

COVID-19

GNWP Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy and Appeal

June 2020

Country Update

Philippines

Context and government response:

As of June 5th, 2020, the Philippines has 20,626 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 987 deaths. In response, the Philippine government instated a partial lockdown of Metro Manila, prohibiting flights in and out of the area meetings, events, gatherings, and travel for non-essential purposes, as well as enhanced community quarantine in many provinces across the country. Although only a few cases have been confirmed in the newly established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, GNWP's local partner, Balay Mindanaw, fears that this information does not indicate these communities' insulation from the outbreak of COVID-19. A lack of infrastructure for and capacity to conduct COVID-19 testing is a more likely explanation for the lower numbers of reported cases in these communities. GNWP's local partner reported limited supplies of surgical masks and hand sanitizer, along with significant misinformation and fake news in the project implementation sites.

The government's militaristic response to the health emergency and resulting police clampdowns have raised concerns amongst civil society about human rights violations. It is confirmed that the Philippine government is cracking down on journalists and social media users critical of the government's COVID-19 response, threatening media freedom and the rights to free expression and access to information. Preliminary evidence highlights that hate speech, fake news, discrimination, and stigma have spread quickly, undermining social cohesion and reigniting historical tensions. As COVID-19 drives a growing sense of social exclusion and insecurity, there is a real risk that COVID-19 could impact peace and security.

The travel and mobility restrictions have severely inhibited the delivery of essential services and humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups, including women, young women and girls, indigenous persons, religious minorities, people living with disabilities, and IDPs. For example, in the southern region of Mindanao, where more than 300,000 people are displaced due to ongoing armed conflict or natural disaster, local aid groups are attempting to continue implementing cash aid programs, despite staff being quarantined or isolated as COVID-19 cases rise. Women and girls displaced in Mindanao face increased risks due to poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, lack of access to services including healthcare, sanitation and education, and increased protection issues, including a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Similarly, hundreds of health centers and clinics are reporting reduced or interrupted essential services to treat Tuberculosis.

Summary of impact on peace, security, and gender equality:

On March 18th, the Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte, declared a unilateral ceasefire with the Communist Party of the Philippines – New People’s Army – National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF). In response, on March 26th, the Communist Party of the Philippines – New People’s Army – National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) reciprocated by declaring a unilateral ceasefire in compliance with the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres’ call for a global ceasefire during the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 16th, the CPP-NPA-NDF extended their unilateral ceasefire until April 30th to “prioritize the fight against the pandemic and ensure the safety, health, and well-being of everyone”. On April 30th, the unilateral ceasefire declared by the CPP-NPA-NDF ended with no extension. The failure to uphold the ceasefires by the CPP-NPA-NDF and the government of the Philippines worsened prospects of peace negotiations and increased the incidence of violent clashes between the two warring parties.

The CPP-NPA-NDF accused the Armed Forces of the Philippines of 36 attacks on the NPA in 23 provinces despite the ceasefire, making it impossible for the armed group to further extend the ceasefire. The leader of the NDF, Luis Jalandoni, wrote a letter detailing these attacks to the United Nations on April 13th. On the other hand, the Philippine government has accused the CPP-NPA-NDF of “hampering the delivery of relief goods”. The Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) blamed the death of 26 government soldiers killed in action between March 15th and April 23rd on the CPP-NPA-NDF.

Fake news, misinformation, and disinformation disseminated by biased Filipino media agencies are said to be heavily contributing to false accusations and increased violence between the two warring parties. It is confirmed that clashes between Armed Forces of the Philippines and suspected NPA rebels killed 3 soldiers in Negros Occidental and two other soldiers helping to distribute cash aid to poor residents. On April 16th, a suspected NPA rebel was killed in an armed clash with government forces in Sorsogon province. GNWP local partner, Balay Mindanaw, shared reports of aerial bombings in Bukidnon and ransacking of relief goods in Eastern Samar. Balay Mindanaw also shared that there was no functional ceasefire monitoring mechanism on either side. Local Peace and Order Councils attempted to address violations.

Elsewhere in the Philippines, a clash between the Abu Sayaff Group, a well-known violent extremist group which operates in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, and the Armed Forces of the Patikul, Sulu, Philippines resulted in 11 dead soldiers. Two soldiers were also reportedly killed in a clash with the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) while manning a coronavirus check point. Violence committed by extremist groups and clan feuds threaten the peaceful transition to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao and inhibit the implementation of the peace agreement between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the government of the Philippines. In addition, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority has highlighted delays in the development of government structures and processes, including the electoral code for the region, which are crucial for the region’s transition from rebellion to governance.

