, family, service providers or women's organizations.

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The increased threat to women and children can be a predicted consequence of the coronavirus lockdowns – Commission on Human Rights.<sup>iii</sup>

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In part due to increased economic hardship, there are reports of gender-based violence shifting to online, with women being coerced into online pornography and children being sexually exploited and abused online.

Amongst incidents of gender-based violence, support to survivors, as well as access to protection and justice mechanisms, have been disrupted as services are overburdened with COVID-19. This is in spite of the Government’s efforts to respond to incidents of violence against women and girls, and provide continuity in survivor services.

***Mobility restrictions and women’s safety***

Women’s groups in the Philippines have highlighted how mobility and transportation restrictions under Enhanced Community Quarantine, introduced to protect citizens from COVID-19, have resulted in increased risks for women seeking gender-based violence protection by reducing their options for accessing support services. The Commission on Human Rights and women’s groups have noted concerns over underreporting and monitoring of gender-based violence cases during COVID-19, as women are prevented from leaving the home.

***Harassment and discrimination***

Harassment, including sexual harassment, and discrimination is widespread in the Philippines, with over half of Filipino women having concerns about their safety in the community.<sup>iv</sup>

Under COVID-19, Filipino women’s exposure to harassment and discrimination has increased, including reports of healthcare workers facing discrimination, such as refusal of basic services and transport. As 72 per cent of healthcare workers in the Philippines are women, women are likely to experience a spike in discrimination and harassment.

Separately, women have reported sexual harassment at COVID-19 checkpoints by police and military officers. Women make up only 12 per cent of law enforcement in the Philippines. As a result, COVID-19 mandatory checks and physical

screenings of women, such as temperature checks, are often conducted by male officers.

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Women face increased risk of gender-based violence, sexual harassment and exploitation by law enforcement at COVID-19 checkpoints.

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Indigenous women have also faced harassment and violence by officials, including as they attempt to access their farmlands to plant or harvest crops, or protest in mining communities. There are also reports of limited recognition of diverse families and LGBTQI individuals and households by officials.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- **Reporting and monitoring mechanisms** for violence against women and girls that take into consideration COVID-19 mobility and community restrictions, as well as information communication technology access and literacy, should be enhanced. Reporting and monitoring should also include women migrant workers, both repatriated/returnees and on-site in countries of destination.
- **Women’s shelters** should continue to be considered essential services and remain accessible to women and children during COVID-19.
- Delivery of **sexual and reproductive health services**, including contraception and maternal health services, should be maintained during COVID-19.
- Implementation of **laws on gender-based violence and gender equality** should continue, having regard to the increase in intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse of women and children **online**. These laws include the Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act, Safe Spaces or Bawal Bastos Act, and the Magna Carta of Women Act including Section 10: Women Affected by Disasters, Calamities, and Other Crisis Situations.
- Social protections must recognize and respond to the needs of **diverse women**, including Indigenous women, women with disabilities, women migrant workers, LGBTQI women.

## WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN BARMM

COVID-19 poses particular challenges in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), where COVID-19 risks undermining fragile peace and community resilience, potentially triggering unrest, and rolling back advancements in women’s rights in the region.

### COVID-19 as a driver of conflict

Preliminary evidence highlights that hate speech, fake news, discrimination, and stigma have spread quickly, undermining social cohesion and reigniting historical tensions. As COVID-19 drives a growing sense of social exclusion and insecurity, there is a real risk that COVID-19 could impact peace and security.

COVID-19 has put pressure on persistent disparities and inequalities, including gender inequality. In BARMM, this is compounded by ongoing radicalization and violent extremism, including gender-based targeting and recruitment of women and girls to violent extremist organizations.

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*I want to deliver to you, Bangsamoro people, that we can protect our women in our community in the midst of this pandemic. Women’s rights have remained human rights to be respected by the majority.*

MP Bainon Karon, Chair  
Bangsamoro Women’s Commission

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COVID-19 also risks creating additional obstacles for women’s participation in sustaining and governing peace in BARMM. Reliance on security-led approaches to respond to COVID-19, as well as an increased burden of COVID-19 related care on women, could result in women being further marginalized from peace and governance processes that will shape the course of the region for decades.

### Women in IDP communities

People displaced by conflict and disaster, including recent renewed fighting, in Mindanao continue to live in temporary settlements, evacuation centers, and transitory sites.

