



## ACTION BRIEF #3



# BEYOND THE LOCKDOWNS: WOMEN, PEACE & SECURITY AND COVID-19 IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

## BEYOND LOCKDOWNS, TOWARDS RECOVERY: WHAT NEXT FOR WPS & COVID-19?

The peace and security implications of COVID-19 are being widely felt across Asia and the Pacific, with the introduction of emergency powers and security-driven measures to stem the pandemic. These approaches, designed with limited input from women and implemented often without their participation, have resulted in negative outcomes for peace and security, as well as for the human rights of women and girls.

A global call for ceasefires was heeded in many conflicts, providing temporary reprieve and allowing for COVID-19 relief responses. However, as hostilities have resumed, the vulnerability and marginalization of women and girls, already at risk in fragile and conflict settings, have been compounded. In states where social cohesion was already weak, militarized responses to COVID-19 have undermined women's peacebuilding efforts, fuelled discrimination and xenophobia, driven misogynistic and anti-feminist rhetoric online, and triggered unrest.

Protection mechanisms are failing women and girls, with a surge in gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, inequitable access to healthcare services, and disproportionate economic shocks for women, as a result of the pandemic.

The work of women's civil society organizations has been severely restricted as COVID-19 measures render many organizations only partially operational, while others are forced to cease operations altogether due to a lack of resources or the ability to access women and girls.

As the world enters the next phase of COVID-19 and states start to ease lockdowns and outline recovery plans, measures put into place now are likely to set the direction for long-term recovery. As such, it is vital that women are able to meaningfully shape and benefit from recovery efforts.

The women, peace and security (WPS) agenda provides a framework through which to elevate women's participation and priorities to create sustainable recovery that is gender-inclusive and promotes peaceful societies.

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**[COVID-19 is] a human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis. We see the disproportionate effects on certain communities, the rise of hate speech, the targeting of vulnerable groups, and the risks of heavy-handed security responses undermining the health response.**

UN Secretary-General  
*Human Rights and COVID-19  
Response and Recovery, 23 April 2020*

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This is the third action brief on WPS & COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific. The previous briefs on militarisation and cyber security can be found on the UN Women Asia Pacific website: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications>

## PEACE & SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS

### GLOBAL CALL FOR CEASEFIRES

As COVID-19 threatens conflict and fragile areas, the UN Secretary-General has called for an immediate global ceasefire<sup>i</sup>. Many responded positively, including armed groups in the region such as the Arakan Army and Brotherhood Alliance in Myanmar, the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army (CPP-NPA), and the West Papua National Liberation Army. However, since an initial drop in hostilities, fighting has resumed in those and other areas, and in some instances, has intensified.

Caught in the nexus between violent conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls in conflict and fragile settings are suffering disproportionately as existing inequalities are magnified, social networks break down, and access to life-saving healthcare, food and shelter are restricted. In addition, displacement is increasing, and vulnerability to gender-based violence and exploitation, including trafficking, is heightened. For women and girls with intersecting vulnerabilities, including women and girls with disabilities, a combination of COVID-19 and conflict holds an even bigger threat to their survival.

Against a backdrop of spikes in COVID-19 cases, **Afghanistan** saw an increase in civilian casualties, with women and children disproportionately affected. Signalling earlier commitments to women's participation in peace initiatives, the government announced a 21-member negotiating team, inclusive of five women, however, falling short of 30 percent recommended for meaningful influence and well below gender parity.

In **Myanmar**, clashes between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army intensified resulting in civilian casualties, the majority being women and children. The clashes also caused further displacement and made it difficult for humanitarian actors to access communities. In Rakhine State, an attack against a marked vehicle of the World Health Organization (WHO) transporting COVID-19 test samples, resulted in the death of its driver.

The Government and CPP-NPA in the **Philippines** both declared unilateral ceasefires to facilitate COVID-19 responses. However, trust was quickly eroded with both citing ceasefire violations by the other, government security forces resuming operations, and President Duterte cancelling peace talks. In Mindanao, clashes between clans continue, leaving civilians injured and families displaced.

