



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

Africa

More than 70 per cent of displaced and refugee women in Africa reported a rise in domestic violence in their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ In a report published by the International Rescue Committee, in which interviewed 850 women from fifteen African countries, more than half reported a rise in sexual violence and almost one in three had observed a growth in early and forced marriage.² Due to the social and economic limitations created by restrictions in movement, women and girls are being sexually exploited. For example, being forced into transactional sex for food and sanitary pads, threatened with eviction by landlords, with some being forced into early marriage to mitigate the family burden endured due to financial strain. They have also been subjected to harassment from police officials if they break curfew on account of waiting in long queues or walking long distances for water.³ Further, the closure of schools has increased cases of child marriages, adolescent pregnancies and sexual abuse.

Central and South America

Colombia's Femicide Observatory recorded an increase in femicides across the country since the lockdowns were lifted in September, with 86 killings in the month alone. Economic fallout and resurgence of armed group violence have been attributed as the leading cause for these increased numbers. In Guatemala, university student Litzzy Amelia Cordon was abducted and killed last month sparking outrage and call for action across the country.⁴

Europe

Women's rights groups in France fear a rise in domestic violence cases in the second lockdown. Measures put in place include: women fleeing violent situations will not be required to carry a signed form before leaving their homes, and Uber providing 2,000 free rides to help transport victims of domestic abuse.⁵ Ireland has seen almost 2,000 women and 411 children seeking support from domestic violence services each month since March.⁶

2. Refugee camps

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has reported that at the end of October, out of the 30 million refugees globally, 28,000 have tested positive for Covid-19 across 97 countries.⁷ There

¹ <https://news.trust.org/item/20201015150430-q7ce7>

² www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/5281/ircwpecovidreportv6.pdf

³ <https://news.trust.org/item/20201015150430-q7ce7>

⁴ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/10/i-am-tired-of-it-femicides-spark-outrage-across-guatemala

⁵ www.france24.com/en/france/20201102-france-fears-fresh-wave-of-domestic-violence-amid-second-covid-19-lockdown

⁶ www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/covid-19-sharp-increase-in-women-and-children-fleeing-domestic-violence-1.4404850

⁷ https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/28102020_UNHCR%20Global%20COVID-19%20Emergency%20Response.pdf

have been severe cuts to humanitarian funding for refugee camps leading to food shortages and limited employment opportunities due to the global economic recession. As lockdowns were lifted, many camps softened their entry and exit requirements, allowing refugees to leave for work purposes, increasing the instances of an infection.⁸

Saudi Arabia

Hundreds of Ethiopian migrants were forcibly expelled by the Houthi armed group under the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic from Northern Yemen to the Saudi Arabian border. They have since been arbitrarily detained in unsanitary and abusive facilities in Saudi Arabia without the ability to legally challenge their detention. According to the interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch, hundreds of women were being held under a wire mesh roof, ankle deep in filthy water, screaming and crying. There were reports of overcrowding, blocked, inadequate and overflowing toilets, a lack of beds and blankets, a lack of medical care, including prenatal care for those who were pregnant, and inadequate food and water.⁹

Syria

In the Atmeh refugee camp in North West Syria, there has been a ten-fold increase in the number of Covid-19 cases in the last month to 330 of some 5,075 in the region.¹⁰ Cramped and filthy conditions have only exacerbated the risk of infection as wearing masks and social distancing are almost impossible. Up to 40 per cent of people being tested are positive, yet daily test numbers are quite low. Treatment of infection has been made more difficult because only 600 doctors are available for a population of over four million. Further, there is a major shortage of medical kits, food and fuel to keep warm during the winter.¹¹ According to the Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, 92 per cent of Covid-19 cases in Syria cannot be traced back to a source because of the poor state of healthcare.

