



# Human Rights Institute

25 years promoting and protecting  
human rights worldwide

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

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2. **Refugee camps**
3. **Prisoners and detainees**
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## **1. Gender-based violence and women's health**

### **Reproductive health**

The Commissioner of Youth and Children Affairs in the Gender Ministry of Uganda has expressed concern that girls are exposed to a higher risk of HIV/AIDS than boys as they have limited-to-no access to healthcare services and information.<sup>1</sup>

### **Cybersecurity for women and girls**

Six of the world's largest child-focused international development sector organisations launched an urgent call for better protection from online abuse for women and girls. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, and exacerbated by worldwide closure of schools, girls are facing a higher risk of online abuse and exploitation.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent global survey carried out by Plan International, there was an increase in the number of women and girls who experienced cyberstalking, abuse and received inappropriate messages and images.<sup>3</sup>

### **Uganda**

As Uganda celebrated the international day of the girl child on 11 October 2020, concern was voiced regarding SGBV against girls. Sauti-116, a children's helpline of the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, reported a surge in sexual violence cases against girls due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis indicated that the main perpetrators were fathers or unrelated adult males. The issue of child marriages among girls remains another concern in the country. It has been further exacerbated by the closure of schools amid the crisis.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Refugee camps**

### **Kenya**

The Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the growing mental health crisis in Kenya's Dadaab refugee complex, where hundreds of thousands of Somalis have been stuck for decades. Amid the pandemic, Médecins Sans Frontières has reported an increase in suicide rates.<sup>5</sup> In addition to already existing struggles, the World Food Programme was forced to cut down food rations by 40 per cent.<sup>6</sup> UNHCR's Senior Mental Health Officer Pieter Ventevogel noted that before the pandemic, refugees' mental health

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<sup>1</sup> [www.newvision.co.ug/news/1529011/fathers-unrelated-adult-males-lead-girls-sexual-violence](http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1529011/fathers-unrelated-adult-males-lead-girls-sexual-violence).

<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/urgent-call-equal-digital-citizenship-and-cyber-security-girls-asia>.

<sup>3</sup> [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/05/most-girls-and-young-women-have-experienced-abuse-online-report-finds](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/05/most-girls-and-young-women-have-experienced-abuse-online-report-finds).

<sup>4</sup> [www.newvision.co.ug/news/1529011/fathers-unrelated-adult-males-lead-girls-sexual-violence](http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1529011/fathers-unrelated-adult-males-lead-girls-sexual-violence).

<sup>5</sup> [www.africanews.com/2020/10/10/coronavirus-world-mental-health-day-dadaab-s-refugees-face-the-prospect-of-a-life-sentence-in-one-of-the-harshes-places-on-earth/](http://www.africanews.com/2020/10/10/coronavirus-world-mental-health-day-dadaab-s-refugees-face-the-prospect-of-a-life-sentence-in-one-of-the-harshes-places-on-earth/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.msf.org/kenya-covid-19-further-fuels-mental-health-crisis-dadaab](http://www.msf.org/kenya-covid-19-further-fuels-mental-health-crisis-dadaab).

was severely overlooked, however, during the pandemic he characterised the situation as ‘a full-blown crisis’.<sup>7</sup>

### **Bangladesh**

On 10 October, World Mental Health Day, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that more than 20 per cent of Bangladesh’s Rohingya refugees living in Cox’s Bazar are struggling with mental health issues amid the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

### **Greece**

The Vathy camp, located on the Greek island of Samos, has approximately 90 confirmed cases of Covid-19. With the current restrictions on movement, health care professionals have noticed a concerning deterioration of refugees’ mental health. With limited medical capabilities and resources, it is difficult to treat patients with underlying chronic and acute medical conditions. Refugees who have tested positive for Covid-19 are isolated in terrible conditions without access to medical treatment.<sup>9</sup>

### **Mediterranean Sea**

Sea journeys remain a preferred route of migration even during the Covid-19 crisis. The number of migrants trying to reach Europe’s shores from Africa has increased. This had been characterised as Covid-19-driven irregular migration.<sup>10</sup> Italy has opened ports for ships carrying migrants, which had previously been closed off since the start of the pandemic. However, Italian authorities are still operating ‘quarantine vessels’ to hold migrants near the coast of Lampedusa, an island in the Mediterranean. Rescue NGOs have called them ‘floating hotspots’.<sup>11</sup>

