



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**
2. **LGBTQI+ rights**
3. **Refugee camps**
4. **Prisoners and detainees**
5. **Informal settlements and homelessness**
6. **Disability rights**

1. Gender-based violence and women's health

Asia and the Pacific

Women-focused organisations (WFOs) in Asia and the Pacific have highlighted severe operational and funding challenges. In April, 71 per cent of WFOs reported that Covid-19 was affecting them somewhat or very negatively, with 12 per cent suspending activities altogether. Similar trends persist for organisations serving diverse gender populations. The Asia-Pacific Transgender Network reported that all of their project partners, providing critical services to transgender people, expressed concern about sustaining operational costs. The Southeast Asia Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression Caucus reported that donors supporting groups focused on LGBTQI+ people had backed out from agreed funding.¹

Sri Lanka

A recent survey by a consortium of three organisations found that 26 per cent of respondents experienced violence during the Covid-19 curfew imposed from March to June. Of the 329 respondents, 56 per cent were men, 16 per cent transgender women, 16 per cent sex workers, 32 per cent people who use drugs and three per cent beach boys (young men who engage in casual and transactional sex with female tourists).² 76.8 per cent of respondents experienced verbal abuse, while 7.8 per cent encountered physical and 5.6 per cent sexual violence. A consultant with the consortium said, 'they cannot go to the police. The violence is based on their identity which is stigmatised. It gets worse with men because they're expected to be strong; men who have sex with men find it difficult to report abuse because they are supposed to be strong [as well as] the fact that they are supposed to operate in private.' Out of 248 respondents, 174 expressed hopelessness, 159 said they were stressed, 95 suffered from anxiety and 34 experienced depression. A coordinator from one of the organisations added that the pandemic worsened police violence, most of which is against men, and is referred to as police brutality and not gender-based violence.³

India

From 25 March to 24 June, 47 per cent of the estimated 3.9 million abortions that would have taken place in India under normal circumstances were possibly compromised. This means 1.85 million women could not terminate unwanted pregnancies, according to a modelling study by a non-profit dedicated to preventing and managing unwanted pregnancies. Of these, 80 per cent or 1.5 million

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/closing-funding-gap-women-focused-organizations-responding-Covid-19-asia-and>

² www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-26585/v1

³ www.ipsnews.net/2020/08/report-shows-sri-lanka-escalation-violence-Covid-19-lockdown/

compromised abortions were due to lack of availability of medical abortion drugs at pharmacies. 20 per cent or nearly 370,000 were due to reduced access to facilities (16 per cent to private facilities and 4 per cent to public facilities).⁴ Millions of women have thereby been forced to either continue with an unwanted pregnancy, at great mental, emotional and economic cost, or undergo a late-term or unsafe abortion.

2. LGBTQI+ rights

Burundi

Burundi President Évariste Ndayishimiye made homophobic comments last week claiming that homosexuality is the cause of Covid-19 and HIV. In a video shot in Ngozi, where the first family held four days of Thanksgiving prayers, the President is recorded saying: ‘God does not support homosexuals. Homosexuality is the origin of curses such as AIDS and coronavirus. For him, the countries hit the most by the virus are the ones supporting LGBTQ.’ He added that ‘homosexuals are responsible for the cases of coronavirus in Burundi.’

Same-sex sexual relations were criminalised for the first time in Burundi in 2009. The law entered into force on 22 April 2009 and punishes same-sex relations with three months to two years imprisonment and a fine.⁵

Myanmar

The Embassy of Denmark in Myanmar has pledged to support the LGBTQI+ community in Myanmar by providing grants for psychological support to two hundred people in need. The grants will be provided through the Embassy’s existing partnership with the Myanmar LGBT Rights Network, and are aimed at members of the LGBTQI+ community in need, including people who have lost their livelihoods due to the pandemic, those in need of medical support, victims of domestic violence and other forms of abuse.⁶

3. Refugee Camps

Myanmar

The 25 August marked three years since the commencement of persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in the Northern Rakhine State and its forced displacement to neighbouring Bangladesh.⁷ They remain unable to return due to both the Covid-19 pandemic and continuing violence at home.⁸

