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IBAHRI Covid-19 Human Rights Monitor

Release date: Friday 21 August 2020

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1. Gender-based violence and women's health

Overall, economic, social and health impacts of the pandemic are different for men and women. Women, at the heart of care and response efforts underway in being called upon to protect and care for families, children, the elderly and the sick, are disproportionately affected.¹ The pandemic has also worsened situations in conflict-affected countries, including Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. In Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, women were still trying to recover from the effects of the Ebola virus when the coronavirus struck. In MENA, the pandemic is expected to result in the loss of 1.7 million jobs, of which over 700,000 held by women.²

Jamaica

The level of violence against women in Jamaica was already high at 27.8 per cent per cent of ever-partnered women reporting at least one act of physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetimes. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Further, Covid-19 has had a very specific impact on women's and men's livelihoods. According to a recent UN Women analysis of the labour force in Jamaica, 58,387 women compared to 36,316 men work in accommodation and food services, a proxy measure of employment in the tourism sector, one of the sectors most hard hit by the pandemic. The Government of Canada through its 'Enabling Gender-Responsive Disaster Recovery, Climate and Environmental Resilience in the Caribbean' (EnGenDER) Project has committed \$100,000 to Jamaica to support immediate needs such as access to food and hygiene supplies and provide income and livelihood support including psychosocial support for some of the most vulnerable including women and girls, the elderly, persons living with disabilities and individuals who have lost their jobs due to Covid-19.³

Lebanon

An estimated 150,000 women and girls have been displaced as a result of the explosion that devastated Beirut on 4 August. As Lebanon faces a dire economic crisis, 300,000 women were already unemployed and countless more have now lost their jobs; reducing women's participation in the economy by 14 to 19 per cent. It is expected that these compounding crises will leave women even more vulnerable, with many becoming increasingly reliant on negative coping strategies such as skipping meals and incurring debt. The implications are particularly bleak for a country with high

¹ In Focus: Gender equality matters in COVID-19 response, UN Women, www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response

² Stronger partnerships and investment needed to support women's recovery from COVID-19 in the Global South, UN Women, 13 August 2020, www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/8/news-womens-recovery-from-covid-19-in-the-global-south

³ Canada supports efforts to tackle gender-based violence and COVID-19 in Jamaica, MENAFN – Caribbean News Global, 14 August 2020, <https://menafn.com/1100634547/Canada-supports-efforts-to-tackle-gender-based-violence-and-COVID-19-in-Jamaica>

gender gap (Lebanon ranks 139 out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap report 2020), with one of the lowest rates of women's labour force participation (29 per cent for women as compared with 76 per cent for men). These inequalities are replicated in refugee and migrant communities in both formal and informal labour markets.⁴ Before the blast, Covid-19 was already compounding a dire economic situation, with increases in the number of children, including girls, working in the street in Lebanon, as well as those engaged in other forms of child labour.

One assessment found that up to 54 per cent of respondents had observed an increase of harassment, violence or abuse against other women and girls in their household or communities. Additionally, the risk of forced and early marriage of girls may now increase given the most recent crisis will put increased pressure on many household incomes. Since the explosion, some women and girls who have been affected have remained in their partially damaged homes, which is dangerous; others have relocated to temporary accommodation or shared shelters. In these locations they are at grave risk of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse (already on the rise due to the pandemic), while their capacity to report and seek help is reduced due to restrictions on freedom of movement.⁵

India

The pandemic has seen an increase in child marriages across India, and the lockdown restrictions mean many jobless and struggling families are performing ceremonies on the cheap and forgoing payments of dowries by the bride's family as they seek to ease their economic hardship. With schools closed and weddings taking place discreetly, officials fear that girls are harder to reach, educate, and save from child marriage. For instance, the number of child marriages in two of Tamil Nadu's districts rose to 27 in June from five in March; activists managed to prevent 50 marriages in this period but 24 went ahead. Officials at Childline, a toll-free emergency helpline for children, said they had stopped 5,200 child marriages between March and May. Activists also fear that men are capitalising on cheap weddings as a way to traffic girls for sex and labour; more families in villages are not being asked for dowry, and some are even offering money to the girl's parents. Further, parents had stopped marrying off girls provided they were in school, which was seen as a 'safe space'; this is no longer the case with school closures. In fact, Maharashtra is considering reopening residential schools to tackle an 'unexpected' rise in child marriage, as authorities in the state stopped more than 100 such weddings from April to July but fear that many others went unreported.⁶

