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GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF COVID-19 IN THE PHILIPPINES

Photo: UN Women/Louie Pacardo

GENDER SNAPSHOT: JUNE - JULY 2020 3RD EDITION

The Philippines remains gravely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with the highest number of COVID-19 cases in South East Asia, and the second highest number of COVID-19 related deaths, behind Indonesia.¹ Community quarantine measures continue to be enforced as the Philippines records the largest number of COVID-19 cases daily in the region.

Responding to a spike in COVID-19 cases in July, the Philippines introduced further area-specific lockdowns and suspended its prior decision to allow non-essential outbound international travel. Amid soaring infection and death rates, house-to-house searches and transfers of persons testing positive to COVID-19 to isolation facilities are being undertaken by local authorities, with the support of the police. There are growing calls for arrests of individuals who do not wear face masks in public places, in addition to existing law enforcement measures for quarantine violations.

This third Gender Snapshot captures the situation of women and girls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines from the period of June to July.

EMERGING IMPACTS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

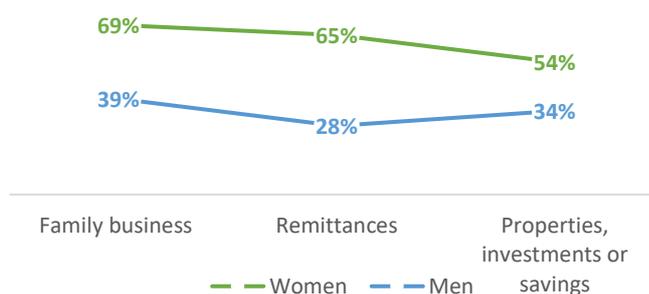
The COVID-19 pandemic is having distinct gendered impacts in the Philippines, affecting the agency, safety and security of women and girls, and threatening gains in gender equality and the empowerment of women.

A recent report by UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacificⁱⁱ unpacked the effects of the pandemic on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific. In relation to the Philippines, the report highlighted two alarming trends requiring urgent action, including that women's

economic resources are quickly being depleted, and women's mental and physical health and wellbeing are suffering.

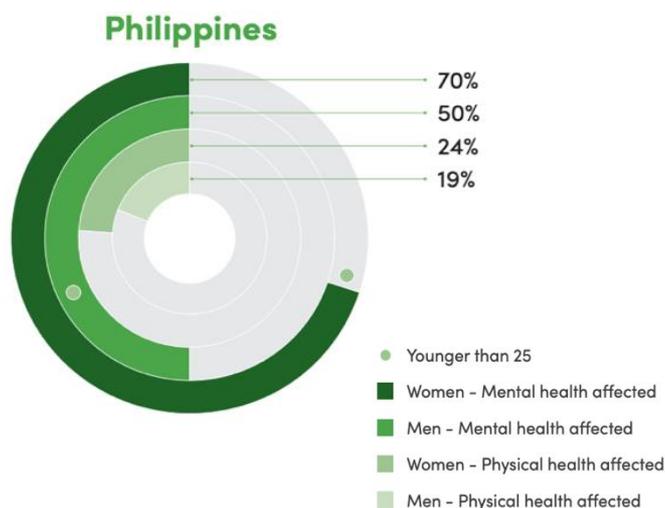
Overall, women reported greater decreases in resources since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to men. Almost 70 per cent of women noted a decrease from family businesses, while 65 per cent noted a decrease in remittances. Confirming earlier warnings that women were less likely to be able to weather the economic shocks of the pandemic, 54 per cent of women reported decreases in resources related to properties, investments or savings.

Graph 1: Proportion of people who noted decreases in resources since the start of COVID-19 (%)ⁱⁱⁱ



The pandemic has also disproportionately affected women's mental and physical health and wellbeing. The majority of women (70 per cent) reported that their mental and emotional health had deteriorated, including by increased stress and anxiety related to the pandemic. A quarter of women reported that their physical health had been impacted resulting in illness. As lockdowns and quarantine measures continue, women face reduced access to mental and physical health professionals, services, and support networks, including support through informal networks, such as friends, family, and colleagues.