⁴ <https://scroll.in/article/966566/the-coronavirus-lockdown-prevented-1-85-million-indian-women-from-getting-an-abortion>

⁵ <https://regionweek.com/burundi-president-believes-that-Covid-19-is-a-curse-linked-to-homosexuality>

⁶ <https://scandasia.com/denmark-supports-psychological-and-housing-assistance-to-lgtb-group-in-myanmar-that-had-been-affected-by-Covid-19-pandemic>

⁷ www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/rohingya-diaspora-vow-to-return-home/1951298

⁸ www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200825_26/

Restrictions on freedom of movement made it much more difficult for many refugees to be self-sufficient.⁹ In the largest settlement at Cox's Bazar, refugees are living together so closely that social distancing and sanitation are impossible.¹⁰ With cases being reported in the camp, there are fears that an uncontained outbreak of Covid-19 in the refugee camps could be devastating.¹¹

Mozambique

In Mozambique, the Covid-19 outbreak is hitting the southern African country's most vulnerable people the hardest. Many are still recovering from two severe cyclones in 2019. The UN is currently providing humanitarian assistance with a priority to save lives, while the humanitarian community along with host communities and local leaders are fostering a dialogue on how to strengthen support networks.¹² It is not yet evident how effective that assistance is, and additional efforts and resources are urgently needed to support the people across Mozambique.

4. Prisoners and detainees

Egypt

UN rights experts have raised alarm over 'grave and unnecessary' risks faced by imprisoned human rights defenders in Egypt due to lengthy pre-trial detention. The experts are calling on authorities to facilitate the release of prisoners with pre-existing medical conditions or those detained without sufficient legal basis. 'With few physical distancing measures in place in these prisons, we fear that the death toll may be much higher than the cases so far corroborated,' they said. They added that detained rights defenders have few opportunities to make their health conditions known, as they are not being allowed to individually contest their charges. 'The pandemic brings a heightened need to protect human rights defenders, as now there is even less space for victims to denounce violations' they stated.¹³

United States

A recent study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that correctional facilities that resisted mass Covid-19 testing for inmates erred in their decision to only test inmates with symptoms, leading to large initial undercounts. The study examined thirteen prisons in California, Colorado, Ohio and Texas, and three federal prisons in unidentified states. It found that most institutions waited several days or weeks before the first identified case to begin mass testing. In one unidentified prison where testing was delayed nearly six weeks after the first case, positive results were returned for 77 per cent of inmates. In an Ohio prison where mass testing was delayed by almost two weeks after the first case, mass testing found 87 per cent of inmates tested positive. Corrections officials told

⁹ www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1972643/pandemic-aftermath-threatens-refugee-livelihoods

¹⁰ www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-53838410

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1070962>

¹² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1070762>

¹³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1070882>

researchers that mass testing was expensive and consumed staff time, and that rearranging living space based on the results was not always possible.¹⁴

Madagascar

On 23-24 August, security forces killed twenty-two inmates escaping from a prison in southeast Madagascar, with more in hospital with severe injuries. Overcrowding is rife and pre-trial detention rates remain excessively high in Madagascar's prisons. As of May 2020, the prison in question housed 453 detainees despite an official capacity of 260. Conditions have worsened since the Covid-19 outbreak, with detainees no longer receiving visits from family or lawyers, and living in fear of falling sick and not having appropriate access to healthcare. According to local reports, the detainees escaped to protest prolonged pre-trial detention, pre-trial detention for minor offences, squalid conditions of detention characterised by severe overcrowding, and widespread prison corruption.¹⁵

5. Informal settlements and homelessness

United States

The Howard Center for Investigative Journalism conducted a study into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on those affected by homelessness and precarious living in the United States. The study, which spans over three months, shows that homeless people are part of the most vulnerable sectors of society vis-à-vis the pandemic. Most homeless people have limited access to health care, and with the recent closure of most shelters and facilities many have lost access to food, water, and shelter. The Howard Center was able to track at least 153 Covid-19-related deaths among the homeless populations of six cities—Los Angeles, New York City, San Francisco, Seattle, Phoenix and Washington, D.C.,—and 206 homeless deaths in the country. These numbers surpass those reported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the federal agency in charge of implementing and overseeing homeless programmes, as it has not kept track of Covid-19 infections and deaths among the homeless.