3. Prisoners and detainees

Madagascar

As of August 2020, the 82 prisons across the country were holding nearly three times their capacity with more than 27,000 detainees nationwide, severely increasing risk of spreading Covid-19. Amnesty International has called for President Andry Rajoelina to immediately release pre-trial detainees, such as those held for minor and non-violent offences, as well as children, and to ensure that remaining detainees have access to adequate healthcare.¹²

⁸ <https://time.com/5893135/covid-19-refugee-camps>

⁹ www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/19/immigration-detention-saudi-arabia-during-covid-19

¹⁰ www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2020/11/2/in-pictures-displaced-syrians-fear-spread-of-coronavirus

¹¹ www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-54697587

¹² www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/madagascar-president-rajoelina-must-deliver-on-his-promise-to-decongest-prisons/

Middle East

Twenty political prisoners detained in the Greater Tehran Penitentiary who been infected with Covid-19 have been denied medical care despite having symptoms, with the prison authorities attempting to cover up the issue by closing the halls and cutting off phone lines.¹³ Palestinian Prisoner Society (PPS) reported that Gilboa prison inmates in Israel with virus symptoms were treated as if the infections were influenza, despite many of them suffering from very high temperatures and called on the World Health Organization to exercise pressure on Israel to immediately release all women, children and the elderly from the prison.¹⁴

United Kingdom

Children in detention in England and Wales have been kept locked alone in their cells for up to 23 hours a day under emergency Covid-19 measures. This UK government policy has been described by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture as ‘extreme and inhumane’, and one that could lead to lifelong mental health damage. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) and the British Medical Association have called for an end to the solitary confinement of children in detention.¹⁵

United States

Last month, a bill was signed in New Jersey to reduce sentences for inmates in order to curb the spread of Covid-19 in the state’s prison system. This was followed by the release of more than 2,000 inmates on 4 November 2020. On the same day, at least 51 inmate deaths and 4,111 cases, including employees and inmates, were recorded – one of the highest Covid-19 death rates in the country.¹⁶

4. Informal settlements and homelessness

Mozambique

There are over 350,000 persons displaced in Mozambique – due to cyclones, drought in the South and insecurity– who are now also confronting the threat of Covid-19. The current focus is on training community members in resettlement sites and refugee camps to produce hand-made face masks and provide families with equipment to rear chicken and boost livelihoods.¹⁷ Insecurity in the north, specifically in Cabo Delgado, is now increasing with over 300,000 people forced to leave their hometown and migrate to Pemba. Cabo Delgado has also recorded the second highest number of Covid-19 cases. The willingness of host families in Pemba to take in people affected by mass displacement will undoubtedly trigger a spread in the virus.¹⁸ This is creating an urgent need for humanitarian

¹³ <https://iran-hrm.com/index.php/2020/11/03/coronavirus-outbreak-among-political-prisoners-in-tehran>

¹⁴ www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israeli-jail-shut-as-virus-surge-among-palestinian-inmates/2029452

¹⁵ www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/27/uk-covid-policy-for-children-in-detention-cruel-and-inhumane-says-un-expert

¹⁶ www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/more-2-000-new-jersey-inmates-released-slow-spread-coronavirus-n1246388

¹⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1070762>

¹⁸ <https://theconversation.com/catalogue-of-failures-behind-growing-humanitarian-crisis-in-northern-mozambique-149343>

assistance to provide hygiene products to prevent diseases like cholera and Covid-19. But with travel restrictions already in place due to the pandemic, humanitarian workers are struggling to respond to the demands of the displacement.¹⁹

Europe

According to a study from Doctors Without Borders, 40 per cent of homeless people in Paris have contracted Covid-19. Many cases are a result of young people sharing a room at homeless shelters.²⁰ In England, homelessness charities are now calling for the government to reinstate a scheme that provided emergency accommodation to over 15,000 homeless people as the country entered into a second lockdown.²¹ Crisis, a homelessness charity, revealed in June that more than half of frontline services have seen a rise in homelessness due to the pandemic.²² Without the ‘Everyone In’ scheme operating for a second time round, rough sleepers are not only at risk of Covid-19 but will also suffer from the cold weather.²³ Although Prime Minister Boris Johnson has pledged £15 million to house the homeless in ten areas across Britain, charities argue that the funding is insufficient.