⁴ UN Women and partners provide immediate relief to women and girls impacted by the Beirut blasts, UN Women, 13 August 2020, www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/8/news-un-women-and-partners-provide-relief-after-beirut-blasts

⁵ Beirut: 150,000 women and girls displaced following blast, International Rescue Committee, 14 August 2020, www.rescue.org/press-release/beirut-150000-women-and-girls-displaced-following-blast

⁶ India's COVID-19 lockdown threatens efforts to stop spikes in child marriage, Roli Srivastava, Thomson Reuters Foundation, 12 August 2020, <https://news.trust.org/item/20200811231237-svn98>

Africa

Anecdotal data indicates an increase in gender-based violence in the first months of the pandemic. Intimate partner violence was reported to have increased mainly in urban areas in Kenya and Uganda from the onset of the crisis in March 2020, and subsequently in Somalia, Rwanda and Tanzania. Other incidents such as denial of resources psychological and emotional abuse, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy and child marriage are also reported in a number of countries in the region including Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. In many instances, families rely on the dowry as a means of sustenance. In Tanzania and Uganda, the delayed reporting of rape cases did not allow for the administration of PEP kits.⁷

United States

On 22 March, Governor of Texas Greg Abbott signed an emergency order calling for a halt to abortion procedures, arguing that it was a ‘medically unnecessary procedure’ and thus had to be put on hold during the pandemic. Texas was the second state to attempt this; four other states followed. After a prolonged legal battle, clinics were allowed to resume abortions on 22 April. Data has now shown that as soon as the ban was lifted, clinics immediately saw an influx of patients seeking abortions later in their pregnancies: Southwestern Women’s Surgery Center in Dallas reported a 57 per cent jump in second-trimester abortions in the month after 22 April; Planned Parenthood Center for Choice in Houston reported a 28 per cent increase in abortions after ten weeks, and 51 weekly patients after the ban, compared to about 40 before; Whole Women’s Health in Austin reported nearly double its usual number of surgical abortions in the three weeks after 22 April. Many of the patients, clinics said, had intended to receive a nonsurgical medication abortion, allowed only in the first ten weeks in Texas, and missed the opportunity.⁸ Surgical abortion gets more dangerous the later it occurs during pregnancy; in addition to putting patients’ physical health at risk by delaying procedures, the ban also placed on women the emotional and psychological costs that come with later abortions. Moreover, the data does not even show the patients who attempted unsafe, illegal at-home abortions, or who endured forced childbirth because they could not afford to travel for care.

Italy

Following pressure from local organisations, Italy’s health ministry has indicated that revisions to national guidance will ease restrictions on medical abortion. Until now, medical abortion has been permitted in Italy only until the seventh week of pregnancy (by which time the pregnancy may not

⁷ East and Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes Region SGBV – Regional Overview, March–July 2020, UNHCR, ReliefWeb, 11 August 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/east-and-horn-africa-and-great-lakes-region-sgbv-regional-overview-march-july-2020>

⁸ The Devastating Impact of the COVID Abortion Ban in Texas, Bridget Read, The Cut, 13 August 2020, www.thecut.com/2020/08/the-devastating-impact-of-the-covid-abortion-ban-in-texas.html

even be detected), and has had to be administered during a three-day hospitalisation, while the WHO says medical abortion can be safely self-managed up to the 12th week. The ministry has announced that the new guidelines will allow medical abortion on an outpatient basis up to the ninth week of pregnancy. While this will help ensure implementation of Italy's national law, which permits abortion during the first 90 days for any reason, burdensome requirements still exist, and medical personnel extensively use 'conscientious objection' to deny services. Although Italian law requires authorities to ensure that 'conscientious objection' does not prevent legal abortion, this is not upheld or enforced. As the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates existing barriers to legal abortion in Italy,⁹ the government should monitor regional health authorities to ensure they uphold women and girls' reproductive rights.

2. LGBTQI+ rights

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sarajevo was set to hold its second Pride march on 23 August under the slogan 'Life is not four walls'. The previous march, held in September 2019, attracted 3,000 activists and supporters from the country and region. However, this year's march has been cancelled due to health-related concerns, as Sarajevo is considered a Covid-19 hotspot given a recent spike in infections

In their statement announcing the cancellation, the event's organisers also brought attention to other factors encumbering the functioning of LGBTQI+ organisations, some of which include increased security concerns, LGBTQI-phobia, and a rise in physical, psychological and verbal violence from family and partners, and mass job losses and loss of contact with those in their support network. Trans people have also been affected by drastically reduced access to needed medical care, which usually requires many of them to travel outside of Bosnia for treatment.

