

## Country Update

# Armenia

(February 13, 2021)

### **Context and government response:**

As of February 13, 2021, Armenia has registered 168,830 confirmed COVID-19 cases, including 3,138 deaths. Armenia declared a state of emergency on March 16, 2020, with mandatory self-isolation, the prohibition of all but the “vital movements” and closing of “non-essential” businesses and institutions. The government kept extending the state of emergency, which finally lasted until September 11, 2020. However, despite the extension of the state, most businesses re-opened in early May 2020, in order to prevent the collapse of the state's economy. On June 26, 2020, the government announced that they rule out the renewal of the lockdown measures and the Health Minister stated in a television interview that the government policy is to learn to live with the situation. Nevertheless, the national lockdown was extended on January 11, 2021 for six months. As of January 29, 2021, Armenia had the highest number of deaths per million people in the region.

As part of the response, the government has put in place mechanisms for wide-spread testing, screening and contact-tracing for COVID-19 cases. However, these efforts were undermined by a spread of misinformation and inconsistent and sometimes contradictory messages from the authorities. Both the Prime Minister and Health Minister have publicly made jokes about COVID-19. In mid-March, while schools were closed due to COVID-19, the Prime Minister continued organizing a mass gathering in favor of the then-planned referendum on the Constitutional Court. The referendum was ultimately postponed given the public outcry and the increasing number of COVID-19 infections. Armenia plans to purchase 10,000 doses of the Russian vaccine

Sputnik V. Health Minister Torosyan was among the first ones to receive the vaccine on December 30, 2020.

**Impact on women and on peace and security:**

In the unrecognized region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is the subject of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the number of confirmed cases has been lower than in either of the two countries. Due to the eroded medical infrastructure and limited access to medical personnel and expertise, the population living in Nagorno-Karabakh may be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. In parallel, the **conflict and clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region continued to escalate**, culminating in the full-scale war that erupted in on September 27, 2020. Each side accused the other of the escalation, and civilian casualties have been documented on both sides. While the war came to an end with a Russia-negotiated peace deal between the two countries signed on November 9, 2020, which the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian described it as “unspeakably painful” it has provided additional burden on the country’s economy and contributed to pushing the healthcare system beyond its capacity.

The pandemic and accompanying emergency measures have also led to an increase of violence against women. Domestic violence organizations have noted a 30% spike in domestic violence reports in March 2020 and raised alarm about insufficient capacities to respond. The government did not take targeted measures for the victims of domestic violence. Similarly, the Ombudsman’s office has also noted an increase in the number of domestic violence cases received. According to the HRW, the situation continues to deteriorate as the pandemic continues – with a 40% increase in cases in April 2020 (compared to reports during the same period in 2019), and 50% increase in May 2020.

Women in Armenia reported that due to the restrictive measures, they were forced to give birth alone and some women even reported having unwanted medical procedures.

Some of the measures taken by the government in the first months of the pandemic have raised concerns that the pandemic may be used as an excuse to expand and



abuse State power. On March 31, 2020, the Armenian parliament has also passed amendments giving the government far-reaching surveillance powers, which can amount to the violations of the right to privacy. The government had also prohibited the publishing or sharing any information about the COVID-19 outbreak that did not come from the Armenian government or other official sources, in an effort to prevent the spread of fake news. However, after a letter of protest from 11 media and human rights organizations, the restrictions on the media were lifted.

**Response by women peacebuilders:**

Women have been at the center of citizenship organizing to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Women groups initiated “emergency teams” to provide food packages to elderly people. Food items for one month have been packaged and delivered to elderly and vulnerable families. Women drove the groceries to the households where they unloaded them, with help from men volunteers. According to Democracy Today, 35,000 food packages were delivered through this cooperation in March 2020 alone. Women have also organized to sew surgical masks and deliver them to hospitals.

Democracy Today has used its cross-border network of women peacebuilders to share information about the progress of the COVID-19 situation in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Syria and Yemen. It is also working with partners in other countries to launch appeals to the international community for a gender-sensitive response to the COVID-19 crisis, especially in humanitarian and crisis contexts. Democracy Today is also closely monitoring the situation in Nagorno Karabakh, maintaining contact with young women in border communities to ensure that the peacebuilding activities do not stop despite the state of emergency. They have circulated an open letter from young women, in support of the UN Secretary-General’s call for a ceasefire.

Women’s organizations have been using their existing networks to provide consultations, counselling and emotional support to women – including victims of violence – online. They have also been disseminating information about cyber-security among vulnerable women. Women psychologists have organized to provide online lectures on psychological self-care to alleviate the mental health burdens of the pandemic and the lockdown.



Women are also at the center of providing help to persons displaced as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Different initiatives emerged, providing displaced populations with housing and job opportunities.