Graph 2: Proportion of people whose mental and physical health were affected since the start of COVID-19 (%)^{iv}



Further impacting women and limiting their agency is that the majority of grocery shopping permits in the Philippines are granted to men,^v confining women at home, and likely further negatively impacting their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

In the context of confinement, access to technologies can play a crucial role in enabling remote access to goods and services and providing information to cope with physical and mental health concerns related to COVID-19. Women in the Philippines have a high rate of mobile phone access and usage (89 per cent, compared to 95 per cent of men), which can be leveraged in this regard.^{vi}

WHEN HOME IS NOT A SAFE SPACE

As of June, the Philippine National Police recorded 1,945 cases of violence against women and 1,745 cases of violence against children, since the implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine in March.^{vii} Women's human rights groups have noted that enforced "militarized" lockdowns have contributed to the increase in cases of violence against women, while simultaneously reducing access to social protection.^{viii}

In July, the National Bureau of Investigation arrested a couple for online sexual exploitation of four children, aged two to eight years old.^{ix} Two were the children of the male suspect, while two were related to the female suspect. The rescued children were brought to a government shelter where they received trauma-informed interventions. During lockdowns and quarantine measures, there has been an increase in people attempting to access websites hosting illegal sexual exploitation and abuse material.

LGBTIQ AT RISK

In June, at least 20 members of the LGBTIQ community were arrested during a peaceful Pride event, protesting the Anti-Terrorism Bill. Human rights groups have warned that, if adopted, the Bill could derail critical legal protections and pave the way for the broad designation of organisations and individuals as terrorists.^x

Protesters were said to have been following social distancing protocols and wearing face masks, and there were no allegations of violent actions by the protesters. Protestors arrested were subsequently charged under the Public Assembly Act (1985) and the Law on Reporting of Communicable Diseases (2019). Three of the arrested were released on the basis of being minors.

#HijaAko Movement and #MCHSDoBetter: online campaigns against rape culture and sexual abuse

In June, a local police station posted on Facebook that women should dress modestly to avoid getting harassed. The post took Philippine social media by storm. In response, Frankie Pangilinan, daughter of a prominent politician and actress, tweeted, "Stop teaching girls how to dress; teach people not to rape." Her statement was countered by a male TV host, "Hija, a rapist or a juvenile sex offender's desire to commit a crime will always be there. All they need is an opportunity, when to commit the crime. Sexy ladies, careful with the way you dress up! You are inviting the beast." *Hija*, Spanish for daughter, is also a term used in the Philippines by someone older to address younger women, often considered of condescending tone.

Pangilinan refuted the TV host's comment to emphasize that rape culture is real and being normalized. She further pointed out that one's way of dressing should not be deemed as an opportunity for sexual assault and that calling her "hija" does not belittle her point. After this exchange, the hashtag #HijaAko emerged and sparked a movement of women speaking against rape culture, and sharing their personal stories of harassment, abuse and trauma on social media.

Following the #HijaAko movement, a former student of Miriam College recounted her experience on social media of being sexually harassed by a male teacher as he spoke of fantasies about his young female students. After her post, other students and alumni used #MCHSDoBetter to share their own stories of sexual harassment, assault and paedophilia from teachers within the school. Students and alumni from other educational institutions likewise posted similar stories, opening the floodgates of complaints and appeals to revisit and enforce laws and policies on child protection and sexual harassment in campus settings.

The use of public health restrictions and emergency powers to curtail human rights, including freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, has been widely criticized by women civil society organisations and human rights groups across the Asia Pacific region.

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a mental, emotional, and financial toll on Filipina migrant workers, both in the Philippines and abroad. In April, a Filipina migrant worker, who had recently returned from Kuwait, hung herself in a quarantine facility. In May, a Filipina domestic worker jumped to her death while staying in a migrant shelter in Beirut, Lebanon. In June, a Filipina crew member on a Royal Caribbean ship was found dead in her cabin; she was said to have committed suicide after months of waiting for a repatriation flight to the Philippines.^{xi}

The primary source of depression and anxiety for many migrant workers is reported as being initially connected with repatriation issues, as they wait for news about the schedule of their journey home and seeing their families again. The repatriation process is growing increasingly difficult with restrictions at points of entry, and suspension of air, water, and land travel. In addition, there is often a long wait for COVID-19 test results, which the Department of Health attributes to encoding issues and the slow pace of testing.^{xii}

As of early July, 68,440 overseas Filipino workers (OFW) have been repatriated - 51% were sea-based and 49% land-based.^{xiii} The Department of Labor and Employment has reported that around 200,000 Filipino migrant workers, mostly in the US and Europe, have declined to return despite losing their employment due to the pandemic or contracting COVID-19 overseas.

