



Human Rights Institute

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IBAHRI Covid-19 Human Rights Monitor

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1. Gender-based violence and women's health

India

India recently became the country with the second highest number of reported Covid-19 cases.¹ However, it has also been reported that India's Covid-19 count could be missing several women. The second sero-survey in Delhi, as well as the Mumbai and Ahmedabad sero-surveys, collectively showed a higher prevalence of infections among women than men – yet, women trail men significantly in officially counted cases. 'This could be because of the gender differences in social interactions, with women typically going out for household needs,' said one of the scientists who led the Mumbai survey. There are fewer women in the official case counts because fewer women are being tested, and fewer women develop serious enough symptoms to warrant testing. The Indian Council for Medical Research's analysis of over one million tests also found that women were slightly more likely to test positive than they were to be tested.²

Separately, Marie Stopes, a global non-profit for women, estimated that disrupted services due to lockdown could result in two million additional unsafe abortions, 650,000 unintended pregnancies and 2,600 maternal deaths in India.³

Africa

From rape and sexual exploitation to female genital mutilation, child marriage and early pregnancy, Covid-19 has unleashed a myriad of 'shadow pandemics' on girls across Africa. Closure of schools, seen as safe spaces for children, have left girls open to sexual violence from family members, neighbours and people from the community; lockdown poverty has forced minors into transactional sex to buy basics. Countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Malawi are reporting spikes in teen pregnancies and early marriages, raising fears many girls may never return to school, and jeopardising decades of gender equality progress. The World Health Organization says of the 39 countries surveyed in sub-Saharan Africa, only six have fully reopened schools. A recent report by Plan International and the African Child Policy Forum found school closures had forced more than 120 million girls across the region to stay home. 'Millions of girls have been deprived of access to food, basic healthcare and protection and thousands exposed to abuse and exploitation,' it added. Calls to helplines have surged in Malawi, Niger, Somalia, South Africa, Tunisia and Uganda. In Kenya, a national helpline reported a more than tenfold increase in calls, with 1,108 calls in June (many of which reported child rape) compared to 86 in February.⁴

¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-becomes-second-worst-affected-country-from-covid-19-in-the-world-a-look-at-the-number/articleshow/77974840.cms>

² www.livemint.com/news/india/india-s-covid-19-count-could-be-missing-many-women-11598670961443.html

³ <https://theprint.in/india/lockdown-seen-leading-to-1-million-unsafe-abortions-in-india-marie-stopes-says/491347>

⁴ www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/covid19-shadow-pandemics-africas-girls

2. LGBTQI+ rights

Tanzania

Tanzania-based NGO, LGBT Voice, documented an increase in cases of homophobia and discrimination against LGBTQI+ people during the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many members of the LGBTQI+ community to move in with family members who harbour homophobic views, and subsequently the LGBTQI+ community has reported not only higher levels of physical, sexual and emotional violence but equally denial of food or shelter. Local authorities have not intervened as same-sex relations are criminalised in Tanzania.⁵ The Tanzanian government banned social media and online posts that ‘promote homosexuality’, and the authorities have also increased restrictions on organisations working to advance LGBTQI+ rights ahead of elections in October.

Mexico

The US asylum system was shut down due to Covid-19, and this has left the LGBTQI+ community who were seeking asylum stranded in Mexico. Although Mexico recognises same-sex marriages, the LGBTQI+ community has faced homophobia and discrimination, particularly in the northern cities of Ciudad Juárez, Mexicali and Tijuana that act as gateways to the United States. Camps here house roughly 140 LGBTQI+ asylum seekers. Transgender asylum seekers are unable to gain employment in these cities as their birth certificates or identity cards differ from their gender identity.⁶

South Korea

The LGBTQI+ community in South Korea was blamed for the outbreak of coronavirus back in May after a gay man tested positive. The man had visited several gay bars as was revealed through contact tracing. Although homosexuality is legal in South Korea, there is discrimination against same-sex relations. With the second wave of infections hitting South Korea, the authorities have intensified contact tracing in order to curb the virus, however, this has had negative consequences for the LGBTQI+ community, as contact tracing has on occasion forcibly outed members of the community via certain Korean media outlets who took to reporting the identities of the venues’ customers and where they worked. This has also led to members of the community withdrawing from social media and dating apps, as they feared being outed online.⁷

