

## **Covid-19: Experts across Asia call for urgent measures to stop alarming increase in violence against women**

Geneva and Manila, 29 May 2020 - The members of the Women and Torture Working Group, a joint regional initiative of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the Philippines Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), express concern over the disproportionate impact Covid-19 is having on women. The social, political, and economic sectors, in which women already face inequalities, have all been adversely affected by the pandemic.

In many countries, families share limited room and homes have become particularly crowded spaces that exacerbate risks of increased domestic violence. In Bangladesh, a phone survey conducted by civil society organizations in April revealed that at least 1672 women experienced their first incidents of domestic violence during lockdown.

Judicial, police and health services, which often provide limited assistance to victims of gender-based violence even under normal circumstances, have now shifted their priorities as a result of the pandemic or are finding themselves unable to help. In several countries, such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, the police have repeatedly refused to register domestic violence complaints.

Nepal is also one of several Asian countries where fewer cases of domestic violence are being reported under lockdown. Rather than an actual decrease in the commission of violence, this is a reflection of women's inability to access help and report incidents under gender-blind lockdown measures. Abusers are exploiting women's inability to escape or obtain help, and civil society actors can no longer access victims. This creates significant challenges in the collection of accurate data.

In most countries, the pandemic shines a light on already inadequate systems of protection and assistance for victims of gender-based violence. Covid-19 has merely exposed these existing gaps and vulnerabilities across the region. In the Philippines for example, there is no national hotline that specifically caters for women victims of domestic violence. The dramatic increase of violence against women is often linked to the inability of national institutions to adequately address this issue. In most countries, women were already frequently reluctant to report torture and other forms of violence, including domestic violence, and refrain from seeking justice.

In light of the above, the members of the Women and Torture Working Group call on governments in Asia to:

§ Design and implement a gender-sensitive response to the pandemic and guarantee the right of women to live free from torture and other ill-treatment. The pandemic requires national authorities to acknowledge the differential impact of Covid-19 on women, and to implement rigorous measures that respond to the increase of gender-based violence.

§ Prioritize and integrate measures providing support to women victims of violence in national response plans to Covid-19. Measures include, but are not limited to:

- o Ensuring that all services of assistance for women victims of gender-based violence be considered essential services during the pandemic, and therefore remain accessible;
- o Addressing pre-existing gaps in gender-based violence response frameworks by developing all necessary services to ensure the protection of women;
- o Guaranteeing that shelters remain open and receive the resources necessary to adapt to quarantine needs;
- o Designating safe spaces for women to report incidents of abuse, such as in pharmacies, and ensuring that employees of such safe spaces are provided with a clear protocol to follow in these situations;
- o Adapting services to the pandemic situation by, for instance, moving assistance online;
- o Strengthening advocacy and communication campaigns about gender-based violence, including those targeting men. For instance, the hashtag #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic has proven useful in China.

§ Guarantee women's access to justice within the context of the pandemic, through measures that take into account current challenges as well as travel restrictions.

§ Guarantee the immediate release of women human rights activists and political prisoners, and ensure that they are not subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in custody.

§ Guarantee that women take an active and meaningful part in decision-making processes related to the pandemic and its aftermath.

In times of emergency, violence against women increases. Covid-19 is no different. Political leaders in Asia have now an opportunity to demonstrate that this cycle can be broken. We call on governments to abide by international standards and ensure that women live free of torture and other ill-treatment, including gender-based violence.

## **Signatories**

### **Members of the Women and Torture Working Group**

- Cristina Sevilla, Phillippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), Philippines
- Muna Baig, Association of Women for Awareness and Motivation (AWAM) and National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), Pakistan
- Habibun Nessa, Naripokkho, India
- Prachi Lohia, Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), India.
- Roshani Giri, Advocacy Forum, Nepal
- Sayed Hussain Anosh, Civil Society & Human Rights Network (CSHRN), Afghanistan
- Semkidmaa Choijil, Psychological Responsiveness NGO, Mongolia
- Shreen Saroor, Women's Action Network / Mannar Women's Development Federation Muslim Women Development Trust, Sri Lanka
- Sopheap Chak, Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), Cambodia
- World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), Switzerland

*The World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) is the main global coalition of NGOs fighting torture and ill-treatment, with over 200 members in more than 90 countries. Its international secretariat is based in Geneva, Switzerland.*

### **Media Contact:**

Iolanda Jaquemet  
World Organization Against Torture  
ij@omct.org mobile  
+41 79 539 4106