Despite ongoing conflicts, it is hoped that ceasefires prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic will translate into a longer-term cessation of hostilities, allowing for important confidence-building measures and peace initiatives to take hold.

Ceasefire agreements often provide the foundation on which broader peace talks and agreements are built. Women must therefore be able to fully, equally, and meaningfully participate in the design, implementation, and monitoring of ceasefire agreements. Furthermore, ceasefire agreements must contain gender provisions and not permit amnesties for violations of women's human rights.



Only 11% of ceasefire agreements include gender provisions.

Jana Krause et. al.  
International Interactions, 2018

### DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE & CYBER SECURITY

Data is a key tool in combatting and stemming the COVID-19 pandemic, with governments, technology companies, international organizations, and civil society alike announcing digital solutions. With the introduction of digital solutions has been the introduction of digital surveillance and contact tracing, often permitted through emergency powers introduced in response to the pandemic.

Digital surveillance and contact tracing, informed by electronic transaction data, mobile phone data, and surveillance camera footage, has been introduced in varying degrees by **South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia, Indonesia, China**, and others. This surveillance is often in the form of government-mandated mobile phone applications and websites that allow governments to monitor, geolocate, and track citizens' potential contact with COVID-19. In some instances, including in **Indonesia**, national intelligence agencies have been engaged to support digital surveillance.

An increase in digital surveillance and contact tracing carries with it an increased risk to the rights to privacy, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. This brings disproportionate risks for women civil society and human rights defenders, as well as sexual rights activists, women political opposition, religious and ethnic minorities, and journalists. All of whom rely on online privacy to assert their rights and protect the rights of others in the face of significant power imbalances and online harassment, and to gain access to critical information, including related to health and safety.<sup>ii</sup>

With less than 40 percent of states in the Asia-Pacific region having legislation to protect an individual's online data and privacy,<sup>iii</sup> the use of digital surveillance and contact tracing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, like other emergency powers, must be proportionate, neither arbitrary nor discriminatory, respectful of human dignity, subject to review, and limited in duration. Additionally, clarity on the use of data must be provided and the data destroyed after the pandemic, to prevent normalizing future surveillance.

To address the gendered impacts of digital surveillance and ensure women's human rights are protected, COVID-19 responses that include elements of data surveillance and contact tracing must be informed by women, provide for regular review and oversight by women civil society, and establish mechanisms for redress for violations of women's human rights enabled by digital surveillance and emergency powers.

### **DISCRIMINATION & HATE SPEECH**

COVID-19 is driving conflict. COVID-19-fuelled discrimination, hate speech and xenophobia are inflaming grievances, triggering unrest, and motivating attacks against minorities.

Individuals are using the pandemic to spread misogynistic and anti-feminist rhetoric online. Preliminary analysis of Google search trends in countries, including **India**, **Bangladesh**, and **Sri Lanka**, indicates an increase in searches for misogynistic speech during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Muslims in **India** are accused of intentionally spreading COVID-19 through "corona jihad" despite some 400 Indian scientists refuting claims that Muslims are responsible for transmission.<sup>iv</sup>

Several boats carrying **Rohingya** refugees were prevented from docking in **Malaysia** and blocked by **Bangladesh** from re-entering its waters amid concerns over COVID-19. A number of women and children have died on board, while many have suffered physical abuse at the hands of the traffickers and people smugglers. Some refugees were eventually taken to an isolated island in Bangladesh waters, where protection and humanitarian agencies have not yet been given access to assess their conditions. The refugees have thus far been denied permission to be relocated back to the camps to reunite with their families.

In states where peace remains fragile, such as the **Philippines** and **Nepal**, COVID-19 has disrupted social cohesion and inflamed grievances, which in some instances, has reignited violent clashes.