From the period of April to June, UN Women, led by its civil society partners, Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) and Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB), conducted a rapid gender assessment among 138 returning migrants, under the Safe and Fair Programme of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to End Violence against Women and Girls. The rapid gender assessment found that the primary concern of women migrant workers is loss of employment and unpaid wages, as well as discrimination and stigma resulting from being perceived as "carriers of the virus."

The rapid gender assessment also highlighted significant changes in the gender roles and responsibilities among the respondents during the pandemic. Of the men interviewed, up to 26% now spend over five hours undertaking domestic work compared to before the lockdown. A higher percentage of women, however, up to 53%, remain responsible for domestic work, finding it even harder to find or undertake paid work, and have enough time for rest. For women migrant domestic workers, the number of hours of domestic work has increased as more family members stay within the homes of their

employers. Despite an increase in work, wages remain stagnant, and in some instances, unpaid.

OFW and returning migrants rely on the internet and television as their primary sources of information. Filipino migrant workers reported television and the barangay as their main source of information once repatriated. A significant number of the respondents reported being unaware of sexual and reproductive health care services, while a mere 10% of women and 3% of men reported having continuous access to reproductive health care services, despite knowledge that barangay centers and public hospitals are open. More women respondents (35%) noted difficulties in accessing sexual and reproductive health supplies, such as contraception, than men (14%).

Roughly half of active OFW respondents received aid, while around 90% of returning migrants received aid during the reporting period. However, some respondents (up to 50%) expressed dissatisfaction with the aid they received. A number of OFW respondents reported being unemployed, stranded overseas, and/or attempting to return to the Philippines.

Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau

The Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB), in partnership with UN Women, under the Safe and Fair Programme, is supporting communities to address issues facing Filipino migrant workers.

A rapid assessment in Talisay City conducted April to May highlighted that women migrant workers are struggling to find alternative sources of income due to community quarantines with some resorting to taking out loans to pay for basic necessities. Migrant workers and their families are not eligible for the Social Amelioration Program cash subsidy. Information on the Department of Labor and Employment's AKAP program for financial assistance for returning overseas Filipino workers (OFW), has not reached women migrant workers.

Women migrant workers in United Arab Emirates who have been laid off are stranded and under lockdown in company-provided accommodation but uncertain when the subsidised accommodation will cease. Others cannot send remittances to their families due to harsh penalties for violating quarantine protocols (a fine of 500,000 to one million dirhams and a five-year jail time).

In general, OFW reported a lack reliable information on how to access support from the Philippine Government during the pandemic. The WLB facilitated delivery of relief packages to some Filipino women migrant workers in Dubai through its partner NGOs and networks in the Philippines.

Some of the women respondents noted taking up farming, or setting up their own businesses at home or online. More women OFWs also became involved in community work, such as migrant worker federations, domestic worker alliances, and church groups, than their male counterparts. More channels, however, are needed to inform OFWs and returnees that families of distressed OFWs can qualify for the Social Amelioration Program (SAP).

IMPACT ON WOMEN LED MICRO, SMALL, & MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES

Results of an online survey conducted by UN Women WeEmpowerAsia validated earlier surveys and rapid assessment findings that women-led and owned micro, small, and medium-scale enterprises have been negatively affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of respondents reported difficulty in product distribution and service offering, as well as increased responsibility for unpaid care duties.

Looking at the support women need to build back and operate better, three areas were highlighted by respondents: 1. Access to information, including available support for businesses, as well as health and safety protocols; 2. Re-skilling for other employment and/or business opportunities, especially for those who have lost their jobs or had to recalibrate their businesses; and, 3. Access to finance, preferably through grants and loans with flexible terms. In addition, respondents indicated a need for ICT-related facilities to enable work from home schemes, as well as physical and mental health support programs.

