



# Human Rights Institute

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human rights worldwide

## **IBAHRI Covid-19 Human Rights Monitor**

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## 1. Gender-based violence and women's health

Women are particularly vulnerable to corruption across the health care system, both as patients and providers, and through 'sextortion', which is the practice of public officials or aid workers demanding sex in exchange for key services. Reports indicate many incidences of corruption in health centres, ranging from petty bribery to access to lifesaving treatments to influence in the procurement of medical supplies. For example, women in Zimbabwe are being sexually extorted for access to water, whilst, in Nigeria, police have arrested women for minor Covid-19 infractions and sexually abused them while in custody. The economic hardship and loss of jobs and livelihoods may be putting women at greater risk of sextortion. In the current context, the closure of borders can often result in marginalised groups, including undocumented female migrants and refugees, facing greater exposure to sextortion risks and coercion by officials. In these situations, women are often forced into paying a double bribe – monetary and sexual – in exchange for crossing borders.<sup>1</sup>

### Asia

The negative impact of the pandemic is likely to be felt long after the health risk is resolved, a high-level meeting of parliamentarian and civil society actors under the auspices of the Asian Population and Development Association heard on 17 September. There was concern around how much societal socio-economic impact Covid-19 has created, including the impact on employment and in unpaid care work, impact on health, including reproductive health services, as well as the impact of domestic violence during lockdowns. There were projections that in 2020 maternal mortality ratios could increase between 17 and 43 per cent – and from data collected in both Bangladesh and Myanmar, these projections are in line with reality. Family planning too was problematic, with the unmet need expected to spike from between 21 to 40 per cent. For instance, in Indonesia, maternal mortality and unmet family planning needs were expected to rise because 28 per cent of health centres were not fully functioning.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. LGBTQI+ rights

### United States

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been advocating an anti-LGBTQI+ agenda amid the global pandemic, where associated rights are already often under attack globally, with many countries using the pandemic as a pretext to restrict freedoms. Mr Pompeo established a commission on unalienable rights to 'review and tighten the State Department's definition of human rights and ensure it is grounded in the nation's founding principles'. The commission, which is mainly made up of religious conservatives, released a report since adopted by the State Department. The report has downgraded LGBTQI+ rights to a second, optional tier.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [www.transparency.org/en/news/covid-19-makes-women-more-vulnerable-to-corruption](http://www.transparency.org/en/news/covid-19-makes-women-more-vulnerable-to-corruption)

<sup>2</sup> [www.ipsnews.net/2020/09/covid-19-possible-human-rights-crisis-asia-disparities-expected-widen](http://www.ipsnews.net/2020/09/covid-19-possible-human-rights-crisis-asia-disparities-expected-widen)

<sup>3</sup> [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/17/mike-pompeo-human-rights-women-lgbt-unalienable](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/17/mike-pompeo-human-rights-women-lgbt-unalienable)

Also in the United States, there are reports of a disproportionate impact faced by lesbian couples during the pandemic where job losses have mostly affected women. Reports say that women's labour force participation shrunk to 54.7 per cent, a figure last seen in the 1980s.

The Affordable Care Act has helped millions who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, however, the transgender community has faced discrimination. In June, the Supreme Court gave a broad definition of sex, yet, the Department of Health and Human Services narrowed the definition of sex in the Affordable Care Act hereby leaving out many transgender people.<sup>4</sup>

### **Middle East**

A survey conducted in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia during the pandemic by the NGO Mawjoudin (We Exist) revealed that 61.7 per cent of LGBTIQ+ community members have been a victim of cyber-attacks and cyberbullying, which has in turn affected them psychologically. With homosexuality criminalised in most countries in the Middle East, access to mental health services is very difficult for the LGBTIQ+ community. The survey also showed that 50 per cent of the participants have not reported cyber-attacks to the police as they feared re-victimisation.<sup>5</sup>

## **3. Refugee camps**

### **Ethiopia**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on Tuesday said more than 200,000 refugee children are out of school in Ethiopia due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> The East African country is one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa, sheltering about 779,261 registered refugees and asylum seekers as of the beginning of this month, according to latest figures.<sup>7</sup> According to the agency, essential primary healthcare activities are maintained in all refugee camps, which are currently part of the ongoing national campaign to enhance awareness and testing for Covid-19. The UNHCR, however, stressed that refugees continue to receive only about 84 per cent of the minimum standard food ration of 2,100 kilocalories per person per day. 'This has kept the global acute malnutrition rate in most camps higher than the acceptable standards.'