Asia

Many across Asia who live in poor neighbourhoods or housing arrangements shaped by ‘structural or institutional inadequacies’²⁴ have been uniquely affected by the pandemic. After two waves of Covid-19, residents in Hlaing Thar Yar, one of Yangon’s poorest neighbourhoods have had to hunt for rats and snakes in open drains for food. Although the government has offered poor households a one-off food package and three cash grants of \$15, not all families are covered. Those living in informal housing arrangements in Pakistan and Bangladesh have struggled to gain consistent access to healthcare, especially mental health services. The disruption to the supply of medication to pharmacies due to lockdown regulations has resulted in an increase in prices. This is only slightly mitigated by benevolent pharmacists willing to dispense medication on credit.²⁵ The pattern is clear: poverty intensifies the risks of contracting the virus. What remains a standout story is the healthcare response in Dharavi, ‘the most densely packed human settlement on Earth’²⁶. Over 2,450 health workers were sent to conduct mass testing and strict containment in an effort to curb the already fast-spreading virus. The number of deaths

¹⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/mozambique/mozambique-flash-update-no-2-arrival-displaced-people-pemba-1-nov-2020>

²⁰ www.france24.com/en/20201011-in-greater-paris-40-percent-of-homeless-are-infected-with-covid-19

²¹ www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/nov/02/homelessness-charities-call-for-second-everyone-in-scheme-in-england

²² www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-homeless-job-loss-hotels-housing-a9547351.html

²³ www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/rough-sleepers-homeless-lives-risk-death-night-shelters-coronavirus-b865107.html

²⁴ <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-how-lockdowns-affected-health-access-in-african-and-asian-slums-147600>

²⁵ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-myanmar-slums-idUKKBN27818R>

²⁶ www.bloomberg.com/features/2020-mumbai-dharavi-covid-lockdown

reduced from 56 in May to zero in June.²⁷ Although there has been an uptick of cases with the second wave, it has reported only one positive case for the second consecutive day between 1-5 November.²⁸

5. Disability rights

India

Disability rights continue to be absent from the priority list of experts designing India's response to the pandemic. In October 2020, local disability rights activists called for the Kolkata Municipal Corporation to include a column on disability in the comorbidity survey to allow policy makers to be better informed in addressing the pandemic.²⁹ Current health facilities do not have a protocol on how persons with disabilities will be treated. India's mental healthcare system is also failing to deliver during the crisis. Individuals who need to visit outpatient treatment centres on a weekly basis cannot do so under lockdown conditions and prescription medication is becoming increasingly difficult to secure.³⁰ Separately, the Bombay High Court recently directed the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to ensure that none of its physically disabled employees who did not report for duty during the pandemic are denied pay benefits and that withholding pay is illegal.³¹

United Kingdom

The Vice-President of the Court of Protection, Mr. Justice Hayden has circulated a memo stating that visits to care homes by relatives and friends are allowed contrary to government regulations that effectively banned routine visits in areas of high Covid-19 infection.³² This comes on the back of the decision of the Health Secretary to devolve decision making to local officials, resulting in inconsistent policy making as some local authorities allow visitation and others do not.³³ Isolation imposed by lockdown rules may reduce the risk of infection, but it concurrently deteriorates the mental health issues that exist.³⁴

²⁷ www.businessinsider.com/india-dharavi-slum-how-it-controlled-coronavirus-outbreak-photos-2020-6

²⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/dharavi-reports-single-covid-19-case-on-second-consecutive-day/articleshow/79063274.cms>

²⁹ www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/include-disabilities-in-kolkata-municipality-corporations-comorbidity-survey-say-activists/article32942312.ece

³⁰ <https://scroll.in/article/977451/in-india-coronavirus-crisis-has-been-particularly-hard-for-mental-health-patients-and-hospitals>

³¹ www.barandbench.com/news/litigation/bombay-high-court-directs-bmc-to-pay-physically-disabled-employees

³² www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/03/judge-says-care-home-residents-in-england-are-legally-allowed-visitors