Montenegro's recent move to legalise same-sex partnerships, as part of its bid to join the European Union and the first country in the region to do so, is however viewed as a positive development. In April 2020, it was announced that the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the three self-governing entities in the country alongside the Republika Srpska and Brčko District, intends to start a consultation that may result in the government recognising same-sex relationships. An interdepartmental working group was appointed to meet with activists and discuss challenges faced by LGBTQI+ people before drafting legislation.¹⁰

⁹ A Step Forward for Abortion Rights in Italy, Hillary Margolis, Human Rights Watch, 11 August 2020, www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/11/step-forward-abortion-rights-italy

¹⁰ Balkan Insight 'Bosnia's LGBT Activists Vow to Fight on Despite Cancelled March', 14 August 2020; Pink News 'Bosnian imam thanks Allah for bringing about coronavirus and cancelling the country's second-ever Pride parade', 11 August 2020; Gay Times 'Bosnian imam celebrates coronavirus canceling a Pride march'; Gay Nation 'Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities start consultations on same-sex union legalization', 21 April 2020.

LGBTQI+ mental health in the UK and Hong Kong

Across the world, pandemic-related self-isolation has worsened the mental health of LGBTQI+ people and their family relationships by cutting them off from supportive peers, allies and networks, and by forcing them to live with kin who either do not know their identities or are hostile to them. University College London and Sussex University conducted a survey on 310 respondents as part of ‘the Queerintine study’ into the experiences of LGBTQI+ people during the pandemic. While the study is yet to be peer reviewed, researchers found that 69 per cent of respondents experienced symptoms of depression, and ten per cent felt unsafe in their homes. One sixth of respondents reported experiencing discrimination based on their sexualities, a figure which increased to one third for those in homes where they had not disclosed their identities. Co-author of the Queerintine study and deputy director of the centre for innovation and research in wellbeing at Sussex University, Laia Bécades, described the pandemic as having a ‘pernicious impact’ on the mental health of LGBTQI+ people.

The LGBT Foundation reported receiving 25 per cent more suicide-related calls during the lockdown, and that demands for support by people affected by issues like abuse or domestic violence have continued to increase despite the easing of lockdown restrictions.

A study by the Sexualities Research Programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in collaboration with the Education University of Hong Kong and the London School of Economics, also looked into the effects of the pandemic on the LGBTQI+ community. The study found that anxiety and depression were on the rise during the pandemic. More than half of the people surveyed felt significant worry about their health and financial situations, and a third felt disconnected from the wider LGBTQI+ community. The lockdown has also left Hong Kong residents with HIV without access to PrEP, since HIV-positive members of Hong Kong’s LGBTQI+ community would travel to Thailand to access the medication. They can no longer do so during Covid-19, which puts their health at serious risk.¹¹

China

On 13 August, Shanghai Pride announced that it was shutting down because of suspected political pressure from state authorities. In mid-June, the NGO managed to shift celebrations for Pride 2020 online in response to Covid-19 restrictions. In a statement entitled ‘The End of the Rainbow’, its organisers stated they were ‘cancelling all upcoming activities and taking a break from scheduling any future events’. Although the statement did not mention a reason for the cancellation, sources have claimed Shanghai Pride’s organisers and volunteers were being targeted by local authorities to the extent where their everyday lives and jobs were being disrupted. Despite having more discreet celebrations, the organisers of Shanghai Pride had to make contingency plans and navigate around the

¹¹ The Guardian ‘Lockdown having ‘pernicious impact’ on LGBT community’s mental health’, 5 August 2020; Exposure ‘Celebrating LGBT+ youth in lockdown’, 11 August 2020; Hong Kong Free Press ‘Covid-19 crisis exacerbating mental health issues in LGBT community – study’, 12 August 2020.

reluctance of venues and corporate sponsors to display LGBTQI+ paraphernalia openly. Earlier in 2020, in the Shangdong Province's capital, Jinan, education authorities called on primary and secondary education institutions to strengthen 'political and ideological education', including characterising homosexuality as 'corrupt behaviour imported from the West... inconsistent with core socialist values'.¹²

Poland

16 August saw a clash between hundreds of Polish nationalists and LGBTQI+ rights defenders in the nation's capital. Separated by a line of police officers and vehicles, one side set a rainbow flag ablaze while the other side use the street as a canvas to paint the Pride flag. The nationalist gathering to 'stop aggression by LGBT' was organised by the far-right All-Poland Youth. Rights defenders confronted them in a counter-protest. LGBTQI+ rights have been a point of contention in Poland for years, and were a critical element in the 2020 elections where incumbent President Andrzej Duda, an ally of the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) campaigned on an anti-LGBTQI+ platform. Since attaining political power, the PiS has systematically undermined the human rights and freedoms of women and LGBTQI+ people. This year, several municipalities signed 'family charters', which promote 'traditional families' to the exclusion of 'non-traditional' gender identities and sexual orientations.