### **Greece**

On 19 September, thousands of asylum seekers moved to new temporary facilities at Kara Tepe, ten days after a fire destroyed their former camp Moria.<sup>8</sup> Food and sanitary conditions were reported to be 'dangerous' for refugees, while the troubled Kara Tepe transfer complicates government efforts to

<sup>4</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/us/transgender-supreme-court-healthcare.html?smid=tw-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/us/transgender-supreme-court-healthcare.html?smid=tw-share)

<sup>5</sup> [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AjOXJna\\_7yZYC86U9E1-1zcRcExzcx12/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AjOXJna_7yZYC86U9E1-1zcRcExzcx12/view)

<sup>6</sup> [www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/22/c\\_139388175.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/22/c_139388175.htm)

<sup>7</sup> [https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20COVID-19%20and%20Operational%20Update%20-%20September%202020\\_0.pdf](https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20COVID-19%20and%20Operational%20Update%20-%20September%202020_0.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-20/about-9,000-migrants-on-greeces-lesbos-move-into-new-tent-camp/12683048](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-20/about-9,000-migrants-on-greeces-lesbos-move-into-new-tent-camp/12683048)

manage the country's worst humanitarian crisis in five years, when more than one million refugees, mainly from Syria, flooded Europe in the biggest migration push since the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> Several EU members have offered to take in refugees from Greece, led by Germany, which says it will take in 1,553 refugees from Greek Island camps who have had their asylum applications approved.

### **Bangladesh**

About 860,000 Rohingya live in the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camp called Kutupalong, and about half of the hundreds of thousands of refugees in Kutupalong are children. With overcrowding, poor living conditions and great psychological stress, these children already face immense health challenges. Yet, now with the global Covid-19 pandemic, children living in Kutupalong face more significant challenges to their health and wellbeing. Infectious diseases and malnutrition threaten the Rohingya refugee children's health. About half of the children lack access to formal education. Moreover, with an unstable environment, other socio-economic dangers also jeopardise children's futures. These socio-economics challenges include abuse, neglect, sexual violence, trafficking and child labour, among others.<sup>10</sup>

## **4. Prisoners and detainees**

### **Lebanon**

Families of inmates rallied outside Lebanon's largest prison, Roumieh, to protest against the spread of Covid-19 inside the facility. Lebanese activists also circulated videos on social media of rioting inmates who are angered by the detection of Covid-19 infections among a number of detainees and security personnel, and who demand the release of Roumieh's prisoners.<sup>11</sup> 223 of the 3,000 detainees at the overcrowded prison have recently tested positive. Some detainees' families have urged the state to issue amnesty to certain detainees to reduce the possibility of the virus sweeping through the country's prison population.<sup>12</sup>

### **Japan**

An inmate with a pre-existing condition plans to file a lawsuit against Osaka Prison, arguing that its rules have put him in a 'life-threatening situation' of being infected with Covid-19. According to the planned lawsuit, inmates are ordered to wear masks while working in an area for prisoner activities, but must remove the masks when moving between their cells and the workspace. Hand sanitiser is not available at cells and the workspace, and measures to keep inmates at a safe distance from each other are inadequate. A representative of Osaka Prison said hand sanitiser is not provided 'because of the risk

<sup>9</sup> [www.voanews.com/europe/greece-scrambles-rehouse-homeless-migrants-refugees-lesbos](http://www.voanews.com/europe/greece-scrambles-rehouse-homeless-migrants-refugees-lesbos)

<sup>10</sup> [www.borgenmagazine.com/worlds-largest-refugee-camp](http://www.borgenmagazine.com/worlds-largest-refugee-camp)

<sup>11</sup> [www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200922-inmates-families-rally-outside-lebanons-largest-prison-amid-reports-of-covid-19-outbreak](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200922-inmates-families-rally-outside-lebanons-largest-prison-amid-reports-of-covid-19-outbreak)