³³ www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/07/care-homes-they-dont-put-loneliness-on-death-certificates-but-it-is-a-killer

³⁴ www.newscientist.com/article/2259044-coronavirus-rules-for-care-homes-are-too-strict-and-not-science-based/#ixzz6cv3r4Z8m

United States

The ‘Remain in Mexico’ policy initiated by the Trump Administration forces asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while legal proceedings ensue to decide their status.³⁵ It does however exempt those with physical or mental disabilities. It now appears that asylum seekers with disabilities are being forced to remain in Mexico with no certainty as to when hearings will resume. A lawsuit has now been filed alleging discrimination.³⁶ Plaintiffs to the lawsuit include young persons and adults with physical and mental conditions. The Homeland Security Acting Secretary and US Customs and Border Protection Acting Commissioner have been named as defendants. The current pandemic has limited the ability of lawyers to appear with their clients before the US Customs and Border Protection at the port of entry, to plead their clients' case to allow entry to the US to gain access to healthcare.³⁷

6. Freedom of assembly

Indonesia

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected 3.5 million workers and left 6.9 million people unemployed in Indonesia.³⁸ On 5 November 2020, President Joko Widodo signed the Omnibus Bill into law.³⁹ The Act seeks to deregulate business, labour and environmental laws to reduce bureaucracy with the promise of increasing jobs and foreign investment. However, Indonesia’s working class have protested the legislation for reducing severance pay, increasing the daily overtime limit, abolishing sectoral minimum wage and allowing businesses to limit employees’ days off.⁴⁰ Students circulating information on the protests via social media have been arrested and charged with ‘provocation to commit criminal acts’ carrying a maximum penalty of six years’ imprisonment.⁴¹ At least 28 journalists across Indonesia were physically assaulted by the police when covering the protests.⁴² The police have also reportedly launched ‘cyber-patrols’ to peddle ‘counter-narratives’ on social media to turn sentiment against the protests. Water cannons and tear gas have been used to disperse protestors. According to Indonesia Legal Aid (LBH), some protestors under detention have been ‘stripped half naked and forced to drink from the same bottle despite the risk of coronavirus’.⁴³

³⁵ <https://time.com/5906321/asylum-seekers-disabilities-lawsuit-trump-administration>

³⁶ <https://creeclaw.org/disability-rights-advocates-sue-trump-administration-for-migrant-protection-protocols>

³⁸ www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/jokowi-defends-passage-of-jobs-law

³⁹ www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-president-jokowi-signs-contentious-omnibus-bill-into-law

⁴⁰ www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54460090

⁴¹ www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/10/21/seven-social-media-managers-arrested-in-relation-to-omnibus-jobs-law-protests.html

⁴² www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/indonesia-police-attack-journalists-covering-protests-across-the-country.html

⁴³ www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/07/indonesia-police-use-water-cannon-and-teargas-to-disperse-labour-law-protests

Nigeria

Nigeria's #EndSARS protests are calling for the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a body laden with allegations of assaulting innocent citizens, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.⁴⁴ The military and police are alleged to have used brutality to clamp down on protests. Eyewitness reports claim that the army turned up Lekki Toll Plaza and opened fire on the protestors. The army admitted to deploying troops but denied opening fire.⁴⁵ Having just come out of a Covid-19 lockdown, the government has now imposed a national curfew across 13 states in an attempt to quell protests.⁴⁶ The main participants are youth. Their discontent is now fuelled by the economic crisis created by Covid-19, with more Nigerians being drawn into poverty.⁴⁷ Although the government has claimed to dissolve SARS, activists believe the announcement does not take into consideration their other important demands.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/22/sars-a-brief-history-of-a-rogue-unit

⁴⁵ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/28/nigerias-military-admits-to-be-at-shooting-but-denies-shooting

⁴⁶ www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/nigeria-imposes-curfews-in-4-more-states-amid-protests/2018958

⁴⁷ www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/10/29/youth-protests-for-police-reform-in-nigeria-what-lies-ahead-for-endsars

⁴⁸ <https://time.com/5902112/nigeria-endsars-protest-shootings>