



Human Rights Institute

25 years promoting and protecting
human rights worldwide

IBAHRI Covid-19 Human Rights Monitor

Release date: Friday 2 October 2020

1. **Gender-based violence and women's health**
2. **LGBTQI+ rights**
3. **Refugee camps**
4. **Prisoners and detainees**
5. **Informal settlements and homelessness**
6. **Freedom of assembly**

1. Gender-based violence and women's health

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to disproportionately affect the social, economic and health aspects of women and girls' lives around the world, as exemplified by the newly launched Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker from UNDP and UN Women. Their research shows that one-fifth of countries studied have not adopted gender-sensitive measures that focus on tackling violence against women and girls.¹

As sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) increases, including sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and abuse in workplace settings, there is a need for governments and businesses to address the disproportionate and unique impacts of the crisis faced by women. In some countries, it is estimated that GBV costs up to 3.7 per cent of a country's GDP. Recognising these risks to both female employees and businesses, the International Finance Corporation has provided firms with a guidance note called 'Covid-19 and Gender-Based Violence: Workplace Risks and Responses' in order to provide methods for businesses to protect their female employees during the crisis, and especially while working from home.²

Swaziland

Due to school closures, new reports show that the rise in SGBV cases in Swaziland mostly affected the age group of 12 to 17. The numbers spiked in teenage pregnancies and child marriages as well, which in turn lead to a higher dropout rate from school and a perpetuation of the issue.³

2. LGBTIQI+ rights

Honduras

Since declaring a state of emergency in March to contain the outbreak of Covid-19, there has been intensified violent attacks on the LGBTIQI+ community. Seven transgender women have been killed since mid-March, with three killed in July. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet expressed her concern over the killings and stated that the UN was cooperating with the authorities to seek accountability. Many transgender people cannot find work, leaving sex work as their only option. However, sex work has landed many transgender women in prison where several prisoners have died and hundreds more are infected.⁴

Portugal

A study from the faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto (FPCEUP) revealed that close to 60 per cent of young LGBTIQI+ people felt uncomfortable being confined with

¹www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/undp-and-un-womens-newly-launch-covid-19-global-gender-response-.html.

²www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/Topics_Ext_Content/IFC_External_Corporate_Site/Gender+at+IFC/Resources/COVID19+and+Gender+Based+Violence+Workplace+Risks+and+Responses.

³<https://allafrica.com/stories/202009240098.html>.

⁴<https://newint.org/features/2020/08/11/feature-pink-corridor>

family whilst 35 per cent felt ‘suffocated’ and unable to express their identity while confined with family. Although the country has since relaxed lockdown regulations, it has recently recorded the biggest surge in infections since May, raising fears of another lockdown.⁵

3. Refugee camps

Middle East

Refugee camps located across Iraq, Lebanon, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Syria are currently experiencing a sharp increase in Covid-19 cases. The camps are inherently ill-equipped for adequately addressing pandemics due to cramped space, poor medical care and limited hygiene facilities.⁶ UNHCR Regional Communications Spokesperson Rula Amin stated that the current situation in camps may lead to a ‘poverty pandemic’. The number of people infected has increased to 1,000. However, as the reporting and testing capacity is limited, the Middle East may be facing even larger numbers.⁷ Aid groups working across the region warn that winter holds a greater risk of increased cases.⁸ Health-care facilities are overcrowded and unable to curb the spread of the virus.⁹

Greece

Early this week, Greece reported its first Covid-19-related death in one of its refugee camps.¹⁰ Despite the warning of aid groups, the Greek authorities chose to lockdown refugee camps, which only worsened the spread of the virus here.¹¹ Hundreds of refugees and migrants tested positive for Covid-19 as they were moved from the former Moria camp to the new temporary Kara Tepe facility.¹² Currently, at least 110,000 people live in temporary facilities, 40,000 of whom live in densely populated camps on five Greek islands.¹³

Education

Access to education is another challenge refugees face amid the Covid-19 pandemic. While the virus impeded the education process across the world, it disproportionately affected refugee children. Because of limited funds and lack of access to technology and Wifi, it is almost impossible for refugee children to receive an education.¹⁴

4. Prisoners and detainees

⁵ <https://noticias.up.pt/covid-19-trouxe-solidao-e-desconforto-aos-jovens-lgbt>

⁶ www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/23/aid-agencies-warn-of-covid-19-crisis-in-refugee-camps-as-winter-approaches.