3. Refugee camps

According to the Johns Hopkins online dashboard, the global Covid-19 total on 8 September topped 27.3 million with 893,382 deaths reported.⁸ In the meantime, the global pandemic activity shows no

⁵ www.globalgiving.org/donate/6026/lgbt-voice-of-tanzania/reports

⁶ www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/08/13/film-Mexico-US-asylum-shutdown-LGBTQ-danger

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/tracing-homophobia-in-south-koreas-coronavirus-surveillance-program-139428>

⁸ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

sign of slowing, with several refugee camps becoming hot spots.⁹ Experts and aid agencies have warned of potentially catastrophic outbreaks in these refugee camps, where sanitation is often poor and social distancing is nearly impossible.

Jordan

On 8 September, the UNHCR confirmed two Covid-19 cases in the Azraq camp in Jordan. Azraq is home to more than 36,000 Syrian refugees who have fled their country's civil war which broke out in 2011, and is the second largest refugee camp in Jordan. To date, the Kingdom has reported 2,478 coronavirus cases and 17 related deaths.¹⁰ 'This is the first confirmed case of coronavirus in refugee camps in Jordan,' the UNHCR said in a statement. 'It is a reminder that everyone has been affected by this epidemic, and solutions must be addressed through international solidarity and cooperation.'¹¹

Greece

The first Covid-19 case was reported in the Moria refugee camp on the eastern Aegean island of Lesbos on 2 September.¹² The Moria camp, which currently hosts more than 13,000 refugees, though originally designated to accommodate 3,000, has been criticised several times for its unhygienic and inhumane living conditions. Most are living in cramped conditions with limited or no access to fresh water and without any hygiene measures. The fact that confinement rules imposed on over 24,000 migrants on Lesbos are increasingly turning into de facto 'detention' measures is also denounced.¹³ Experts have several times warned that the situation in the camp is not only a humanitarian issue but a risk in the fight against the pandemic as well. Multiple organisations, including Oxfam and the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), have urged the Greek government and its EU partners to take immediate action to avoid a health tragedy in the camp. Action is needed now more than ever, following a fire which has devastated most of the camp, leaving thousands in desperate need of emergency accommodation. At least 35 of the refugees forced to flee the camp tested positive for Covid-19, although the number is likely higher due to lack of testing.¹⁴

4. Prisoners and detainees

United States

As Covid-19 has spread through immigration detention centres, more than 2,000 immigrants at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities in California, Florida, New Mexico, Ohio and

⁹ www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/08/refugee-camps-developed-nations-covid-19-keeps-world-edge

¹⁰ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/09/covid-19-cases-confirmed-jordan-camp-syrian-refugees-200908121425186.html

¹¹ www.arabnews.com/node/1731421/middle-east

¹² www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/greece-reports-1st-covid-19-case-in-moria-refugee-camp/1960839

¹³ www.inmigrants.net/en/post/27083/coronavirus-lesvos-migrant-camp-risks-catastrophe-oxfam

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/09/lesbos-refugee-camp-fire-forces-thousands-to-evacuate>

other states have refused meals in protest since March. They have also called for more masks, soap and better medical care. About 21 immigrants held by ICE at a jail north of San Francisco recently went on a hunger strike for nearly a week. Meanwhile, the American Civil Liberties Union and its state chapters have filed more than 50 lawsuits against prisons and jails authorities nationwide to force immigration authorities to release people at risk of serious illness from the disease.¹⁵ Nearly 5,500 people in ICE custody nationwide have tested positive for the coronavirus.¹⁶