As the number of COVID-19 related deaths continue to rise, cremation is being mandated in some instance, in contravention of the burial rites and practices of some communities, and contrary to WHO guidelines.

In many contexts, women have successfully acted to provide early warning of eruptions of violence and prevent conflict. Women have access to different information than men and hold distinct insights into community behaviours. To address disruptions in social cohesion due to the pandemic and to prevent COVID-19 from driving conflict, women must be supported to build social cohesion in times of social distancing.

### **TREATMENT OF WOMEN PRISONERS**

COVID-19 has highlighted the dire situation of overcrowded prisons, and the potential for prisons and other custodial settings to become epicentres for COVID-19, prompting discussions about alternative sanctions.

Asia has the highest rates of women prisoners globally, with **China**, **Thailand**, **Myanmar**, and **Vietnam** recording that women constitute 15 percent and more of prison populations, compared to the global average of 4 percent.<sup>v</sup>

Many of these women are incarcerated for non-violent offences. In the **Philippines** and **Thailand**, 53 percent and 82 percent of women inmates, respectively, are incarcerated for drug-related offences. In **Afghanistan**, at least half of women in prison, and nearly all teenage girls in juvenile detention facilities, are charged with so-called "morality" crimes.<sup>vi</sup>

To mitigate the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons and detention centres, states are suspending short sentences or ordering early release of low-risk detainees.

Amid fears of COVID-19 in prisons, **Myanmar** announced its largest-ever prisoner amnesty to release some 25,000 prisoners, or more than a quarter of the total prison population. It is unclear how many of those released will be women.

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**Enhanced consideration should be given to resorting to non-custodial measures at all stages of the administration of criminal justice [...]. Priority should be given to alleged offenders and prisoners with low-risk profiles and caring responsibilities, with preference given to pregnant women and women with dependent children.**

*WHO, Preparedness, prevention and Preparedness, prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and other places of detention, 15 March 2020*

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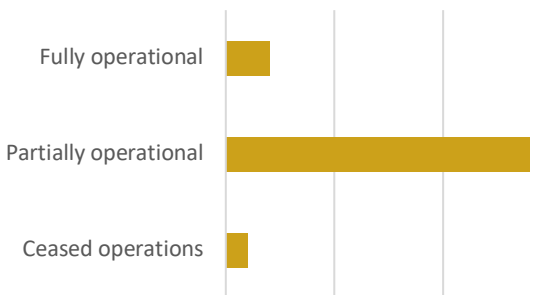


Given that most incarcerated women are sentenced for non-violent offences, non-custodial and community-based alternatives to imprisonment for women with low-risk profiles is an effective mechanism for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in prison populations.

**IMPACTS ON CIVIL SOCIETY WORKING ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY**

Civil society organizations working on WPS continue to undertake critical conflict resolution and peacebuilding work in fragile and conflict settings in the face of COVID-19, including repairing social breakdowns, monitoring women’s human rights, and negotiating militarized responses to COVID-19.

A rapid response assessment survey of the impact of COVID-19 on WPS civil society organizations in the region conducted by UN Women found that COVID-19 was affecting their ability to deliver services, with the majority of organizations only partially operational. The reasons cited for the impact included: restrictions on movement and activities; lack of access to communities and women; cancellation or delay of collaboration with donors, governments, and partners; redirection of funding to COVID-19 responses; and, a shift towards digital-only service delivery.



Positively, over half of respondent civil society organizations noted that they had been able to directly participate in shaping the COVID-19 response and recovery planning, including through: consultations with authorities to develop response plans; conducting COVID-19 impact assessments and analysis in coordination with working groups and government task forces; and, collaborating with national institutions, including justice institutions. Where organizations were unable to participate, they indirectly influenced COVID-19 processes by lobbying local members of parliament and filing petitions with courts.

