



**ACTION BRIEF**



# RAPID ASSESSMENT: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

May 2020

Photo: UN Women/Younghwa Choi

**Background**

Women's civil society organizations (CSOs) in Asia and the Pacific play a critical role in understanding, promoting and meeting the needs of women and girls on a variety of socioeconomic issues, including violence against women (VAW), migration, trafficking, health and displacement. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the accompanying emergency measures, the role of CSOs has become both more essential and more tenuous. In order to understand the impact of COVID-19 on their work and the challenges they are facing, UN Women carried out a rapid assessment in the first half of April 2020.

UN Women found that almost three quarters (71%) of CSO respondents' said that COVID-19 was affecting them somewhat or very negatively, and 12% have had to temporarily suspend activities altogether (Graph 2). At a time when families and individuals are experiencing high levels of economic and emotional pressure, the associated stress and uncertainty is exacerbating existing levels of violence against women and discrimination at a time when CSOs are less able to respond.

*"We have to minimize our staff presence and cannot mobilize our teams for remote areas."*

**What challenges are CSOs facing?**

CSOs reported a number of impacts to their activities, including the need to minimize staff presence, an inability to fully provide services for survivors of violence, shortage of funding and closing offices.

Only 15% of respondents said they were fully operational while 71% were operating at reduced levels and a further 12% were forced to temporarily suspend operations (Graph 3). Moreover, 61% of respondent organizations said COVID-19 is affecting women's access to legal services (Graph 4).

1. 100 CSOs from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam. The respondent organizations' areas of focus are available in the graph 1.

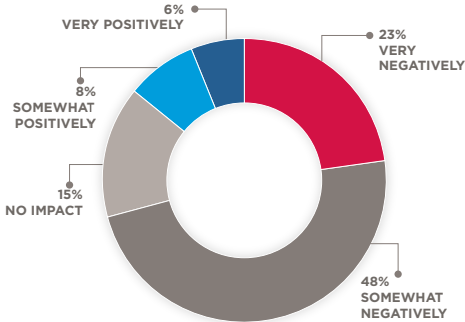
**Acronyms in the graphs**

- ASEAN  
Association of Southeast Asian Nations
- EVAW  
Ending Violence against Women
- WMW  
Women migrant workers

**GRAPH 1: AREAS OF FOCUS/TARGET GROUPS OF THE RESPONDENTS**



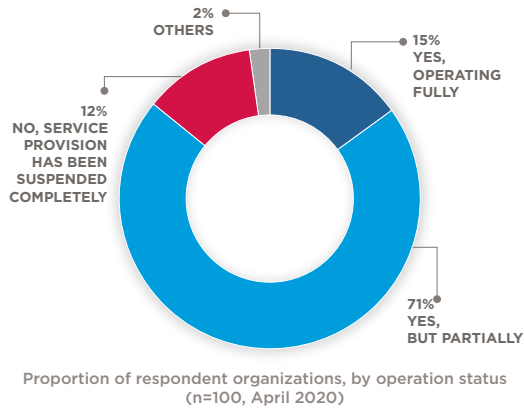
**GRAPH 2: THE SCALE OF THE COVID-19 IMPACT**



Number of respondent organizations that are affected by COVID-19, by scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive) (n=100 April 2020)

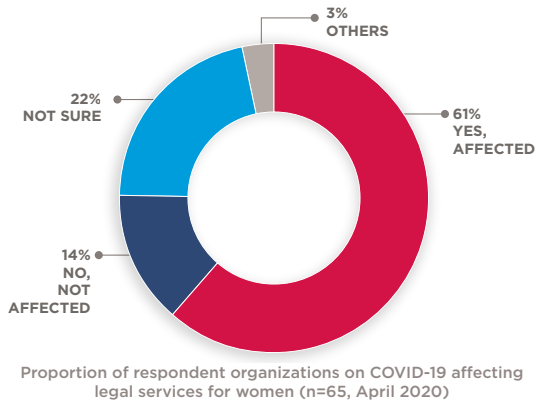
Despite the challenges that CSOs are facing due to the “isolation measures”, UN Women found that CSOs are continuing to provide services for women, especially referral services, emergency aid, psycho-social services, hotline and justice/legal services (Graph 5)