⁷ www.unhcr.org/refugeebrief/latest-issues/

⁸ www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/coronavirus-could-yet-tear-refugee-camps-winter-warn-aid-groups/

⁹ www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200928-in-northwest-syria-camps-brace-for-covid-catastrophe-in-aleppo-locals-bribe-hospitals-for-beds/.

¹⁰ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/28/greece-reports-first-covid-19-refugee-death-since-pandemic-began

¹¹ <https://covid19data.com/2020/09/28/greece-confirms-first-coronavirus-death-at-a-migrant-and-refugee-camp/>.

¹² <https://covid19data.com/2020/09/28/greece-confirms-first-coronavirus-death-at-a-migrant-and-refugee-camp/>.

¹³ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/28/greece-reports-first-covid-19-refugee-death-since-pandemic-began.

¹⁴ www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/9/5f68f6d74/dont-covid-19-pandemic-derail-refugee-education.html;
<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/five-ways-education-continued-for-refugees-during-covid-19/>.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean prisoners, detained in prisons which are largely underfunded and overcrowded, have experienced inhumane and unsafe living conditions that have catalysed the spread of Covid-19. Detainees at the centres, many of whom are political prisoners, have reported that as many as 40 people are accommodated in a cell meant for 16 individuals. Additionally, prisoners that have tested positive for the virus were simply returned to their cells with other healthy inmates due to the absence of quarantine facilities. The lack of social distancing, hygiene products and medication for sick patients has resulted in a highly infectious environment described as a ‘Covid-19 timebomb’.¹⁵ The defunding of the nation’s healthcare system and a national shortage of medical supplies has resulted in the government being incapable of sufficiently resourcing state-run facilities. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, or Mandela Rules, state that prisoners should enjoy the same standards of health care available in the community.¹⁶

Ireland

The living conditions of migrant detainees held at direct provision centres, the network of detention centres housing migrants awaiting asylum, has rapidly deteriorated with the pandemic.¹⁷ The accommodation system, which has been previously decried as cruel and inhumane by Amnesty International, is mired with crowded conditions, a lack of social distancing and self-isolation, and highly restrictive freedom of movement outside the facilities.¹⁸ The Irish Refugee Council has reported that 55 per cent of detainees feel unsafe during the Covid-19 pandemic, with 50 per cent reporting they were unable to socially distance, 42 per cent sharing a bedroom with a non-family member and 46 per cent sharing a bathroom with a non-family member.¹⁹ It has led to several cluster outbreaks of the virus at these centres, at a disproportionate rate compared to the rest of the country.²⁰ Additionally, migrants are more unwilling to take a Covid-19 test due to fear of unemployment, as their weekly allowance from the state is only €21.60 per week.²¹ This is grossly insufficient to survive in the EU’s third most expensive country, with human rights experts describing it as ‘institutionalised poverty’.²²

5. Informal settlements and homelessness

¹⁵ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/25/gg

¹⁶ www.un.org/en/events/mandeladay/mandela_rules.shtml

¹⁷ www.rebelnews.ie/2019/07/18/exposing-the-profits-behind-direct-provision/;
www.hotpress.com/culture/fresh-coronavirus-outbreak-at-direct-provision-centre-in-carrickmacross-22828843

¹⁸ www.amnesty.ie/direct-provision/ ; www.echolive.ie/corknews/UCC-lecturers-accuse-Irish-state-of-putting-Direct-Provision-residents-at-risk-following-reports-of-Covid-19-outbreak-at-Cork-centre-60c8e95f-ac80-4af5-b3da-87df7b79a69e-ds