Women and girls displaced in Mindanao face increased risks due to poverty, social exclusion,

discrimination, lack of access to services including healthcare, sanitation and education, and increased protection issues, including a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

Female-heads of households experience added constraints in accessing services, including food, and water. There have been reports of inequitable distribution of food packages in the BARMM due to corruption and politicization of food distribution. Additionally, relief packages do not routinely include sexual and reproductive health resources or maternity and hygiene kits.

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With COVID-19 disrupting delivery of services to IDP communities, the multiple and intersecting hardships displaced women and girls face will be compounded, and their exposure to violence and their vulnerability to exploitation amplified.

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As COVID-19 further threatens the economic security of displaced women and families, negative coping mechanisms are placing women and girls at greater risk. With limited opportunities, women and girls risk being sold into sexual slavery, trafficked for sexual exploitation and abuse, and forced into child marriage.

Further complicating the provision of gender-sensitive responses are matters relating to lack of access to some IDP sites, low levels of trust in authorities, and an absence of reliable communications networks.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Women peacebuilders should be supported to lead **social cohesion measures**, including countering discrimination and hate speech, and preventing COVID-19 from becoming a driver of violence and conflict.
- Women’s organizations and networks active in **disaster risk reduction and community resilience** efforts should be engaged and supported to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.
- Security **sector-driven** COVID-19 responses must be **proportionate, gender-sensitive and protect women’s human rights**, including through women’s leadership in law enforcement.

## ECONOMIC IMPACTS ON WOMEN

Emerging data on the economic impacts of COVID-19 indicates that women are disproportionately affected, and have less capacity to absorb the economic shocks associated with COVID-19.

In the Philippines, women are overrepresented in the informal economy, with 6.6 million Filipino women working in the informal sector. Filipino women in the informal sector have a lower earning capacity, resulting in reduced savings and safety nets. In addition, they have little to no access to labor protections, including sick leave or protections against dismissal. In many situations, their livelihoods are dependent on public spaces and social interactions, which are now restricted due to COVID-19.

In the formal sector, many Filipino women are employed in the service industry, including retail, hospitality and tourism. The services and retail industry were among the first sectors impacted by COVID-19, resulting in partial to full business shutdowns. With lockdowns extended and social distancing set to continue, it is unlikely that business operations will fully resume in the near future, disrupting traditional employment modalities and resulting in workforce adjustments. For women and families that were already struggling economically, this may tip them into poverty.

For micro, small and medium enterprises, the lockdown has resulted in temporary closures for most, or a drastic reduction in revenue for those able to remain operational. Given the small scale of these businesses, the majority will be unable to fully cover expenses related to maintaining business, such as paying suppliers and salaries. Limited mobility and strict border controls have also negatively impacted supply sourcing, as well as the buying and selling of goods.

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The disproportionate economic impact on women is likely to result in increased extreme poverty, and reduce opportunities for labor force participation, including through business ownership and enterprise, thereby further exacerbating gender income disparities.

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## Unpaid care work

Prevailing socio-cultural norms in the Philippines mean that women undertake the majority of unpaid care work.

In the context of COVID-19, the burden of unpaid care work on women is evident as they increasingly provide even greater support to family members, including maintaining sanitary conditions in the home, and caring for family members that are ill, putting themselves at increased risk of becoming infected. Women in the formal and informal sectors are additionally balancing work with housework, childcare, and/or elder care.

The undervaluing of women's unpaid care work in the Philippines has a knock-on effect for women's paid care work. The lack of recognition of unpaid care work extends to the undervaluation of paid care work and contributes to depressing wages of women care workers in the Philippines.<sup>v</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Social protection plans and emergency economic measures** must be gender-responsive and take into account unpaid care by women, specific constraints for women entrepreneurs, and women in both the formal and informal sectors.
- **Gender-sensitive workplace policies**, including telecommuting and flexible work arrangements, that recognize the balance of paid and unpaid work at home undertaken by women, should be promulgated with the view to **maintaining women's workforce participation**.
- Women frontline workers, including women health workers who comprise 75% of health workers, should have **access to extraordinary support measures**, including financial support, as well as capacity building on peacebuilding and conflict prevention.
- The roadmap to **early recovery** must be inclusive of **women's socio-economic needs and priorities**, especially women from low-income households and marginalized sectors, and create **pathways for women's participation** in order to promote faster recovery and increased resilience.

## WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

Filipino migrant workers are one of the largest diaspora populations, spanning over 100 countries and constituting approximately 11 per cent of the total population of the Philippines. Remittances by migrant workers account for 11 per cent of GDP.