In Warsaw, three activists were criminally charged with desecrating national monuments and offending religious feelings by hanging Pride flags on the statues of Jesus Christ, the Warsaw Mermaid and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. Multiple protests have been staged in Poland and abroad since President Duda's re-election, including a large protest in Warsaw this month demanding the release of non-binary activist, Margot Szutowicz, one of the activists arrested for allegedly hanging pride flags on the city statutes. The protest last week resulted in the brief detention of 48 LGBTQI+ rights supporters and bystanders. An investigation by the Polish Commission for Human Rights revealed that detainees, especially trans people, were insulted and humiliated by the police prior to their release, including being strip searched without proper cause. Szutowicz also stands accused of allegedly damaging a vehicle proclaiming anti-LGBTQI+ propaganda and slurs, and of attacking an anti-abortion campaigner. She has been denied bail and is currently in pre-trial detention.¹³

3. Refugee camps and asylum procedures

¹² CNN 'End of the Rainbow': Shanghai Pride shuts down amid shrinking space for China LGBTQ community', 17 August 2020; Radio Free Asia 'Shanghai Pride Event Canceled Amid Crackdown on LGBTQ Community', 17 August 2020.

¹³ Reuters 'Polish nationalists and LGBT activists face off in Warsaw', 16 August 2020; Deutsche Welle 'Poland: LGBT+ activists and nationalists face off', 17 August 2020; Human Rights Watch 'Poland Punishes LGBT Rights Activist with Pretrial Detention', 12 August 2020; BBC News 'Poland LGBT protests: Three charged with hanging rainbow flags off statutes', 5 August 2020; Human Rights Watch 'Poland: Crackdown on LGBT Activists', 7 August 2020; Balkan Insight 'Mass arrest of LGBT people marks turning point for Poland', 13 August 2020.

Lebanon

On 16 August, the UN Palestinian refugee agency confirmed four new Covid-19 deaths in camps in Lebanon, bringing the total number of Palestinian refugees who have died from Covid-19 since Lebanon first recorded an outbreak of the virus in February to eight.¹⁴ Currently, over 200,000 Palestinians reside in Lebanon, and the rising cases call for vigilance in observing hygiene measures to combat the spread of the virus in the densely populated camps.¹⁵ After the deadly blast that devastated large parts of Beirut, at least 17 containers of medicine, medical equipment and personal protective equipment that would have been used for the Covid-19 response were destroyed.¹⁶ Lebanon's health services were already straining under the pandemic crisis before the blast, and the latest event overwhelmed the country further. Local NGOs and groups are stepping up to lead Beirut blast response.¹⁷

Syria

On 10 August, the first case of Covid-19 appeared among residents in Syrian al-Hol camp.¹⁸ Al-Hol camp, which is run by the autonomous Kurdish administration that controls the north east of Syria, holds around 74,000 women and children displaced by the battle with Islamic State militants,¹⁹ with most of them from Syria and Iraq and more than 7,000 reportedly from foreign countries.²⁰ On 16 August, eight children under the age of five died in al-Hol Camp, which points to the seriousness of living condition issue in the camp. Nearly 40,000 children from more than 60 countries continue to languish in al-Hol camp. They lack access to basic services and have to contend with the sweltering summer heat and the trauma of violence and displacement. Their home governments are reluctant to take back their nationals due to the alleged potential threat to their home countries, while UN aid agencies continue to provide a range of critical relief such as shelter, food and hygiene, nutrition and protection. However, access to basic services, including regular water supply and emergency healthcare are still in short supply.