¹⁹ www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/coronavirus-all-direct-provision-residents-and-staff-to-be-offered-covid-19-testing-1.4352776

²⁰ www.hotpress.com/culture/fresh-coronavirus-outbreak-at-direct-provision-centre-in-carrickmacross-22828843

²¹ www.ria.gov.ie/en/RIA/Pages/Direct_Provision_FAQs

²² www.forbes.com/sites/ceciliarodriguez/2020/03/02/the-most-expensive-countries-to-live-in-2020-europeans-at-the-top-with-switzerland-first/#7fc23d956dc1 ; <https://sinnott.ie/direct-provision-in-asylum-hostels-amounts-to-institutionalised-poverty-and-social-exclusion-for-children-says-new-report-from-the-irish-refugee-council>

Italy

As Italy extends its lockdown until 7 October, the homeless population remains vulnerable to the virus as they have not been provided with accommodation by the government. Although the Red Cross has amplified efforts to give the homeless food, they are still struggling. According to One Charity, Rome has over 7,000 homeless people. The homeless population has requested protective equipment, but Italy faces a shortage.²³

Mozambique

The escalating conflict in Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique has left over 300,000 people displaced. Growing insecurity and poor infrastructure means that reaching out to those in need has become harder, particularly now with Covid-19. This northern region has the second highest rate of chronic malnutrition, with half of children under the age of five chronically malnourished their vulnerability to Covid-19 is only heightened. According to a report released by the World Health Organization, Cabo Delgado was already facing significant challenges to accessing primary health care prior to the pandemic.²⁴

6. Freedom of assembly

Myanmar

Authorities in Myanmar have been responding to waves of protests critical of the military and government by arbitrarily arresting and prosecuting students protesting against human rights abuses, ongoing war crimes and internet blackout in Rakhine and Chin States. Police have been misusing the Covid-19 pandemic to crack down on protestors, such as officers conducting night time raids under the pretence of testing for the virus, but instead arresting protesting students. Other recently amended legislation assigning overly broad powers, such as the Natural Disaster Management Act, imposes criminal charges for holding a protest during Covid-19 restrictions and has been used to crackdown on anti-government assemblies.²⁵

The ongoing internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin States, the longest digital blackout in the world, is also a violation of the right to freedom of assembly. The right is protected under Article 21 of the ICCPR, as civilians have the right to organise, assemble and express themselves online as they do offline, as stated by the UN General Assembly in 2019.²⁶ This shutdown, combined with the broad definition of the distribution of flyers as ‘assemblies’, makes it impossible for government critics to safely protest through alternative means, both physically and digitally, which is needed during the pandemic.

²³ <https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/idPsJ5?now=true>

²⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/300-000-displaced-by-conflict-in-northern-mozambique/1982035>

²⁵ www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/23/myanmar-stop-prosecuting-peaceful-protesters

²⁶ <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/41>

Belarus

On 25 September, the UN released a statement expressing serious concern on what appears to be the ‘systematic targeting and persecution of prominent opposition politicians’ and protestors, including Maria Kalesnikava, by Belarusian authorities. At least 50 protestors were detained on Sunday in response to widespread anti-governmental protests, mired by reports of torture, disappearances and police brutality, against recent elections believed to have been rigged in favour of President Alexander Lukashenko. The President’s response was that Belarus needed security and consensus ‘on the brink of a global crisis’ indicating the justification for the heavy-handed suppression of civil society is due to the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁷ This follows a trend of heads of government clamping down on political assemblies, using powers from wide sweeping restrictive measures meant to protect public health. The crackdown on protestors has been occurring in tangent with an ongoing internet shutdown and targeted content blocking, which the EU has condemned as a violation of freedom of assembly, as well as directly impairing civilians’ ability to access life-saving information online relating to Covid-19, violating their right to health.²⁸

²⁷ www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54316568

²⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-geneva/85360/hrc45-urgent-debate-situation-human-rights-belarus-eu-statement_en