Filipino women constitute a slight majority of overseas workers from the Philippines, yet their vulnerability to violence and exploitation is exponentially greater than that of their male counterparts, with women comprising 80 per cent of trafficked persons, and almost 70 per cent of repatriated overseas Filipino workers in distress.<sup>vi</sup> Often employed as domestic workers, women are subject to physical, psychological and sexual abuse in private homes, as well as forced confinement in the workplace, non-payment of wages, and long working hours.

As a result of COVID-19 and the closure of borders, many overseas migrant workers are finding themselves either in lockdown in the Philippines or trapped abroad with no work and no pay. Women domestic workers abroad are particularly vulnerable as their housing is often within their employer's accommodation, making them vulnerable to eviction, in addition to the loss of livelihood, exploitation and abuse.

Simultaneously, the demand for women migrant workers is slowing and employment contracts are being terminated due to business operations contracting, and fears of imported COVID-19 cases. While the Government of the Philippines has offered repatriation assistance, many Filipino women migrant workers fear that the economic difficulties they face, and their ability to provide for their families, will be worse if they return.

Women migrant workers who have returned home have suffered discrimination, including being denied entry to their home provinces. It is unclear whether these repatriation processes are gender-sensitive, or whether alternative accommodation arrangements are provided if violence exists in their homes in the Philippines.

### RECOMMENDATION:

- Women migrant workers should be afforded their **full human rights, without discrimination** and regardless of their migration status, in compliance with international law.

## WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

The Philippines has a strong history of women's leadership and participation in governance, including two women former Presidents, and the first and only woman chief negotiator to sign a major peace agreement.

As women continue to face the full force of COVID-19, including as the majority of first responders in communities and the health sector, it is vital that women's leadership and participation in COVID-19 decision-making processes and task teams be prioritized to ensure that responses are gender-sensitive. COVID-19 response planning and decision-making that is not done in consultation with women risks being less effective and unresponsive to the unique needs of women and girls, and delaying recovery.

Women and women's groups in the Philippines have proven to be crucial partners in leading inclusive and resilient emergency and recovery efforts, as well as repairing social breakdowns, rebuilding trust, and reaching the most vulnerable. Filipino women have a strong understanding of their communities and are best placed to address the disproportionate impact of emergencies on women and girls.

Women's response efforts following the Haiyan typhoon showcased the unique set of skills and resources Filipino women bring to crisis situations. They are experts in allaying fears, finding practical solutions, highlighting gendered aspects of crises, and working to prevent increases in violence against women during emergencies. However, during Haiyan most Filipino women were not in decision-making roles, but acting as volunteers.

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Promoting local ownership and responding to the whole of communities' needs promotes gender equal cultures and fosters broader oversight and accountability.

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In responding to COVID-19, it is essential that women's expertise, knowledge and skills are leveraged to promote gender-inclusive recovery, that is responsive to the needs of the whole community.

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Where women experience higher levels of empowerment in conflict and emergency settings, communities experience more rapid economic recovery in the aftermath.

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Looking forward, if women are able to lead and participate in recovery efforts and governance processes, COVID-19 provides an opportunity to address the structural inequalities affecting women and girls in the Philippines. In this regard, the Philippine Commission on Women is uniquely placed to mainstream gender-inclusive recovery efforts and promote outcomes that benefit women and girls.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

- Women’s **participation and leadership in COVID-19** response plans and post-pandemic governance should be promoted, including in BARMM.
- The Philippine Commission on Women should consider leading a whole of Government approach to **mainstreaming gender** and the rights of women and girls in **recovery efforts**, promoting outcomes that respond to the recovery priorities of women and girls.

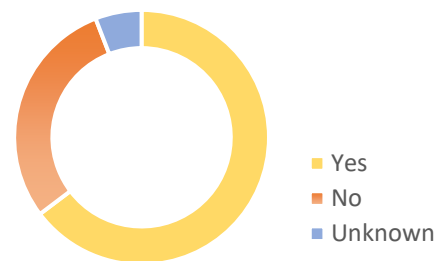
**IMPACTS ON WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY**

COVID-19 has negatively affected the ability of many women’s civil society organizations to continue operating and providing support to women and girls’, as highlighted in a recent survey by UN Women. From lack of access due to mobility restrictions, to loss of resources, suspension of community activities, and the inability to maintain contact with at-risk women that do not have reliable phone or internet connections, the impact of COVID-19 on women civil society and the communities they work with is evident.