**GRAPH 3: BUSINESS CONTINUITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

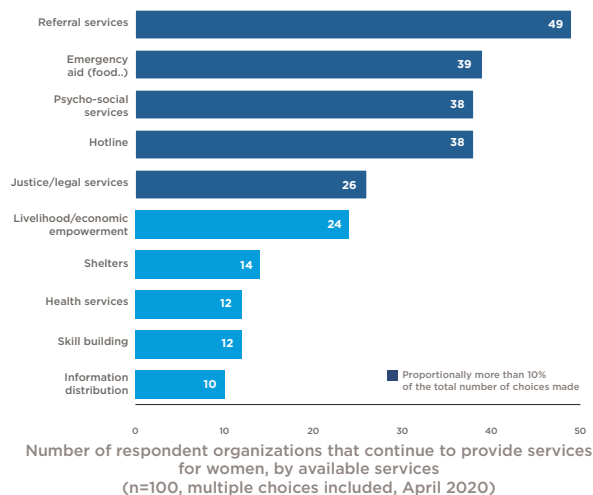


*“Local authorities hesitate to act even when a case is reported.”*

**GRAPH 4: THE IMPACT ON LEGAL SERVICES**



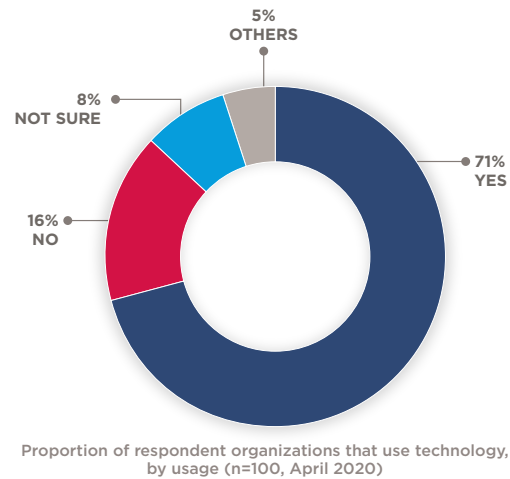
**GRAPH 5: AVAILABLE SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.**



## Using technology to reach out to target groups

CSOs affirm that using technology allows them to continue to reach women, saves on travel costs, can be fast and convenient and that their constituents may be more comfortable talking/texting over the phone compared to meeting in person. Challenges to using technology include limited access to the internet or poor connectivity, low response rates, lack of familiarity with platforms such as zoom or skype and lack of personal devices (Graph 6).

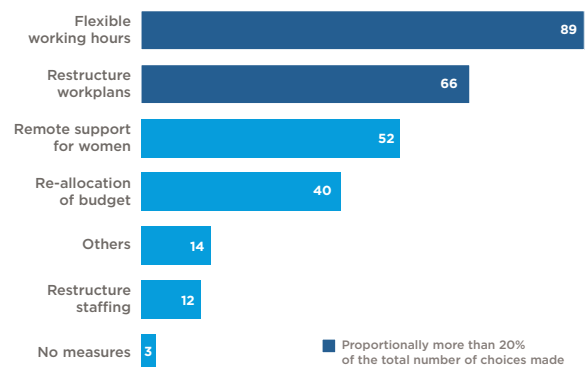
**GRAPH 6: USING TECHNOLOGY TO REACH OUT TO TARGET GROUPS**



## Mitigation measures

The majority of CSOs have implemented mitigation measures to adapt to the situation and maintain support to women. The most common measures are adjusting working hours to be more flexible and restructuring work plans in a way to respond to COVID-19 (Graph 7).