Greece

Greece has been found to have secretly and illegally expelled over 1,000 refugees from its shores in recent months, abandoning many of them at sea around the border of Greek territorial waters.²¹

¹⁴ www.map.org.uk/about-map/map-coronavirus-situation-updates

¹⁵ www.arabnews.com/node/1720371/middle-east

¹⁶ https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/11082020_UNHCR%20Global%20COVID-19%20Emergency%20Response.pdf

¹⁷ www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/08/18/Lebanon-Beirut-explosion-local-aid-response

¹⁸ www.savethechildren.net/news/first-case-coronavirus-appears-among-residents-syrian-al-hol-camp

¹⁹ www.itv.com/news/2020-08-10/first-resident-at-massive-syrian-refugee-camp-tests-positive-for-coronavirus

²⁰ www.voanews.com/middle-east/8-children-syrias-al-hol-camp-die-preventable-illnesses

²¹ www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200817-greece-secretly-expels-over-1000-refugees-abandoning-them-at-sea

According to a report by the *New York Times*²² and based on evidence from witness testimony, researchers and the Turkish coastguard, at least 1,072 refugees and migrants were left abandoned at sea by Greek officials spanning 31 separate occasions since March this year. The refugees, largely made up of Syrians fleeing the conflict in their country, were forced onto damaged lifeboats at the border between Greece and Turkey, while others were left in their own boats after the engines were disabled by Greek officials.

Refugee and migrant detention centres and camps on five Greek islands holding more than 34,000 people have largely been spared outbreaks of Covid-19 during the pandemic despite overcrowded conditions but the facility on Chios was locked down until 25 August after infections were found in a 35-year-old man from Yemen and a worker. The shutdown was ordered by the Migration and the Citizens' Protection ministries in coordination with the National Organization of Public Health (EODY), which potentially violates international law.²³

United States

Hundreds of migrant children rapidly expelled from the United States under a coronavirus immigration policy are returning to shelters in Guatemala where virus testing and bed capacity are regularly stretched to their limits.²⁴ Between April and July of this year Guatemala received 379 unaccompanied minors deported from the United States, 176 in July alone, which was more than double from a month earlier and higher than the same period last year, according to Guatemalan government figures. Only around ten per cent of children sent from the United States arrive with certifications of coronavirus testing. Child protection services, which were already overstretched and under-resourced, have now been further compromised by Covid-19, and vulnerable children are in urgent need of the support and protection.

Bangladesh

Cox's Bazar, the largest refugee settlement in Bangladesh and the world, are sheltering around 900,000 Rohingya refugees. With the pandemic spreading in Bangladesh, the tightly packed conditions of the refugee camps make their residents especially vulnerable. The largest non-governmental responder to the humanitarian crisis in Cox's Bazar, BRAC, developed a three-pronged approach to the crisis, including prioritising primary health care, innovating to adapt preventive measures and spreading essential knowledge through community-based outreach.²⁵

²² www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/europe/greece-migrants-abandoning-sea.html

²³ www.thenationalherald.com/archive_general_news_greece/arthro/first_covid_19_cases_found_in_refugee_camp_on_chios_island-714305

²⁴ <https://news.trust.org/item/20200806121212-a3fno>

²⁵ www.devex.com/news/opinion-from-cox-s-bazar-how-to-address-refugee-needs-amid-covid-19-97840

4. Prisoners and detainees

Malawi

As reported in last week's monitor, seven NGOs wrote to the government urging it to decongest the prison system. A few days after this, on 14 August, the Malawi President pardoned 499 inmates as part of an effort to deal with Covid-19 inside the country's overcrowded prisons. The recent increase in cases had forced authorities to suspend family visits with inmates. However, rights activists say the number of pardoned prisoners is too low. The executive director of the Centre for Human Rights Education, Advice and Assistance stated that it is a small figure that cannot change anything, and is certainly not sufficient for prisons to maintain physical distancing. The national spokesperson for Malawi Prison Services says the situation continues to deteriorate: 'currently the national tally is at 155 positive ... out of the 155 figure, 21 are officers and the rest are inmates'.²⁶ The announcement also followed the death of a prisoner due to Covid-19 on 13 August.²⁷

Iran

While Iranian officials said the country had released around 100,000 prisoners earlier this year, most political prisoners remain behind bars.²⁸ In March, Iranian authorities announced they had temporarily released 85,000 prisoners.²⁹ By the end of April, Iran said it had released 100,000 prisoners as part of what a spokesman for the country's judiciary called 'a significant move' to protect prisoners' health.³⁰ Nevertheless, political prisoners were mostly left out of the mass furlough and hundreds remain in crowded, unsanitary quarters where social distancing was impossible. Although Iranian officials have described their efforts to protect prisoners from the pandemic as 'exemplary', the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights continues to raise concerns over Iran's incarceration of prisoners of conscience, including those reportedly ill with Covid-19 symptoms.³¹ Leaked letters obtained by Amnesty International in July show that the Iranian government has ignored repeated pleas from senior Iranian officials responsible for managing the country's prisons for resources to

