

A background image showing a pair of hands holding a piece of paper with the word 'EMPOWERMENT' written on it in capital letters. The entire image is overlaid with a purple tint.

# OUR RESPONSE

**AT THE NEXUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS, WOMEN, LGBTIQ, AND  
HEALTH IN THE COVID-19 HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

## INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the present situation that CoVid-19 has brought to the region, primarily with the disruption of health systems, we have also recognized the economic implications of CoVid-19, its implication to the educational systems, and the overall challenges this poses to civil society and human rights work. By definition, humanitarian responses are material and logistical assistance to alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity. This discussion has brought sexuality and gender at the fore of the humanitarian responses in relation to the ongoing CoVid-19 pandemic.

Sexual and gender minorities are already experiencing various levels of oppression and discrimination and these are further exacerbated during the CoVid-19 pandemic. This document provides some of the salient points from the dialogue organized by [Youth Voices Count \(YVC\)](#), the [United Nations Major Group on Children and Youth \(UN MGCY\)](#), [Asian Youth Peace Network \(AYPN\)](#), [Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism](#), and the [Medical Students Association of India \(MSAI\)](#) with the support of speakers from [ILGA Asia](#), [Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women \(ARROW\)](#), and [KABATAAN Partylist](#) last April 24, 2020. As governments continue to take urgent and aggressive actions to curb the spread of the virus and support the immediate needs of communities impacted by the lockdowns, this document also provides key recommendations highlighted during the dialogue.

## CONTEXT

Sai Jyothirmai Racherla from the Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW) provides a broad overview of how [COVID19 affects women and girls](#). She also discussed how a gender- and human rights-responsive humanitarian response looks like.

As reports from communities on the ground have evinced, governments are not able to put in place a [human rights-based and gender lens](#) to the current work being done, assuming a one-size-fits-all humanitarian response that is gender-less and age-less. This further exacerbates the overall discrimination and oppression experienced by gender and sexual minorities, particularly women and girls. The present situation has also increased [sexual and reproductive health \(SRH\)-specific](#) issues faced by women and girls. With over one billion women of reproductive age exposed to the pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region, it is imperative that a CoVid-19 humanitarian response adapts a gendered lens.

Other pertinent issues include gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, early and unintended pregnancies and similar [gender issues affecting young girls and women](#)

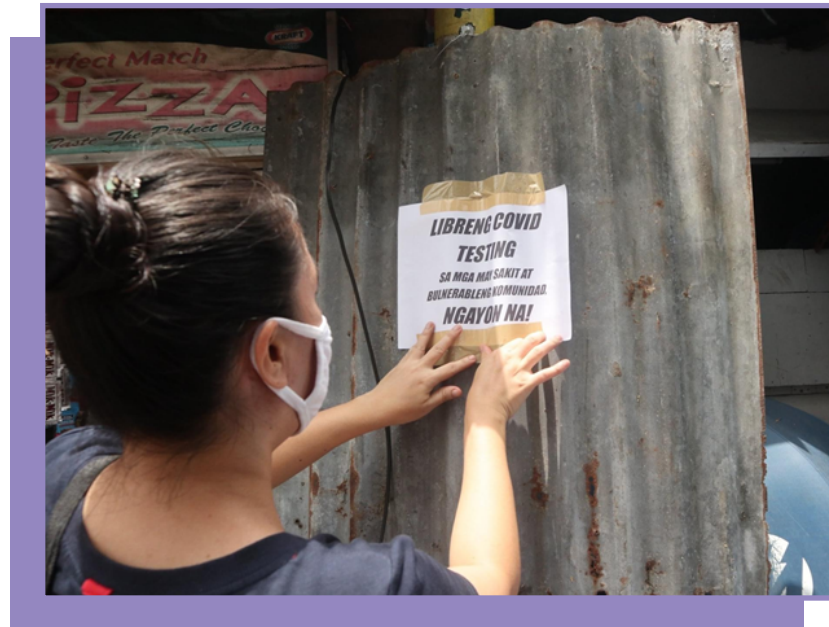
### What does a Human rights and Gender sensitive COVID19 response look like ?

- There is a need to systematically gather disaggregated outbreak-related data, to examine and report on the gender-specific health effects of COVID-19, both direct and indirect as well as on the gender-specific human rights impacts of COVID-19 and utilize this data in the formulation of responses. Disaggregated data across sex, age, disability, gender, ethnic origin, indigenous and immigration or residence status should inform not only health interventions but multi-sectoral interventions. Data protection should be key.
- Ensure the marginalised and vulnerable groups – especially adolescent and young women, sex workers, people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV), women with disabilities and women suffering from mental illness – have access to health services including SRH information and services, without stigma, discrimination and any form of violence.
- Integrate the prevention of violence against women and girls into COVID-19 response plans developed by Governments.

during the lockdown period. The lockdowns have also affected the supply chain of contraceptives, birth control pills, condoms, ART supplies, hormone replacement therapy, and other SRH medical supplies and services. This results in the scarcity of essential SRH medication in many parts of the region and the delay in the provision of medication like antiretroviral treatment to people living with HIV (PLHIV).

Sarah Elago, a congressperson from the Philippine Congress representing the youth constituency through the KABATAAN Partylist, highlighted the vital role that youth-led organizations play in the CoVid-19 response. She emphasizes the role of governments to ensure the safety and wellbeing of its citizens as enshrined in constitutions, legislations, and universal human rights instruments.

The [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) released a guide highlighting the fundamental role for the respect of human rights. Governments hold the power and resources to save lives, therefore, as principal duty-bearers, they should respect, protect, and fulfill the economic, social, cultural, civil, and political [rights in their ongoing CoVid-19 responses](#). Some of best practices include available women help desks and hotlines in community centers. The government's response must address the plight of the marginalized communities.



