

COVID-19

GNWP Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy and Appeal

October 2020

Country Update

Armenia

Context and government response:

As of October 20, 2020, Armenia has registered 64,694 confirmed COVID-19 cases of, including 1,081 deaths. On March 16, 2020 Armenia declared a state emergency, with mandatory self-isolation, prohibition of all but the “vital movements” and closing of “non-essential” businesses and institutions. As the numbers of daily infections in the country continues to increase, the government keeps extending the state of emergency, which is currently set to last until September 11th, 2020. However, despite the extension of the state, restrictions on movement and the closure of businesses began to be eased in mid-April, and most businesses re-opened in early May, in order to prevent the collapse of the state's economy. Government introduced new sanitary regulations, and controls are conducted to ensure that the safety measures are followed. Movement restrictions have also been eased, and meetings of up to 40 persons have been permitted. On June 26th, 2020, the government announced that they rule out the renewal of the lockdown measures. The Health Minister stated in a television interview that the government policy is to learn to live with the situation, and noted that Armenia's mortality rate for COVID-19 is below that of many other countries, at 1.7%.

As part of the response, the government has put in place mechanisms for widespread testing, screening and contact-tracing for COVID-19 cases. However, some activities have undermined this effort, as 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 mass gathering in favour of the then planned referendum on the Constitutional Court.

Additionally, some of the measures taken by the government 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.

Impact on women and on peace and security:

The pandemic and accompanying emergency measures have had issues on the levels of violence against women. Domestic violence organizations have noted a 30% spike in domestic violence reports in March, and raised alarm about insufficient capacities to respond. Similarly, the Ombudsman's office has also noted an increase in the number of domestic violence cases received. The situation continues to deteriorate as the pandemic continues – with a 40% increase in cases in April (compared to reports during the same period in 2019), and 50% increase in May.

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. As of 18 June 2020, there are 94 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, 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. The low number of cases could also be due to the minimal testing capacity of the health care system.

Moreover, the conflict and clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijan forces along the contact line continued. While the violence has initially abated following the outbreak of the pandemic, it escalated in July 2020, with each side blaming the other for clashes and shelling, which killed over a dozen people. On March 31, 2020, elections were held in Nagorno Karabakh, despite the pandemic. However, they were not recognized by most international actors, including the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Response by women peacebuilders:

Women have been at the centre 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. 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 living 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 calling for economic support to women living in the border areas. They have also been circulating online courses and opportunities to the young peacebuilders.

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 cybersecurity 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.