²⁶ Malawi President Pardons Prisoners to Reduce COVID-19 Spread, Lameck Masina, VOA News, 15 August 2020, www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/malawi-president-pardons-prisoners-reduce-covid-19-spread

²⁷ COVID-19: Malawi frees 499 inmates to reduce congestion, Moses Michael-Phiri, Anadolu Agency, 14 August 2020, www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-malawi-frees-499-inmates-to-reduce-congestion/1942136

²⁸ Political Prisoners Remain Behind Bars as COVID-19 Surges in Iran. This Activist Is Risking Her Life to Get Them Out, Joseph Hincks, Time, 14 August 2020, <https://time.com/5879513/iran-nasrin-sotoudeh-hunger-strike-prisoners-covid-19>

²⁹ Iran temporarily frees 85,000 from jail including political prisoners, Parisa Hafezi, Reuters, 17 March 2020, www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-prisoners/iran-temporarily-frees-85000-from-jail-including-political-prisoners-idUSKBN21410M

³⁰ Iran Says 1,000 Foreign Prisoners Released Temporarily Due To Virus Outbreak, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 21 April 2020, www.rferl.org/a/iran-says-1000-foreign-prisoners-released-temporarily-due-to-virus-outbreak/30568248.html

³¹ Iran: UN experts call for the urgent release from prison of human rights defender with COVID-19 symptoms, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 22 July 2020, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26118&LangID=E

control the spread of Covid-19 and treat infected prisoners.³² There are signs the virus is spreading inside the main facility for the detention of prisoners of conscience in Tehran: out of 17 inmates prison authorities recently tested in a single ward, 12 tested positive for the virus, the Centre for Human Rights in Iran reported on 11 August³³.

Nepal

A detainee at the Metropolitan Police Circle in Kalimati has tested positive for the coronavirus. This is the second case of Covid-19 seen in a detainee in Kathamandu district (earlier, a prisoner who was transported from one jail to another had tested positive), and the third case of Covid-19 at the Kalimati police station. So far, 387 police personnel have been diagnosed with Covid-19, of which 251 have already recovered. Meanwhile, 160 officers who were diagnosed with Covid-19 at the Nepal Police Headquarters are still undergoing treatment.³⁴

The coronavirus infections seen in police stations and prison facilities have once again brought to the fore the issue of overcrowded prisons where physical distancing is impossible, with higher risk of coronavirus outbreaks. The Central Jail is currently holding 3,171 prisoners, which is more than twice its capacity of 1,400. According to the Department of Prison Management, over 24,000 people are currently serving in 74 prisons across the country. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, on 20 March the Supreme Court ordered the government to release prisoners sentenced for up to a year for minor crimes. Following the court's order, 409 prisoners were released from across the country.³⁵

India

A number of prisons across India have emerged as Covid-19 hotspots; for example, more than 220 inmates and staff members of Delhi Prison have tested positive. Unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, poor nutrition, co-morbidities and a shortage of hygiene products in these confined spaces have rendered inmates vulnerable to disease outbreaks. Indian prisons are overcrowded by up to an average of 150 per cent, which makes physical distancing impossible. At a time when prisons are being decongested the world over in view of the pandemic, and even the Supreme Court of India has

³² Iran: Leaked Letters Revealing COVID-19 Crisis in Prisons, Amnesty International, 31 July 2020, www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2811/2020/en

³³ Political Prisoners in Iran Contracting COVID-19 at Alarming Rate, Center for Human Rights in Iran, 11 August 2020, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/08/political-prisoners-in-iran-contracting-covid-19-at-alarming-rate>

³⁴ Four inmates test positive for COVID-19 in Jhumka Prison, Amar Khadka, myRepublica, 15 August 2020, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/four-inmates-test-positive-for-covid-19-in-jhumka-prison>

³⁵ Infection fears in overcrowded prisons and lockups after a man catches Covid-19 while in police detention in Kathmandu, Anup Ojha, The Kathmandu Post, 17 August 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/08/17/infection-fears-in-overcrowded-prisons-and-lockups-after-a-man-catches-covid-19-while-in-police-detention-in-kathmandu>

ordered the release of prisoners, Indian investigating agencies are attempting to fill prisons. Several states have introduced punitive measures for citizens who fail to comply with lockdown rules.³⁶

Several political prisoners who are currently incarcerated have reportedly tested positive for Covid-19. Two such political prisoners had known existing ailments and co-morbidities, and yet were hospitalised only after they tested positive; until that time, they had been held inside prisons without adequate precautions.³⁷ There is no systematic testing and information sharing with the lawyers or family members of the accused.