**GRAPH 7: COVID-19 MITIGATION MEASURES**

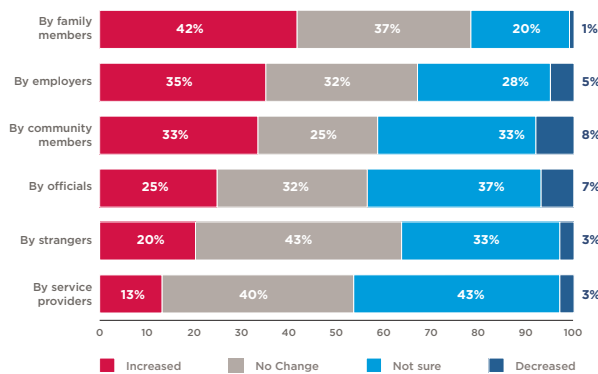


■ Proportionally more than 20% of the total number of choices made

## Observations on changes in violence against women

CSOs with a specific focus on ending violence against women reported observations on the increase in VAW, including anecdotal changes in the situation, with violence by family members representing the highest increase among respondents at 42%. (Graph 8). The lockdown and quarantine measures mean that millions of women are confined with their abusers, with limited options for seeking help and support.<sup>2</sup>

**GRAPH 8: OBSERVATIONS ON CHANGES IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (%)\***



\*The first decimal is rounded to the closest whole number.

Proportion of respondent organizations on reported number of violence against women, by perpetrator group (n=60, EVAW actors only, April 2020)

Women, girls, and vulnerable groups are at an increased risk of violence against women during public health outbreaks, such as COVID-19, due to pre-existing levels violence, exacerbated by limited input and control in decision making on a household's response and shifts in social safety nets, mobility and access to information/ services.<sup>3</sup>

## COVID-19 affecting women migrant workers

Tens of thousands of women migrant workers, often working in informal employment, have been forced to return to their home countries and are facing stigma and discrimination, in addition to the loss of income.<sup>4</sup>

While women and men migrant workers in the region strive to protect their livelihoods and their health, many women migrant workers are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and the economic and health impacts the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

CSOs working with migrant women report that nurses who have tested positive for COVID-19 have been fired from hospitals and domestic workers are losing their jobs because employers are working from home. CSOs also cite increased risk for women migrant workers at the hands of officials while travelling, noting that many are getting stuck at borders and that the current travel restrictions may exacerbate already difficult work or living conditions. Further discrimination follows women home with reports of migrant workers being refused entry to their home villages as they are seen as 'virus carriers'.

3. [GBV AoR \(2020\), Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action.](#)

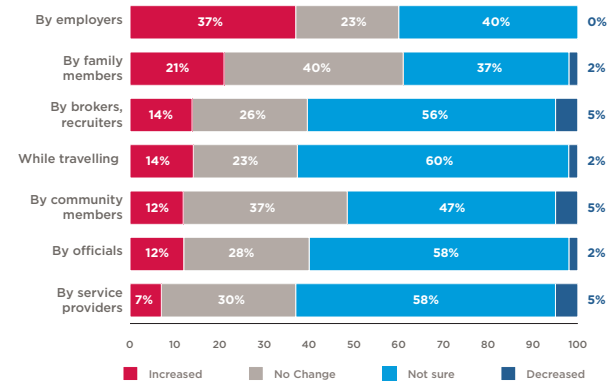
4. Ibid.

5. [ILO, UN Women \(2020\). Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers in ASEAN.](#)

## Observations on changes in violence against women migrant workers (VAWMW)

Women migrant workers represented the second highest area of focus after VAW for CSO respondents of the survey. Violence against women migrant workers was recorded separately from VAW in the general population and although information is still emerging about violence against migrant women, there has been a perceived increase. Employers are perceived as responsible for the highest increase at 37%, followed by family members (Graph 9).

**GRAPH 9: OBSERVATIONS ON CHANGES IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS (%)\***



\*The first decimal is rounded to the closest whole number.