**Free COVID Testing Now.** *Kabataan Partylist joins youth organizations to establish collective kitchens in local communities. The activity was under the campaign Community's Urgent Response to End CoVid-19 or CURE COVID. People's initiatives to aid one another are of great importance but the key to solving this health crisis ultimately lies in our government to pursue medical solutions and provide comprehensive socio-economic programs.*

In terms of issues related to persons living in inadequate housing and homeless persons, the provision of emergency support is necessary especially in countries like the Philippines. In the National Capital Region alone, there are three million homeless individuals. Additionally, as there are regulations placed on certain rights like the freedom of assembly and right to movement and travel, this does not mean the arbitrary denial of our fundamental rights and freedoms. The struggle for equality continues, and the pandemic only encourages young people to continue finding meaningful ways to be engaged through digital spaces. She then points to accessibility of the internet as a right, as well as its security precautions.

Lieu Anh Vu from ILGA Asia notes that [LGBTIQ persons are disproportionately affected](#) by the impacts of CoVid-19 across the world. There is an unreported case of a young transwomen from Nepal who committed suicide because of harassment from her family which she experienced during quarantine. Similar cases of domestic violence and [discrimination against LGBTIQ persons](#) are happening in the Asia-Pacific region.

ILGA Asia has released a [statement on LGBTI youth in quarantine](#) during the CoVid-19 pandemic. The statement contains recommendations for governments, donors, and civil society to protect LGBTIQ young people and adolescents living with unsupportive families during quarantine, lockdown, or curfew.

In a lot of countries, relief support is provided to families in need. However, in many cases, provision of support requires having an identification card. Unfortunately, many [transgender and gender non-conforming individuals](#) have identification cards that do not reflect their gender identity or expression. This subjects them to discrimination and humiliation when they try to get support.

For human rights organizations in the region, they have transitioned to working online, this includes organizing meetings and dialogues via the internet. However, this opens up new issues such as capacity, accessibility, and [online safety](#). Building safe online and offline spaces requires more work especially for organizations [working with LGBTIQ communities](#).

Currently, there are many emergency support fundings available in the region. However, there is a problem on accessing funding for organizations that are not legally registered. Some emergency funding initiatives are also not accessible to groups that operate in the grassroots, do not fluently understand English, and operate in restrictive spaces.

Therefore organizations need to change the way that they work to adapt to the current situation and for the impending “new normal” after the CoVid-19.



*Transgender volunteers of the Khudol Initiative, a crowd funding initiative of Ya.All from India, to provide CoVid-19 support. A total of 90 transgender persons who runs beauty parlors and salons for their livelihood option were supported by the initiative. Due to CoVid-19, their shops have been shut so Ya.All assisted with food packages and some volunteered with the home delivery of the materials.*

## Recommendations

- Governments should provide timely and reliable information to ensure that their citizens are well aware of the present situation. Governments should also bear in mind that the cooperation of their citizens requires understanding. In order to do so, clear and consistent messaging on health measures should be practiced.
- Systematically gather outbreak-related data to examine and report on the gender-specific health effects of CoVid-19. Similarly, systematically gather data on gender-specific human rights impacts of CoVid-19. Disaggregated data should take into consideration sex, age, disability, gender, ethnic origin, among others to inform multi-sectoral humanitarian interventions, while ensuring proper data management and protection.
- Ensure that marginalized and vulnerable groups—especially sexual and gender minorities, including women, LGBTIQ, and PLHIV—are provided access to health services, including SRH information and services, without any form of stigma, discrimination and violence. Ensure access to treatment without discrimination, continued and safe access to support services including legal assistance for cases of domestic abuse, violence, and harassment, and expansion of social protection systems that recognize women and LGBTIQ as heads of households when being provided financial and social benefits.
- Integrate the prevention of violence against sexual and gender minorities in CoVid-19 response plans facilitated by governments. Put in place functional helplines and connect people who need essential SRH services. Key SRH services should be provided in relief packages and made accessible.
- Life-saving measures like travel bans, community quarantines, and lockdowns must be carried out in strict adherence to human rights standards and proportionate to a legitimate health goal.
- For marginalized groups who live in inadequate, informal, and temporary housing, and for those who are homeless, emergency housing can include free and appropriate accommodation. We also need to prevent additional people from being homeless when loss of income prevents households from paying rent by moratoriums or deferrals in mortgage payments.
- It is important to have coordinated efforts among all the civil society networks and community organizations in the region because LGBTIQ communities are significantly affected.
- Emergency funding grants / support led by non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and other agencies must be accessible to individuals and organizations most in need. The “do no harm” policy must be applied in the current responses that civil society is doing in the region.
- Recognize the role of youth-led non-governmental organizations in providing support to their communities. This means that the support being provided by such civil society actors should not be delayed nor prevented and in fact be part of decision-making bodies managing CoVid-19-related responses.
- Economic recovery of developing countries must be based on the national economy and aim not only for temporary fiscal and monetary response but for the financing for development.
- Responses to CoVid-19 must stem from scientific research and advice provided by health experts and epidemiologists to ensure that the responses are evidence-based and complementary to scientific data. Responses to the pandemic must therefore be geared towards alleviating the situation of marginalized communities rather than influenced by political gains.
- There must be a commitment among states to closely study and learn from each state’s best practices and then developing shared solutions that could eliminate the further spread of CoVid-19. There must be a long-term commitment to build the “new normal” free from violation of human rights, online and offline.