Nearly all utilized technology to reach out to women but noted that while technology-based platforms had provided an alternative mechanism during the pandemic, it also highlighted the marginalization and vulnerability of women and girls who lack access to information communication technologies or are not digitally literate. As such, it is important that organizations are able to resume in-person support, services and activities, in addition to enhanced digital services.

As the need for the WPS civil society grows in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, support for WPS civil society organizations must also grow. Faced with uncertain operating environments, increased demand, reduced resources, and navigating new COVID-19 militarized contexts, WPS civil society organizations are essential to ensuring just and peaceful societies where the rights of women and girls are promoted and protected.

**WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION & LEADERSHIP**

Women’s participation and leadership are essential to ensuring that COVID-19 response and recovery is inclusive, effective and sustainable. When women participate, the needs and priorities of women and girls affected, and the socio-economic impacts on communities on a whole, are better addressed.

Women leaders are demonstrating their skills, knowledge and networks to effectively lead on COVID-19. Women who head governments, including in **Taiwan** and **New Zealand**, are being recognized for rapidly putting in place preventive measures and using compassionate and transparent fact-based communications, supported by public health professionals, to communicate difficult messages. Their successful leadership style has been described as more collective than individual, more collaborative than competitive, more coaching than commanding.

Women’s participation is critical at all levels and across all COVID-19 response and recovery planning, including in economic recovery planning. A growing number of fragile and conflict-affected states in the region are seeking support from international financial institutions for weakened economies, including **Afghanistan**, **Pakistan**, **the Maldives**, and **Samoa**. Fiscal and monetary policies to stimulate the economy and employment are crucial but often fail to account for the economic shocks to women or build their resilience. This is particularly crucial for women in fragile and conflict settings, who face dire economic consequences as a result of COVID-19 and are vulnerable to negative coping mechanisms, such as forced, early and child marriage, trafficking, and exploitation.

With more than 2 billion people living in countries where parliaments have been suspended or restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling women's participation in COVID-19 response and recovery, including through government and non-government institutions and civil society, must be a priority. Furthermore, additional efforts should be made to support the participation of women in conflict and fragile settings who face additional obstacles to participating in decision-making. Women are powerful agents of change in their communities. Increasing their participation will ensure that COVID-19 responses are equitable, sustainable, and future-proof.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

For all actors responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific:

1. Women and gender-equality experts must participate in the design, implementation, and monitoring of ceasefire agreements. Ceasefire agreements must contain gender provisions, and not permit amnesties for violations of women's human rights.
2. Emergency powers, including digital surveillance, must be designed with the participation of women, and provide for regular review and oversight by women civil society, as well as include avenues for redress for violations of women's human rights enabled by emergency powers and digital surveillance.
3. Women's peacebuilding expertise should be leveraged, and women supported to lead in repairing social breakdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, building community resilience, and creating a culture of gender equality.
4. Non-custodial and community-based alternatives to imprisonment for women with low-risk profiles should be prioritized as an effective mechanism for reducing and mitigating COVID-19 in prison populations, including for women human rights defenders.
5. Operational and financial support to women civil society, including women-led civil society organizations and women human rights defenders, must be increased, and the space for women-led civic engagement on COVID-19 protected.
6. Women's participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making should be facilitated to ensure COVID-19 recovery is gender-inclusive and addresses longstanding structural inequalities to build back more gender equal societies. Additional support should be afforded to women in conflict and fragile settings.

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**“This is an opportunity to build back better, stronger, resilient and equal societies. It is a time for bold prioritization.”**

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka  
UN Women Executive Director

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<sup>i</sup> [UN Call for Global Ceasefire, 3 April 2020](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [ISHR, \*Protect Women Human Rights Defenders Right to Privacy\*](#).

<sup>iii</sup> [UNCTAD Data Tracker \(2020\)](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [Indian Scientists are fighting fake news about COVID-19, 14 April 2020](#)

<sup>v</sup> [Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 4th edition \(2017\)](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [International Drug Policy Consortium, March 2019](#)