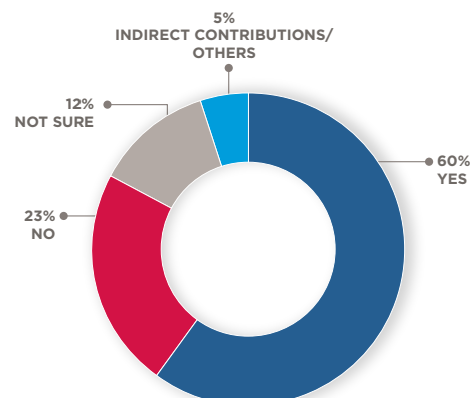
Proportion of respondent organizations on observed changes in violence against migrant women workers, by perpetrator group (n=43, WMW and Domestic Worker actors in ASEAN only, April 2020)

*"Women migrant workers are facing multiple levels of abuse, discrimination and access to social protection."*

## Participation in shaping governments' responses to COVID-19

In terms of engaging in national COVID-19 response efforts, a total of 60% of CSOs responded positively when asked about their coordination activities with their governments (Graph 10). CSOs were able to contribute by discussing with local authorities and developing a COVID-19 response plan, sharing information on migrant workers in different countries of destination, writing petitions and letters to the government and providing inputs through a coalition platform.

**GRAPH 10: CSO PARTICIPATION IN SHAPING THE GOVERNMENT COVID-19 RESPONSES**



Proportion of respondent organizations on having participated in shaping government's response to COVID-19, by Yes or No (n=100, April 2020)

## Recommendations for governments, aid agencies and donors

Women's organizations say that many women are facing greater violence while confined to their homes as part of coronavirus control measures, but they find regular support services closed or limited and in any case, no longer have the privacy or freedom to call for help.<sup>6</sup> The essential role of CSOs must be prioritized and funded during emergencies like COVID-19. This includes support for CSOs that are struggling with shortages of funds, staff and resources as they are overwhelmed by the number and needs of women seeking help during the pandemic.

- Governments can support CSO activities by declaring protection structures and services for survivors of VAW as life-saving and essential, including women and girls safe spaces, and ensure quality, availability and accessibility of services for survivors.<sup>7</sup>
- Aid agencies can contribute by ensuring that VAW response services are prioritized in country response plans to COVID and emergencies, protection mainstreaming and VAW risk mitigation measures are adopted and coordinated across all sectors of the COVID-19 response to ensure continuity of services as much as possible.<sup>8</sup> Violence against women is a feature of most emergencies, and needs immediate action and prioritization as emergency plans are set and rolled out over time.
- It is critical for donors to prioritize funding for lifesaving and essential VAW services, during the COVID-19 response and in its aftermath, to respond to the surge in need. Specific investments should include continuity of life-saving, multi-sectoral services, often provided by CSOs, including: health, psycho-social support, case management, legal/justice and security services, as well as availability of alternative accommodation and emergency shelters.

6. [GiHA Working Group \(2020\). The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: Key Advocacy Points from Asia and the Pacific](#)

7. [The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: Regional Analysis and Recommendations from Asia and the Pacific](#)

8. [Ibid.](#)

## Resources

ILO, UN Women (2020). [16 Essentials for Quality Multisectoral Service Provision to Women Migrant Workers Subject to Violence.](#)

ILO, UN Women (2020). [Safety planning for violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)

ILO, UN Women (2020). [Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers in ASEAN.](#)

UNTF (2020). [Voices from the ground: Impact of COVID-19 on violence against women.](#)

UN Women (2020). [The First 100 Days of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Asia and the Pacific: A Gender Lens.](#)

UN Women (2020). [Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on specialist services for victims and survivors of violence in the Western Balkans and Turkey: A proposal for addressing the needs.](#)

UN Women (2020). [Beyond lockdowns, towards recovery: What next for WPS & COVID-19?](#)

UN Women (2020). [Action Brief: A Guide for Action to Stem Increasing Violence Against Women amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific.](#)

UN Women (2020). [COVID-19 and essential services provision for survivors of violence against women and girls.](#)

\* This assessment is a joint effort by multiple initiatives of the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, including "Safe and Fair: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region", part of the global EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls, "Stepping Up Solutions to Eliminate Violence against Women and Girls in Asia and the Pacific", "Making Every Woman and Girl Count" and "Enhancing Access to Justice for Women in Asia and the Pacific: Bridging the gap between formal and informal systems through women's empowerment".