Jails and prisons continue to be among the largest clusters of Covid-19 in the US, and experts believe the disease will continue to spread, therein and in surrounding communities without more concerted containment efforts, including release from confinement.¹⁷ More than 6,000 prisoners were infected each week for six weeks running in July and August. Nearly 1,000 prisoners have died of Covid-19 and more than 108,000 have fallen ill.¹⁸ The close quarters associated with the high levels of incarceration seen in the US have proven ripe for the spread of Covid-19. As of 1 September, jails and prisons accounted for 90 of the top 100 outbreak clusters.¹⁹ Jails, prisons and detention centres also hold the potential to spread Covid-19 into the broader community. For instance, rural Marion County, Ohio became one of the worst per-capita hotspots in the nation after Covid-19 spread inside the local prison, killing 20 prisoners and 14 others by mid-July.²⁰

5. Informal settlements and homelessness

Belgium

A study conducted by St-Pierre Hospital in Brussels revealed that homeless people were three times more likely to be infected with Covid-19 than the general population. According to the last homeless census report, there were 2,151 homeless people in Brussels. The environment in which homeless people live renders social distancing and hygiene impossible, which puts them at higher risk. The study also showed that the Belgian Government had not implemented strategies to stop the spread of Covid-19 within the homeless population. The homeless population in Brussels often manages to get food but with the pandemic, rough sleepers and families living in temporary accommodation, including children, were not able to get enough food.²¹

Nigeria

¹⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/21/politics/covid-19-supreme-court-prisoners-rights/index.html>

¹⁶ www.ice.gov/coronavirus

¹⁷ www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/08/coronavirus-prisons-jails-us

¹⁸ www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons

¹⁹ www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html#clusters

²⁰ www.marionstar.com/story/news/2020/06/19/marion-public-health-coronavirus-pandemic-shows-signs-slowing/3219137001

²¹ www.brusselstimes.com/brussels/130239/a-piece-of-the-berlin-wall-placed-in-brussels

As economies suffer the effects of the pandemic, low-income earners of Nigeria have been hit particularly hard. Redundancies and income loss by those who are self-employed have created a new generation of homeless people in major cities like Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt. Most people facing homelessness have been unable to pay their rents. The impact of Covid-19 on the informal settlements of Nigeria has also been very pronounced, according to a survey done of Nigeria SDI Alliance, with 85 per cent of urban poor communities living in informal settlements unable to receive palliatives intended for the vulnerable, which were provided by the government.²²

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is facing its third wave of Covid-19 infections and this has only exacerbated the situation for homeless people, as public facilities and services, including bathrooms, meal providers and sleeping areas, have been suspended. According to government statistics, as of June, there are 1,423 homeless persons. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reports that the number of homeless people has increased by 50 per cent in Tsim Sha Tsui district due to the economic downturn brought about by the pandemic.²³

6. Disability rights

United Kingdom

The UK Government has been largely criticised for failing to account for disability rights in its Covid-19 response. In July, it was reported that almost two-thirds of deaths from Covid-19 were people living with disabilities.²⁴ Since the national shielding programme – where the most medically vulnerable were told to avoid leaving their homes at all – ended on 1 August, the government is facing even more criticism for failing to include people with disabilities in plans to reopen society. Opposition Minister for Disabled People, Vicky Foxcroft MP, has called for clear guidance to ensure those included in shielding measures are not forced to return to unsafe workplaces.²⁵ Further, the reopening of schools poses problems for children living with disabilities. Masks are required in communal areas of secondary schools or colleges. However, out of 800 parents asked by the National Deaf Children's Society, only 36 per cent would send their deaf children back to school if masks were compulsory.²⁶ For those who rely on lip-reading, the wearing of masks is incredibly disruptive and reasonable adjustments should be made to ensure they are not isolated. Another study estimates that 20,000 students at schools for children with special needs are unlikely to return to school due to safety concerns.²⁷

²² <https://guardian.ng/property/coronavirus-fuelling-increase-in-homelessness-squatters-say-experts>

²³ <https://msf-seasia.org/news/19070>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53221435>

²⁵ www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/the-government-has-failed-spectacularly-to-support-disabled-people-returning-to-work

²⁶ www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/september/only-third-deaf-children-would-be-school-if-facemasks-class-are-made-mandatory

²⁷ www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/04/special-needs-pupils-forgotten-english-schools-reopen