5. Disability rights

Changes in towns and city centre layouts across the globe are causing major accessibility challenges for individuals with disabilities. Social distancing measures such as widely spaced out tables and chairs and socially distanced pedestrian zones create newfound obstacles to navigate around, and the banning of cars and relocation of bus stops add to accessibility challenges. London disability advocate and access consultant Mik Scarlet highlighted temporary measures introduced by Transport for London, including the narrowing of major roads for cars and lorries, supposedly to increase space for cyclists and pedestrians. He noted: ‘I think there are going to be a lot of people taking their councils to court’. Further, disability advocates have expressed frustration that town governments are making these changes without consultation.

Mask exemptions

Wearing a mask to prevent the spread of Covid-19 is now mandatory in many parts of the world, however many individuals with disabilities are exempt from the requirement, including those who may have trouble breathing, experience sensory issues that make wearing a mask difficult, or those who need to see people’s lips to understand speech. Because many governments have failed to make mask exemptions for some individuals with disabilities public, these individuals are at greater risk of harassment and questioning. Disability advocate Paul Feeley, who lives with various invisible disabilities, reported being harassed multiple times on public transport and being told that he ‘shouldn’t be allowed out’ if he cannot wear a mask. While some governments have produced exemption cards that people can show if they are challenged about not wearing a mask, advocates argue that this is problematic because it makes people with disabilities responsible for making sure that they are not harassed by other members of the public.

³⁶ Prisons become breeding grounds for the coronavirus, Divya Trivedi, Frontline, 28 August 2020, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/tinderbox-prisons/article32296969.ece>

³⁷ Bhima Koregaon undertrials among 1,000 Talaja Jail inmates with COVID-like symptoms; Teltumbde’s kin await results, Parth MN, Firstpost, 3 August 2020, www.firstpost.com/india/at-least-1000-taloja-jail-inmates-including-bhima-koregaon-case-prisoners-have-covid-like-symptoms-say-families-scholar-teltumbdes-kin-await-test-results-8665491.html

Job hunting

In a 3 August letter to government ministers, cross-sector disability rights campaigners in the UK asked for changes to the government's Plan for Jobs to avoid an unemployment crisis among young people with disabilities. Without the changes, the group says the double disadvantage of disability discrimination and a huge increase in competition for jobs caused by the pandemic will leave people with disabilities at risk of long-term unemployment. Steve Haines, Director of Policy and Campaigns at the National Deaf Children's Society, commented: 'The government's efforts to get young people into work are very promising, but we're extremely concerned that those who are disabled will still struggle to access jobs. They already battle discrimination throughout their lives and often find it harder to gain employment, so we cannot risk the gap getting any wider'. Among eight suggested changes, the coalition suggests that career advisors be specifically trained to work with individuals with disabilities and that online job searching tools be made more accessible.

Job losses

In a 6 August report 'Unequal Crisis', non-profit organisation Citizens Advice reported that individuals with disabilities and their caregivers are twice as likely as those without disabilities to lose their jobs during the pandemic. One in four disabled people (27 per cent) are facing redundancy, rising to 37 per cent for those people whose disability has a substantial impact on their activities. Dame Gillian Guy, chief executive of Citizens Advice, commented: 'Employers face difficult choices but there are worrying signs disabled workers, people who shielded, parents and carers are being pushed to the front of the queue when it comes to redundancy.' To avoid discriminatory job loss, the report concludes with recommendations for employers, such as ensuring that adequate measures are in place to make sure people with disabilities are comfortable and safe in office.

6. Homelessness and precarious living

Lebanon

The explosions in the Beirut port, which killed 200 people and injured thousands of others, also destroyed 120,000 tonnes of grain that had been stored there. At present, grain reserves in Beirut are expected to last for only four to six weeks, which falls far below the minimum three-month supply for food security. Lebanon traditionally relies on food imports to meet 85 per cent of its population's needs, mostly through the port of Beirut. Due to diversion to Tripoli in response to the blast, prices will likely further increase. In the agricultural sector, farmers who were already struggling to pay back loans for purchasing imported supplies are unlikely to receive new lines of credit because of the devaluation of the Lebanese pound. Agricultural exports have been moved from the Beirut port, which is mostly out of commission and was at 30 per cent capacity as of mid-August.