Half of investor respondents indicated that they do not discriminate, nor ask if a business is women-led or owned, as long as the owner demonstrates business acumen. A quarter of investors, however, confirmed that it is harder for women entrepreneurs to access investments compared to their male counterparts. All investor respondents noted that it is more difficult to invest in smaller enterprises because investment criteria is often focused on financial returns, limiting access of women micro and small businesses to additional support to rebuild or restart their businesses.

At least 63% of all respondents would be interested to learn more about how to integrate gender equality, diversity, and inclusivity in their daily business activities such as expanding relationships with women-owned businesses in the value chain and when contracting vendors; responsible marketing that would not exacerbate gender stereotypes; product development that considers the needs of both women and men as consumers; and corporate social responsibility activities that embed a gender approach.

JUSTICE DELAYED IS JUSTICE DENIED

From March to June, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology released more than 15,000 persons deprived of liberty, following the earlier directive of the Supreme Court to release inmates detained longer than their minimum penalty and awaiting trial because of a lack of witnesses^{xiv}. This directive is in attempt to decongest jails given the threat of COVID-19 outbreaks in high density confinement. As of June, there were 783 COVID-19 cases in various detention centers all over the country.

Despite this, police continue to arrest quarantine violators, with 57,177 individuals charged with quarantine violation, as of June, and 2,692 still in detention.^{xv} There are more arrests than inquests per day, prolonging police custody without formal court charges. Under Article 125 of the Revised Penal Code, arrested individuals without warrant must be brought to court within 12 to 36 hours, depending on the gravity of the offense. The Supreme Court issued in July a directive suspending the issuance of commitment orders to the facilities of the BJMP until the end of August.

In July, a female inmate gave birth at a hospital and returned to the Manila City Jail two days later.^{xvi} The inmate petitioned to either stay at the hospital or at a prison nursery where she would be provided with lactation facilities - her petition was included with all other vulnerable inmates awaiting release. Until this time, there is no decision made by the Supreme Court on the release of inmates for humanitarian reasons.

In the northern part of the Philippines, a 15-year old girl was allegedly murdered by two members of the Philippine National Police, after she filed a complaint against the same police officers alleging they had raped her and her 18-year old cousin after arresting them for violating curfew.^{xvii} Days after filing the complaint, the girl was shot and killed on her way home. The town's police chief and the head of the Women and Children Protection Desk were relieved from their posts, while the barangay chief was sued for obstruction of justice for enticing the victims to drop the complaint against the police officers who allegedly raped them. Officers alleged to have committed the crimes have been charged with raped and murder.

In late July, the Bureau of Corrections reported that over the last seven months, a total of 476 inmates had died in custody, and that 21 inmates had died from COVID-19^{xviii}. Families of these inmates have criticized the lack of information on the situation in jails and the conditions of these inmates before succumbing to death^{xix}. Senate calls have been made for an investigation into the deaths given the lack of information regarding the cause of these deaths.

COMPLEX EMERGENCIES EXACERBATING THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN DISASTER-PRONE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS

As of late July, there are 448 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), with Lanao del Sur and Marawi City having the highest number of confirmed cases.

Almost 76,000 families, or 352,000 individuals, remain displaced in Mindanao, as of June 2020^{xx}. The majority of these displaced populations have been displaced for more than 180 days and concentrated in the areas of Lanao del Sur and Lanao de Norte due to the 2017 Marawi siege, and in Davao del Sur and Cotabato province due to natural disasters. In June alone, 4,129 or 17,482 individual were displaced in Mindanao due to armed conflict and clan feuds.

In July, Bangsamoro Women's Commission (BWC) and Member of Parliament, Hja. Bainon Karon, urged the BARMM Regional Government to ensure that all current and planned interventions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are gender-responsive and culture-sensitive and contribute towards women's empowerment and gender equality. While there are low numbers of women affected by the virus in the region, Karon highlighted that violence and armed conflict intensified the impact of the pandemic for women and girls. Populations living in evacuation camps suffer from poor conditions, and continue to face security issues.