## **3. Prisoners and detainees**

### **Iran**

Iranian authorities continue to crack down on political prisoners within detention facilities. On 8 October, human rights activist and political prisoner Narges Mohammadi was released from prison following international calls for her release.<sup>12</sup> Mohammadi, who has serious pre-existing medical conditions, began showing symptoms of Covid-19 back in June, but was denied health care.<sup>13</sup> Her

<sup>7</sup> [www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2020/10/5f7ec72a4/qa-pandemic-refugee-mental-health-severely-overlooked-its-full-blown-crisis.html](http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2020/10/5f7ec72a4/qa-pandemic-refugee-mental-health-severely-overlooked-its-full-blown-crisis.html).

<sup>8</sup> [www.arabnews.com/node/1747121/world](http://www.arabnews.com/node/1747121/world).

<sup>9</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/european-policies-continue-trap-thousands-inhuman-conditions-greek-islands>.

<sup>10</sup> [www.infomigrants.net/en/post/27843/migrants-from-africa-take-more-dangerous-route-to-europe](http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/27843/migrants-from-africa-take-more-dangerous-route-to-europe); [www.infomigrants.net/en/post/27839/morocco-intercepts-over-200-migrants-trying-to-reach-europe](http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/27839/morocco-intercepts-over-200-migrants-trying-to-reach-europe).

<sup>11</sup> [www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29108/italy-is-using-the-pandemic-to-keep-more-migrants-from-its-shores](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29108/italy-is-using-the-pandemic-to-keep-more-migrants-from-its-shores).

<sup>12</sup> [www.iranfocus.com/en/women/45224-iran-releases-narges-mohammadi-dozens-of-political-prisoners-are-still-behind-bars/](http://www.iranfocus.com/en/women/45224-iran-releases-narges-mohammadi-dozens-of-political-prisoners-are-still-behind-bars/)

<sup>13</sup> [www.amnesty.org.uk/iran-narges-mohammadi-prison-human-rights-activist](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/iran-narges-mohammadi-prison-human-rights-activist)

imprisonment and medical treatment is symptomatic of a crackdown on political activists, particularly female inmates, in what has been described as imprisonment under ‘vile conditions’,<sup>14</sup> especially considering that prison populations are more prone to contracting Covid-19.

### **Scotland**

In Scotland’s largest prison, Barlinnie Prison, 256 inmates living in a single wing are self-isolating until 20 October following a Covid-19 outbreak in which five guards and two inmates tested positive.<sup>15</sup> This is will also include the discontinuation of visitation.<sup>16</sup> The increased measures at the Glaswegian prison follows increased tension among the prison population where previous restrictions included confining inmates to their cell for 23 hours of the day.<sup>17</sup>

In June, a female prisoner petitioned the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to step in over claims that the UK government’s measure of 23-hour confinement puts women and inmates with pre-existing conditions, especially mental health, at greater risk. In particular, the petition stated that she had experienced medical neglect by prison authorities. The new outbreak at Barlinnie prison could trigger a health crisis, both physically and mentally, as a result of the over-restrictive measures and inadequate medical attention.

## **4. Informal settlements and homelessness**

### **United States**

With early voting underway, the pandemic is making it even harder for homeless people to vote, even in states with fewer restrictions such as California. Homeless people often use libraries or coffee shops to access the internet but many of these places are closed due to the pandemic. This makes even obtaining information about how to vote difficult. Although there are several voting booths at homeless shelters that open in the days before the election, the homeless population is also encountering greater difficulty obtaining proper ID, a necessity to vote in most states, because many government offices are operating with reduced hours and staff.<sup>18</sup>

### **France**

A survey by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) revealed that infection rates of Covid-19 are as high as 94 per cent among some people living in precarious situations in Paris. The findings showed that Covid-19 is more easily spread among people living in crowded conditions, such as hostels for disadvantaged

<sup>14</sup> [www.iranfocus.com/en/women/45224-iran-releases-narges-mohammadi-dozens-of-political-prisoners-are-still-behind-bars/](http://www.iranfocus.com/en/women/45224-iran-releases-narges-mohammadi-dozens-of-political-prisoners-are-still-behind-bars/)