The study further identified 43 counties where homeless people were most vulnerable to the crisis, including counties which became hotspots of infection during the pandemic, such as Imperial, California and Maricopa, Arizona. As part of the study, the Howard Center interviewed more than 80 professionals working in homelessness, epidemiology and public health.

The study also found that four months after the passing of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), less than one third of the \$4 billion allocated for homeless-specific programmes

¹⁴ www.washingtonpost.com/health/cdc-study-suggests-inmates-should-have-been-tested-in-mass/2020/08/20/207dc278-e32f-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html

¹⁵ www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/madagascar-killing-of-detainees-an-appalling-attack-on-the-right-to-life

had been granted. Even the communities with access to the funds were still waiting on federal guidelines on how to spend the money.¹⁶

United Kingdom

The homelessness charity ‘Crisis’ has signed a partnership with Tesco Mobile to distribute 2,500 smartphones and laptops to homeless people in England, Scotland and Wales. Tesco Mobile has pledged to provide £700,000 worth of equipment in the first year of the partnership, with more to follow.

The initiative aims to fight the digital deficit already faced by many homeless people and exacerbated by the closure of walk-in services such as council offices and job centres due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital connectivity has become key to survival for homeless people, as it provides access to homelessness support services, universal credit, job applications, directions to job interviews and appointments, and more.

Crisis also hopes that the initiative will help tackle the high levels of social isolation and loneliness experienced by homeless people.¹⁷

Kenya

Thirty-four youth-led groups and organisations have set up handwashing stations in informal settlements in Kenya. The effort was initiated by youth workers from the Mathare Environmental One Stop Centre in an informal settlement in Nairobi, and the implementation of subsequent stations has been supported by UN-Habitat and public and private-sector. The handwashing stations have contributed to slow the spread of the virus and save lives, with an estimate of 1.5 million hands washed.¹⁸

6. Disability rights

Across the globe, disability service providers are permanently closing therapeutic and recreation programmes. In the United States, a survey of nearly two hundred service providers found that 77 per cent shut down programmes as a result of the pandemic and 16 per cent indicated that those programmes were not scheduled to reopen. Due to social distancing requirements, some programmes are unable to serve enough people to be financially feasible, whilst others see low attendance. In some cases, the closure of programmes represents the closure of entire service provision agencies.

South Africa

¹⁶ <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/covid-19-crisis-within-crisis-180428634.html>

¹⁷ www.theguardian.com/society/2020/aug/18/homeless-people-uk-receive-free-phones-connectivity-drive-Covid-19

¹⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/kenya-s-youth-lead-way-Covid-19-prevention-informal-settlements>

A study published on 18 August revealed current Covid-19 triage policies and practices may exclude or disadvantage South Africans with disabilities from gaining ICU access and receiving ventilators if they become ill. The exclusion of individuals with disabilities directly contradicts the South African Constitution, which states that all people are regarded as equal, have the right to life and inherent dignity, and the right to access healthcare. The triage policy also contravenes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by South Africa in 2007.

United States

An 18 August report from U.S. News & World Report illustrates a variety of accessibility challenges for college students with disabilities participating in remote learning this upcoming semester. One analysis of five hundred U.S. colleges found that more than 50 per cent of PDF documents in courses have accessibility issues. This troubling trend came at a time when PDFs were uploaded to courses at almost twice the rate as spring 2019. A survey from the Association on Higher Education and Disability found that students with disabilities were more likely than students without disabilities to experience difficulty with accessing the internet, technology training and support, course materials and assessments, and communicating with professors. The report explains how students with different disabilities may be impacted in different ways; for example, blind students may struggle with interactive elements like chats and polling, while students with attention deficit disorder may struggle with online learning formats. The report concludes with the recommendation that students with disabilities speak up and share their needs and preferences with faculty and fellow students. University Professor Anjali Forber-Pratt urged students: 'Be the best self-advocate that you can be. All of us, as professors, as instructors, we want our students to succeed and we want to make sure their needs are met, but we don't know what we don't know.'