



MEKONG COVID-19 RAPID GENDER ANALYSIS

The state of women and COVID-19 in the Mekong region

COVID-19 has created unprecedented health, economic, and social impacts all over the world. As of 31 August 2020, there have been **25,405,845 confirmed cases globally, and a total of 849,389 deaths**. In the Mekong region, there have been 5,612 cases, with 274 in Cambodia, 22 in Lao PDR, 882 in Myanmar, 3,390 in Thailand and 1,044 in Viet Nam. In addition to health effects and deaths caused by the virus, the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 and prevention measures taken by governments are far reaching and long-lasting, especially in the context of climate change and natural disasters in the region.

For the Mekong region, COVID-19 presents special challenges for high-risk populations, including the many migrant workers, garment industry workers, indigenous and ethnic minorities, refugees, internally displaced peoples, migrants, urban slum-dwellers, and people working in the informal sector, such as female sex workers. As with all crises, women and children are disproportionately affected. COVID-19 exacerbates the challenges at-risk populations face and makes it even harder for women to access the support services they need in times of crisis.

“I was informed by the factory to take leave without pay by April 30th afterward until the factory get new order. We do not know when we can come back.”

-Female Garment Worker,
Viet Nam

This Rapid Gender Analysis draws from 301 interviews (including 126 women), secondary data sources, and CARE's research to understand women's specific challenges in the Mekong region during the pandemic.

Key Findings

- **Women's employment is deteriorating more rapidly than men's.** Across the Mekong region, women are much more likely to be in the informal sector with few employment protections. They are less likely to be in secure jobs, and struggle to access safety nets. 94 per cent of the women in Cambodia and 87 per cent of those in Myanmar work in the informal sector, where jobs are increasingly being lost and where they do not qualify for benefits and social protection. 75 per cent of garment factory workers in the region are women. 78 per cent of garment workers in Viet Nam and 90 per cent in Lao PDR have had their jobs, hours, or incomes cut. 24.5 million women in the tourism sector are at risk of losing their jobs in Southeast Asia. These women tend to be employed in lower-skilled jobs that pay lower wages, while men hold more managerial positions in government and private tourism enterprises.
- **People are struggling to meet basic needs.** People across the region are reporting they have to eat fewer meals or less nutritious food. They cannot obtain clean water, especially with current drought conditions. Many people have already used all of their savings, are going into debt, and are losing the savings organisations or groups that helped them cope.
- **Healthcare is a major challenge.** 84 per cent of women, compared to 79 per cent of men, are reporting a deterioration in their mental health. Because women are less mobile and rely heavily on public transportation that is now disrupted, they also have less access to health services, including maternal health, family planning, and routine care. Access constraints will likely result in increases in unwanted pregnancies and maternal mortality.
- **Migration patterns that drove economic growth are reversing - creating struggles at home.** More than 260,000 migrant workers have left Thailand to return to their home countries. Many urban workers are returning home to rural areas as they lose their jobs. This is reducing remittance income for families and puts additional pressure on finding food and space for returned workers and has led to an increase in domestic abuse.
- **Regional migration is increasingly dangerous.** Quarantine facilities for migrants returning have substandard living conditions, overcrowding, minimal water and sanitation facilities, lack of dignity for women and girls, and child protection issues. Government restrictions have affected the provision of services, limiting access to health and humanitarian workers, and exacerbating the multiple gender-based barriers faced by refugee women, such as exclusion, discrimination and GBV.
- **Service delivery is not prioritising the needs of women, girls or at-risk groups.** Governments are rolling out safety nets, but they rarely target women, people with disabilities, or migrants. 71 per cent of women's rights organisations that offered support services scaled back delivery as early as April, and 12 per cent have closed altogether.

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- **Gender-based violence is rising.** Service providers responding to GBV report that cases have as much as doubled. Child marriage – already between 11 to 35 per cent – is likely to rise.
 - **Stigma and tensions are increasing.** Nearly every interview pointed to increasing tensions, violence, and stigma. Migrants returning home especially are facing stigma and fear, as are ethnic minority groups.
 - **Women have less access to information.** The gender digital divide is growing, where women are 28 per cent less likely to own a phone than men in Myanmar, and 11 per cent in Lao PDR. In Cambodia, only 20 per cent of children can access remote education. This presents challenges for accessing information through the many digital channels that governments and services are now relying on to deliver information and services and disproportionately impacts women, girls, at-risk groups and ethnic minorities.
 - **Women’s care burden is exceptionally high.** Across the region, women do the vast majority of household tasks – which increases during lockdown when more people are people staying at home. According to UN Women’s [Women COUNT](#), in Viet Nam, women do 12.7 more hours of unpaid work at home a week than men. In Lao PDR, women do 70-80 per cent of all tasks related to food. In Cambodia, women do 10 times the amount of unpaid care work men do.
 - **Women are locked out of decision-making.** Most leaders in the region are men. In Viet Nam, only four out of the 22 members of the government established COVID-19 task force are women. In Cambodia, it is two out of 27.
 - **Sex workers are at special risk.** The more than 332,000 female sex workers in the Mekong region are experiencing dramatic income loss as restrictions on movement keeps their customers at home. These sex workers have no access to safety nets or other income streams. Many of them depend on NGO-provided services for healthcare and protection which are generally considered non-essential in the COVID-19 crisis. If they go to new healthcare service providers, they often face discrimination.
 - **Progress made in girl’s education may be at-risk.** Factors such as the gender digital divide, increases in child marriage, gender roles increasing unpaid care work in the home, can prevent girls from continuing their education remotely in the short term and returning to school in the longer term.

Recommendations

- **Continue collecting appropriate data.** Collect and ensure availability of sex and age disaggregated data, as well as data and information based on disability and at-risk groups.
- **Help women build economic options for the future.** Develop mitigation strategies that specifically target the economic impact of the outbreak on diverse women and build women’s resilience.
- **Engage women as leaders.** Ensure diverse women are given opportunities to meaningfully engage in structures and processes established for COVID-19 prevention, mitigation and response.
- **Focus on migration and supporting migrants.** Ensure that border quarantine facilities are established and maintained according to best practice gender-sensitive

control measures.

- **Protection services responding to GBV and SRH are essential.** Prioritise services for protection and response to GBV, SRH and other protection issues in communities affected by COVID-19.
- **Inclusive communication.** Ensure information, messaging and community outreach on COVID-19 is inclusive and accessible and does not reinforce harmful gender stereotypes.
- **Prioritise girl's education.** Ensure school closures, where they exist, do not further disadvantage girls or at-risk populations such as children with disabilities, ethnic minorities and those from rural communities.
- **Take special care with vulnerable populations.** Prioritise services for protection for sex workers, people with disabilities and LGBTQTI+ people, and continue response measures to counter human trafficking.
- **Respect Rights.** Ensure all response strategies and measures to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those delivered by governments, respect human rights (including women's rights).