While all women civil society survey respondents noted that they had taken measures to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, including flexible work arrangements and reallocation of budgets for COVID-19 activities, many highlighted a pivot towards online and phone-based services, thereby limiting their scope of support to those with access to information communication technology (ICT) and that have digital literacy.

As women and girls most at risk are often those without access to the internet or phones, due to remote locations, inability to pay for services, coercive control, disability, and other reasons, it is imperative that women civil society are able to continue providing in-person support and services, in addition to enhanced digital support.

Women civil society are important partners in emergency responses and recovery, and civic space for them requires continued investment. Importantly, over half of the survey respondents noted that their organization had been able to participate in shaping the COVID-19 response and early recovery planning, for example through planning committees and dialogues with the government:



**Recommendation:**

- **Continue to engage** and support the participation of **women’s civil society** in COVID-19 processes, including in design and delivery of responses, and relief and recovery.

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**A CALL FOR GENDER-INCLUSIVE COVID-19 ACTION**

UN Women calls on all stakeholders in the Philippines, including government actors and policy makers, to place women and girls at the center of COVID-19 responses.

It is crucial that COVID-19 responses are gender-inclusive and respond to the distinct needs of women and girls, including by enhancing human rights protections, strengthening implementation of the Magna Carta for Women, improving social and economic outcomes, and supporting women’s leadership and participation.

By placing women and girls at the center of COVID-19 responses, together we can address longstanding inequalities and promote a gender equal culture in the Philippines.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Gender-based violence

- Reporting and monitoring mechanisms for violence against women and girls that take into consideration COVID-19 mobility and community restrictions, as well as ICT access and literacy, should be enhanced. This should include women migrant workers, both repatriated/returnees and on-site in countries of destination.
- Women’s shelters should be considered essential services and remain accessible during COVID-19.
- Delivery of sexual and reproductive health services should be maintained during COVID-19.
- Implementation of laws on gender-based violence and gender equality should continue, having regard to intimate partner violence and sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse of women and children online. These laws include the Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act, Safe Spaces or Bawal Bastos Act, and the Magna Carta of Women Act, including Section 10: Women Affected by Disasters, Calamities, and Other Crisis Situations.
- Social protections must recognize and respond to the needs of diverse women, including Indigenous women, women with disabilities, women migrant workers, and LGBTQI women.

### Social cohesion and women, peace and security

- Women peacebuilders should be supported to lead social cohesion, including countering discrimination and hate speech, and preventing COVID-19 from becoming a driver of violence and conflict.
- Women’s organizations and networks active in disaster risk reduction and community resilience efforts should be engaged and supported to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.
- Women frontline workers, including women health workers, should have access to extraordinary support measures, including financial support, as well as capacity building on peacebuilding and conflict prevention.
- Security sector-driven COVID-19 responses must be proportionate, gender-sensitive and protect women’s human rights, including through women’s leadership in law enforcement.

### Economic and social protections

- Social protection plans and emergency economic measures must take into account unpaid care by women, constraints for women entrepreneurs, and women in the formal and informal sectors.
- Gender-sensitive workplace policies that recognize the balance of paid and unpaid work at home undertaken by women, should be promulgated with the view to maintaining women’s workforce participation.
- The roadmap to early recovery must be inclusive of women’s socio-economic needs and priorities, especially women from low-income households and marginalized sectors, and create pathways for women’s participation in order to promote faster recovery and increased resilience.
- Women migrant workers should be afforded their full human rights, without discrimination and regardless of their migration status, in compliance with international law.

### Women’s leadership and participation

- Women’s full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership in COVID-19 response plans and post-pandemic governance should be promoted, including in conflict-affected and fragile settings in BARMM.
- The Philippine Commission on Women could consider leading a whole of Government approach to mainstreaming gender and the rights of women and girls in recovery efforts, promoting outcomes that respond to the short, medium and long-term recovery priorities of women and girls.

### Women civil society organizations

- Continue to engage and improve the meaningful participation of women’s civil society in COVID-19 processes, including in design and delivery of the pandemic response and economic relief.

<sup>1</sup> Commission on Human Rights, Rising incidences of domestic violence during COVID-19 lockdown, 5 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Secretary-General, Make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of national response plans for COVID-19, 5 April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Commission on Human Rights, Rising incidences of domestic violence during COVID-19 lockdown, 5 April 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Women, Peace and Security Index, Georgetown University.

<sup>5</sup> ILO, Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work, 28 June 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, in SWS Scoping Study on International Migration Statistics of the Philippines 2017