In his latest national address, President Duterte threatened martial law as a response to the alleged lawlessness of the NPA rebels. The declaration and violations of unilateral ceasefires have ultimately worsened relations between the two warring parties, with increased hostility amongst government officials. President Duterte declared that he would “try to finish all of you (NPA rebels) in his last two years of his presidency”. Martial law and increased violence between the CPP-NPA-NDF and the Philippine will only increase insecurity for women and girls in conflict affected communities. In addition, deliberate disruption and delays in the delivery of relief goods will cause the countless women peacebuilders on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic to remain at risk.

Women and girls in the Philippines are facing distinct challenges to their safety and well-being during COVID-19, such as access to healthcare services, gender-based violence and other human rights violations, and economic insecurity. While not all the impacts of COVID-19 are fully understood yet, it is evident that the gender and social inequalities that existed in the Philippines before the pandemic are now exacerbated.

Emerging data on the economic impacts of COVID-19 indicates that women are disproportionately affected, and have less capacity to absorb the economic shocks associated with COVID-19. In the Philippines, women are overrepresented in the informal economy, with 6.6 million Filipino women working in the informal sector. Filipino women in the informal sector have a lower earning capacity, resulting in reduced savings and safety nets. In addition, they have little to no access to labor protections, including sick leave or protections against dismissal. In many situations, their livelihoods are dependent on public spaces and social interactions, which are now restricted due to COVID-19.

Prevailing socio-cultural norms in the Philippines mean that women undertake the majority of unpaid care work. In the context of COVID-19, the burden of unpaid care work on women is evident as they increasingly provide even greater support to family members, including maintaining sanitary conditions in the home, and caring for family members that are ill, putting themselves at increased risk of becoming infected. The closure of schools further exacerbates the burden of unpaid care work on women and girls, who absorb the additional work of caring for children. Women in the formal and informal sectors are additionally balancing work with housework, childcare, and/or elder care. The undervaluing of women's unpaid care work in the Philippines has a knock-on effect for women's paid care work. The lack of recognition of unpaid care work extends to the undervaluation of paid care work and contributes to depreciating wages of women care workers.

Data from the Philippine National Police shows that in the period of quarantine between March 15th - April 2nd, there were 391 cases of violence against women and 42 cases of rape reported in the Philippines. While the number of reported cases of violence against women has decreased during quarantine, the Commission on Human Rights and women's groups have noted that this is likely indicative of increased constraints on survivors to report abuses, including the ability for women to find privacy from their abusers to seek help from friends, family, service providers or women's organizations. Women's groups in the Philippines have highlighted how mobility and transportation restrictions under Enhanced Community Quarantine, introduced to protect citizens from COVID-19, have resulted in increased risks for women seeking gender-based violence protection by reducing their options for accessing support services.

Under COVID-19, Filipino women's exposure to harassment and discrimination has increased, including reports of healthcare workers facing discrimination, such as refusal of basic services and transport. As 72% of healthcare workers in the Philippines are women, women are likely to disproportionately experience the spike in discrimination and harassment. Women have also reported sexual harassment at COVID-19 checkpoints by police and military officers. Women make up only 12% of law enforcement in the Philippines. As a result, COVID-19 mandatory checks and physical screenings of women, such as temperature checks, are often conducted by male officers.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

The pandemic has negatively affected the ability of many women's civil society organizations to continue operating and providing support to women and girls, as highlighted in a recent survey by UN Women. From lack of access due to mobility restrictions, to loss of resources, suspension of community activities, and the inability to maintain contact with at-risk women that do not have reliable phone or internet connections, the impact of COVID-19 on women civil society and the communities they work with is evident.

Nevertheless, women and youth peacebuilders in the Philippines are acting as first responders, delivering food, protective gear, hygiene kits, and other relief goods. Members of GNWP's Young Women Leaders for Peace program delivered 385 dignity kits and relief good packages to internally displaced mothers in Sagonsongan Transitory Shelter in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur, the site of the Marawi Siege. With guidance from GNWP, the young women peacebuilders have also developed a crisis and risk management communications strategy to counter fake news/misinformation and dissemination information and hygiene tips. They are supporting and upholding the call of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for an immediate global ceasefire which will allow humanitarian actors to reach local populations in the conflict-affected countries who are most vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19.

In Agusan del Norte and Surigao del Sur, women peacebuilders are developing similar gender-sensitive relief operations for vulnerable members of the conflict-affected communities. They plan to lead campaigns advocating for the CPP-NPA-NDF and the government of the Philippines to adhere to the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, the only agreement signed between the two parties, and allow the uninterrupted and uninhibited delivery of relief goods. In Aleosan, North Cotabato, local women peacebuilders aim to support the peaceful transition to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao by disseminating information on Bangsamoro Organic Law and improving the gender-sensitivity of relief operations, thereby contributing to long-term peace and stability in the area.