With this, BWC specifically called for the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data as the basis for gender-sensitive and culture-sensitive responses, as well as designing policies and programmes for gender-inclusive recovery; ensuring inclusive processes and mechanisms by engaging women in COVID-19 interventions, tapping their potential beyond their role as home managers; supporting women's home-based livelihoods and encouraging shared care work; empowering women to use ICT technology towards greater access to life-saving information and resources and dissipating hate messages and tensions at the community level; adapting women's knowledge in disaster prevention and resilience in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; deploying women police officers in patrols and checkpoints to mitigate, if not eliminate, sexual harassment in public spaces and domestic violence; and, establishing women's desks alongside COVID-19 testing centers to facilitate reporting and access to gender-sensitive support systems, among others.

Mobilizing Assistance for Recovery in Emergency (MARE)

At the start of the community quarantines, Bangsamoro women were forced to close their microenterprises and reduce their livelihood projects. Profits and roll-out capital were spent on family consumption as relief from the government proved insufficient to support family needs. Prices of basic commodities skyrocketed while access to transportation and markets were shut down.

In May to June, UN Women supported The Moropreneur, Inc. (TMI), a social enterprise organization based in Cotabato City to support 10 cooperatives in the City and Maguindanao province, through the Mobilizing Assistance for Recovery in Emergency (MARE) project.

An emergency cash assistance of Php 15,000 (approx. USD 300) was given to each cooperative, benefitting 316 women to resume their enterprises, such as food and handicrafts which were cut-off during the lockdown. Aside from capital, the women participated in online trainings on how to re-start their business during the pandemic and were given mobile data loads to access such trainings.

To support marketing of these women's cooperatives, TMI also created and managed an online platform, "Online Padyan" on Facebook. Some cooperatives also sold their products through home deliveries and during payouts of the Social Amelioration Program in communities. Food products earn about Php 500 every month, while handicrafts earn Php 700 and above.

CALL TO ACTION

All actors undertaking COVID-19 response and recovery in the Philippines are called upon to:

- ✓ Ensure collection and analysis of sex, age, disability, and ethnicity-disaggregated data to inform gender and culture-sensitive responses, as well as inclusive policies and programmes for recovery.
- ✓ Hold wide, participatory and inclusive consultations, and ensure institutionalized and meaningful participation of women's civil society organisations, especially those working in marginalized sectors, at all levels of planning, implementation, monitoring, and assessment of COVID-19 response and recovery.
- ✓ Establish a gender focal point in the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) to ensure that the gender-differentiated implications of the COVID-19 measures and protocols are taken into account.
- ✓ Elevate discussions on the situation of women and girls' at the policy level:
 - Gather qualitative and quantitative data to inform advocacy, policy reform and action in response to COVID-19 and long-term recovery and rehabilitation.
 - Raise awareness on, and recommend solutions to, issues affecting LGBTIQ, Moro, Indigenous, rural, and urban women and girls, migrant women, women deprived of liberty, women and girls with disabilities, women and girls in conflict or disaster situations, in-school and out-of-school youth, and others.
 - Engage with champions in support of women's human rights and non-discrimination.
- ✓ Use online platforms to:
 - Create or strengthen online support systems for women and girls to discuss, manage or address various issues, such as mental health and wellbeing, sexual and reproductive health, abuse and harassment, employment and livelihoods, among others. Ensure inclusivity for women and girls from diverse backgrounds in these spaces.
 - Provide tools for women to 'build back better', including support for re-skilling for employment and increasing access to support women entrepreneurs, as well as capacity building on managing businesses.
 - Share resources, such as referral networks for social and legal services, information on laws and human rights, and prevention/reporting of and protection from violence against women, such as sexual abuse and harassment online or offline.
- ✓ Advocate for gender-sensitive treatment of women deprived of liberty, particularly detainees who are pregnant or new mothers. Support jail decongestion, facilitate timely legal processes, and provide public information on the situation in prisons.
- ✓ Intensify the presence and the role of women members of the security sector to mitigate, if not eliminate, violence against women, including online sexual exploitation, and sexual harassment in public spaces, especially at the local level.
 - Enforce existing mandates, such as the Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act, Safe Spaces Act, Cybercrime Prevention Act, Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, among others.

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- vi Unlocking the Lockdown: The Gendered Effects of COVID-19 on Achieving the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific, UN Women ROAP, July 2020.
- vii <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1288275/over-3600-cases-of-violence-against-women-children-reported-since-lockdown-duterte-report>
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