More than 300,000 people have been left homeless by the explosions. 6,000 of them are living in schools while the rest are living with friends and family. The WHO estimates that out of sixteen hospitals, three are non-functioning and three are functioning partially. The Ministry of Public Health has reported increasing rates of Covid-19 transmission, resulting in 8,881 cases as of 17 August. Following the protests, Covid-19 cases were also recorded among healthcare workers and trauma patients, which highlights the importance of ensuring that medical personnel are sufficiently protected and able to recognise symptoms of the virus in those seeking treatment for blast-related injuries, and the importance of promoting public awareness of protection measures.³⁸

India

Schools in India have been closed for five months as part of pandemic-related restrictions. India is currently the third most affected by the pandemic, with almost 2.4 million cases and more than 47,000 deaths. While some schools have managed to move classes online, only eight per cent of homes in India have computers and internet connections, and less than half of the country has electricity for periods longer than 12 hours a day. To circumvent this problem, people have begun providing classes to children who would otherwise go without education. In Kerala State, volunteers have set up temporary classrooms to make education more accessible for children, even in remote areas. During the classes, pre-recorded lessons from the local government are screened for students online or on televisions. In New Delhi, around 100 students regularly attend classes that have been run out of a local neighbourhood's learning centre for five years. Despite these positive attempts to continue education, millions of children are being left behind, worsening the digital divide in the country.

In 160 countries across the world, one billion children are missing school because of Covid-19. Even before the virus, 250 million children were out of school. According to UNESCO, 24 million children in 180 countries are at risk of never returning to school, from pre-school to university level, because of the economic consequences of the pandemic. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has warned that the decline in access to education will hinder progress and entrench inequalities for decades. In low and middle-income countries, which will be hit the hardest, the pre-existing annual education-funding gap of US\$1.5 trillion could increase by 30 per cent globally. The Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, Stefania Giannini has said that digital, social and gender inequalities in access to education have been amplified by the pandemic. Girls in African and Asian communities are at particular risk of

³⁸ Reliefweb 'Beirut blast: World Food Programme working around the clock to avert a humanitarian catastrophe', 13 August 2020; Reliefweb 'WFP Lebanon Beirut Port Explosions Situation Report #2 (17 August 2020)', 18 August 2020; Reliefweb 'WHO Situation Report – Lebanon blast – Issue 5 (11-14 August 2020)', 17 August 2020; The New Humanitarian 'In post-blast Lebanon, farmers struggle as food shortages feared', 11 August 2020.

never resuming their education, teenage pregnancy and resultant (potentially fatal) complications in childbirth.³⁹

England and Wales

Estimates place the number of households made legally homeless in England because of the pandemic at around 20,000. Legally homeless people include those in short-term accommodation, tenants and lodgers who have been evicted, and victims of domestic abuse. 21 Members of Parliament recently signed a letter warning about a new wave of homelessness once the ban on evictions, introduced in March to protect those affected financially by the pandemic, ends on 23 August. In their letter, the MPs called on Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing, Luke Hall, for the Government to fund accommodation for homeless people for at least a year. They have also called for a repeal of the Vagrancy Act, which permits the police to arrest people caught begging in public spaces.

In the early months of the lockdown, 14,500 people were given emergency accommodation. Moreover, the notice periods for evictions for no reason were amended from two months to three months in England and to six months in Wales, except for cases involving anti-social behaviour. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government expressed the opinion that the government had given great support to the most vulnerable members of society during the pandemic. New repossession rules were adopted in English for application during eviction hearings once they resume. The rules will require landlords to furnish more information about how the pandemic affected their tenants when seeking evictions. They will also have to produce the full history of tenants' arrears in advance rather than at the eviction hearing.⁴⁰

³⁹ Al Jazeera 'Millions of children missing school in India COVID outbreak', 13 August 2020; Al Jazeera 'Coronavirus forces millions of Indian children to miss school', 13 August 2020; The Telegraph UK 'A 'generational catastrophe': 24 million children will never return to school post-Covid, UN warns', 4 August 2020.

⁴⁰ BBC News 'Coronavirus: MPs warn of 'wave of homelessness' when eviction ban ends', 17 August 2020; New Statesman 'Revealed: Nearly 20,000 households made homeless during pandemic', 18 August 2020.