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## **Joint questionnaire on COVID-19 and human rights**

**The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights’ Submission**

**Impact on Human Rights**

Following the pandemic, the Egyptian government has taken measures that impacted and limited human rights.

*Freedom of religion and belief*

Freedom to exercise religious rituals was limited due to the consecutive decisions of closing down all worship houses, suspension of prayers and any other activities in these places such as sermons, wedding ceremonies, memorial services and baptisms.

These measures were legal; the mosques were closed down by a ministerial decree issued by the Ministry of Endowment, which is the supervisory body of all the mosques in the country, on 21 March. The decree is renewed on almost monthly bases and in consultation with the Cabinet. The closure of the worship houses of the three major Christian churches, followed separate decisions by the clerical authorities of those churches and were endorsed by the Egyptian government. The Egyptian Coptic-Orthodox Church, representing the largest Christian community in the country, informed the government of its decision to close on 21 March along with the decision of the Ministry of Endowment.

The above-mentioned measures were necessary to respond to the COVID-19 situation because mass gatherings of prayers are ideal idioms for contamination and spreading the infection, especially with the absence of disinfecting tools from most of these worship houses.

Given the gravity of the threat and the absence of other suitable/affordable measures, such as providing sufficient disinfecting tools for tens of thousands of worship houses all over the country, this measure was proportionate. The closure decisions were issues simultaneously for all the worship houses without discrimination.

*Prisoners’ rights*

On 10 March the Egyptian Ministry of Interior issued a decision to ban all visits for prisoners as a prevention measure to respond to the pandemic, however no alternatives were given to prisoners to communicate with their families and loved ones despite the Egyptian law allowing other forms of communications such as letters and telephone calls. It has been [over three months](https://eipr.org/press/2020/06/%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%85%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%91%D9%8B%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%B0%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%87%D9%85%D8%8C-%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9) of complete isolation of prisoners from the outside world. Although the decision was taken legally, these measures are not proportional to their expected results to counter the pandemic, prisons administrations can take precautionary measures that would not isolate prisoners and violate their right to visits.

There is a lack of official information about the number of prisoners who contracted COVID-19, or how many PCR tests that were carried out in prisons, and other precautionary measures that are taken to prevent the widespread of the pandemic inside prisons.

*Sexual and reproductive health and rights*

On 16 March, the Ministry of Health and Population announced that it will guarantee and monitor the availability of reproductive and sexual health medicines, children milk and other medicines of chronic diseases for women. However, in light of absence of reliable/official sources of information, it is difficult to assess the impact of the partial lockdown measures of the availability of the sexual and reproductive health services. But it is definite that certain groups of women are deprived from these services, most notably the prisoners and detainees in pre-trial detention, due to the total ban on visits that started early March.

We also collected a number of anecdotes on the halt of de facto suspension of the sex correction surgeries, and the related services, in public hospitals due to the pressure of COVID- 19 cases.

*Economic recovery and financial assistance*

A number of measures has had positive impact on women either directly or indirectly, most notably the extension of governmental special pensions to around 100,000 more families, and the approval of special leave from work for women having children younger than 12 years old.

However, some of the measures that impacted women the most, such as the management of the debt and small loan payments, were issued without consultation with the beneficiaries or even the national bodies, like the National Council for Women (NCW), despite the fact that the women borrowers represent 69% of the beneficiaries of the microloans in Egypt. There was no consultation or prioritization of [women’s interest](https://www.eipr.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/covid-19_protection_policies_bringing_women_to_the_center_update.pdf) either before issuing Egyptian Central Bank Decree on 22 March that deferred the credit payment of small borrowers, or in the decision of the Financial Regulatory Authority on 29 March.

**Protection of various groups at risk and indigenous peoples**

A number of measures were adopted to mitigate the impact of the COVID- 19 on women in particular. The NCW listed [more than 80 measures](http://ncw.gov.eg/Images/PdfRelease/Third%20Edition%20Women%20policy%20Tra-6202063262824.pdf) in its regular updates, however NCW policy tracker never observed the implementation of these decisions.

**Participation and consultation**

The method of the decision-making processes was generally a top-down one that is in line with the overall autocratic nature of governance in Egypt since President al-Sisi accession to power in 2014. These decisions are declared by the government before quickly being endorsed by the Parliament. Other civil society organisations (CSOs) are rarely consulted, with the exception of the Federation of Egyptian Industries and the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce - both are significant influencers of the government’s fiscal and economic policies. Another significant exception was the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Chairperson of the Egyptian Medical Syndicate on 28 May following calls for a strike by a number of doctors over the lack of PPEs. The meeting resulted in a number of encouraging decisions, most notably the increase of the infection compensation from 400 EGP (24 USD) to 1000 EGP (62 USD) per month.

Egypt is already under a state of emergency [since April 2017](https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Egypt-Return-to-State-of-Emergency-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2018-ENG.pdf), which is renewed regularly every six months and the pandemic did not change that except the new measures with regards to the [partial curfew](https://eipr.org/en/press/2020/04/we-urge-egyptian-authorities-take-steps-reduce-prison-population-and-avoid-increasing) imposed on the movement of people and vehicles, which is now relaxed (from 8pm to 4am).

**Questions by the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity**

The Egyptian government is well known for its notorious [targeting of members of the LGBT community](https://www.eipr.org/en/campaigns/trap-punishing-sexual-difference-egypt) using the infamous anti-prostitution law No. 10/1960 as a pre text. That is why the official policies with regards to COVID-19 were completely blind to the impact on the LGBT community. Moreover, the security targeting of people belonging to the LGBT community continued throughout the last months. But there are no scapegoating campaigns in the media for the time being.

**Other information**

# On the necessity of protecting individuals’ income and mitigation of economic and social impacts of the virus prevention, more information is [here](https://eipr.org/en/press/2020/03/credit-government-measures-combat-spread-coronavirus-protecting-individuals%E2%80%99-income).

# On the use of public spaces in light of the COVID19 epidemic and citizens’ reactions to new official policies, more information is [here](https://eipr.org/en/publications/participatory-research-use-public-spaces-light-covid-19).