<sup>15</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-54493007](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-54493007)

<sup>16</sup> <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-more-than-250-inmates-self-isolating-in-scotlands-largest-prison-12101067>

<sup>17</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-52539415](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-52539415)

<sup>18</sup> [www.marketplace.org/2020/09/22/voting-covid-19-people-who-are-homeless-register-polls-election](http://www.marketplace.org/2020/09/22/voting-covid-19-people-who-are-homeless-register-polls-election)

people and shelters for the homeless. The survey also showed that the prevalence of the virus was three times higher in emergency shelters than in other types of accommodation. MSF states that the majority of individuals living in these precarious situations has used preventive measures, such as frequent handwashing and wearing masks and following physical distancing advice. However, spending lockdown in overcrowded conditions, with shared bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms, greatly increased the risk of transmission.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. Disability rights

### United Kingdom

The elderly continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the United Kingdom, some doctors had reportedly applied ‘do not attempt resuscitation’ notices to groups of care home residents, which meant people would not be taken to hospital for potentially life-saving care.<sup>20</sup> This was being done without proper consent, denying people the right to life. The British health minister, James Bethell, urged the cessation of such practice, calling it ‘unacceptable’.

### Australia

Statements made before the Royal Commission revealed the harsh conditions people with disabilities have faced. These include the sudden loss of support services essential to daily life; lack of access to necessities, such as food, medication and Personal Protective Equipment; enforced isolation from family, friends and social networks; and the absence of clear and accessible information about the pandemic and the changing rules in place, particularly for people with cognitive disability.<sup>21</sup>

### United States

A plan formulated by the State of New York that aimed to ration ventilators has been highly criticised by disability rights organisations as infringing the right to life. The plan proposes that the priority for using ventilators should be given to those more likely to survive. However, this plan also takes into account personal ventilators used by disabled persons with an existing chronic condition. As such, disabled people have become terrified of this possibility happening during the Covid-19 crisis and decided not to seek out medical care for fear of losing their personal ventilators.<sup>22</sup>

## 6. Access to justice

### United Kingdom

<sup>19</sup> [www.msf.org/high-coronavirus-covid-19-rates-found-amongst-people-living-hardship-paris](https://www.msf.org/high-coronavirus-covid-19-rates-found-amongst-people-living-hardship-paris)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/12/inquiry-begins-into-blanket-use-in-england-of-covid-do-not-resuscitate-orders> ; [www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2020-10/Care%20Homes%20Report.pdf?kd5Z8eWzj8Q6ryzHkcaUnxfCtqe5Ddg6=](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2020-10/Care%20Homes%20Report.pdf?kd5Z8eWzj8Q6ryzHkcaUnxfCtqe5Ddg6=)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/covid-has-revealed-some-uncomfortable-truths-about-australia-and-people-with-disability-20200915-p55w00.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/disability-rights-activists-sue-cuomo-over-ventilator-discrimination/>

A recent report by the Law Society of England and Wales shows that social distancing measures have impacted the way in which people are able to access legal advice, especially those who are living in institutionalised settings such as prisons, immigration detention centres, mental health units or care settings. The report alludes that such institutions were unable to meet the sudden increased demand for telephone and video conferencing services, creating a barrier to accessing legal advice. In immigration removal centres, the report states that there have been around 50 deportations. This is despite the limited availability of technology to facilitate remote meetings with lawyers, meaning it has been difficult to ensure that individuals are represented effectively.<sup>23</sup>

### **United States**

A Brennan Center for Justice study of criminal bail hearings found that defendants whose hearings were conducted over video had substantially higher bond amounts set than their in-person counterparts, with increases ranging from 54 to 90 per cent, depending on the offence. A study of immigration courts equally found that detained individuals were more likely to be deported when their hearings occurred over video conference rather than in person. Several studies of remote witness testimony by children found that the children were perceived as less accurate, believable, consistent and confident when appearing over video. The Brennan Center also reported that in three out of six surveyed immigration courts, judges identified instances where they had changed credibility assessments made during a video hearing after holding an in-person hearing.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/research/law-under-lockdown-the-impact-of-covid-19-measures-on-access-to-justice-and-vulnerable-people>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/impact-video-proceedings-fairness-and-access-justice-court>