<sup>12</sup> [www.republicworld.com/world-news/middle-east/virus-hits-lebanese-prison-as-inmates-jockey-for-release.html](http://www.republicworld.com/world-news/middle-east/virus-hits-lebanese-prison-as-inmates-jockey-for-release.html)

that inmates might drink it,' and not allowing inmates to wear masks while moving between their cells and the workspace is 'for security reasons'.<sup>13</sup>

### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi authorities have severed contact between some of the Kingdom's most prominent detainees and their families. Families report that they have not received contact since April or May, while inmates were previously allowed to make regular phone calls home. To their families, the detainees' silence represents an unexpected escalation in the Crown Prince's crackdown on domestic critics, and a potential indication of an outbreak of Covid-19 in the prison. The website of the Kingdom's Interior Ministry describes a prisoner's communication with family and friends as a key element in their rehabilitation.<sup>14</sup>

## **5. Informal settlements and homelessness**

### **Canada**

A study released by Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network shows that Covid-19 has increased the risks for homeless women. The study also revealed homeless women and LGBTQI+ people are at much higher risk of violence with more than 37 per cent of homeless women having experienced sexual assault. Some homeless women are in effect forced to stay away from emergency shelters that were set up to accommodate them because of the policies, including the prospect of losing custody of their children. Some shelters have reduced services or are closed due to public health and physical distancing rules, which left the homeless population in a precarious situation.<sup>15</sup>

### **North Cyprus**

A local NGO, Voices of International Students, reports that the government stopped incoming flights at the local airport starting from 9 September in a bid to contain Covid-19 cases. As the government allows incoming flights only for North Cyprus 'citizens', this has impacted international students who were coming back into the country from the summer break. Many individuals were stuck at the Istanbul airport in Turkey where they could not leave and were denied access to various places at the airport, thereby spending nights in precarious conditions.

### **Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi government is keeping hundreds of African migrants in Covid-19 detention centres, which have substandard conditions. There are reports that some have suffered physical abuse from Saudi authorities and others have committed suicide. These individuals were principally workers in

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<sup>13</sup> [www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13750199](http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13750199)

<sup>14</sup> [www.ndtv.com/world-news/saudi-arabias-most-famous-prisoners-go-silent-during-coronavirus-pandemic-2285839](http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/saudi-arabias-most-famous-prisoners-go-silent-during-coronavirus-pandemic-2285839)

<sup>15</sup> [www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/covid-19-increases-risk-for-canada-s-invisible-homeless-women-study-1.5000474](http://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/covid-19-increases-risk-for-canada-s-invisible-homeless-women-study-1.5000474)

construction and manual domestic work, who have been made redundant by the pandemic. The government feared the migrant workers, who are often housed in overcrowded conditions, would act as vectors for the virus and has subsequently proceeded with a deportation scheme affecting almost 3,000 Ethiopians, among others. Individuals in the detention centres have been plagued by disfiguring skin infections and have not received any medical treatment.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Disability rights

### United Kingdom

The London Recovery Board, made up of elected leaders and senior stakeholders, was established to plan the long-term recovery of London from the Covid-19 crisis, especially to support communities most affected. The membership of the Board has, however, faced criticism for failing to include a single disabled individual or representative from an organisation promoting disability rights despite the hugely disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on this community.<sup>17</sup> This follows long-term criticism against the UK Government's failure to consider the impact of the crisis on those living with disabilities and include them equally in policy development. In the House of Commons on 16 September, Boris Johnson stated he was unaware of criticism from disability groups over the Government's response, leading to accusations that he has wilfully ignored it.<sup>18</sup> His statement followed a letter sent by two disabled Peers, and signed by 28 other cross-party Peers, criticising the Government's failure to account for those living with disabilities in its policies and calling for them to scrap powers given to local authorities to suspend parts of the Care Act, which supports carers and those living in care homes.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/investigation-african-migrants-left-die-saudi-arabias-hellish](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/investigation-african-migrants-left-die-saudi-arabias-hellish)

<sup>17</sup> [www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mayor-defends-failure-to-include-disabled-people-in-covid-recovery-board](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mayor-defends-failure-to-include-disabled-people-in-covid-recovery-board)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-coronavirus-disability-impact-uk-commons-b469297.html>

<sup>19</sup> [www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disabled-peers-call-on-government-to-scrap-care-act-coronavirus-powers](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disabled-peers-call-on-government-to-scrap-care-act-coronavirus-powers)