

# Women's needs should not be sidelined in the time of crisis

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For the country to truly beat the pandemic, initiatives should be aware of the woman's perspective, especially the disadvantaged. Photo by JL JAVIER

**Manila (CNN Philippines Life)** — As the enhanced community quarantine deployed men in uniform to guard our checkpoints, stories of women [harassed](https://www.interaksyon.com/celebrities/2020/03/26/165098/reports-harassment-women-muslim-checkpoints-pnp-afp-bela-padilla/) and [raped](https://www.rappler.com/nation/256502-cops-marikina-arrested-raping-female-detainees/) came along with it.

There was rightful outrage. However, these stories are only deemed unfortunate, but not less than normal. These stories have been happening even before uniformed personnel took full control of our streets; stories that have too often been treated like words inside parentheses. With all of our attention captured by the universal resolve to beat this global pandemic no matter the cost, the issues of women tend to be further driven into oblivion.

ingsioc, the national chair of the Democratic Socialist Women of the Philippines, said that for the country to  
 pan e. ic a (use) and projects should be aware of the woman's perspective, especially the  
 g ad w m n unequal relationships, the LGBT, the elderly, young mothers, solo mothers, indigenous women,  
 and the unemployed, among others.

However, she hasn't seen this to be the case. "The interventions done by the local government have been blind to women's needs as we are lumped with all other beneficiaries," she said. "Given this administration, this is unlikely to change."

She emphasized that, as more programs are put in place, any national plan or civil society action should also be conscious of women's vulnerabilities prior to COVID-19. She cited a woman's multiple roles in the family, the vulnerability to abuse and violence, and the various reproductive health concerns.

Domestic violence, for instance, has been known to [increase](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/04/us/domestic-violence-coronavirus-calls-cases-increase-invs/index.html) during the start of lockdowns and quarantine measures in different countries. For many women who live with abusive partners, the global battle cry — "stay at home" — becomes an imminent threat rather than a source of comfort. In the Philippines, there are no official reports on the state of domestic abuse cases during this time, but it is known that [one in four women](http://www.psa.gov.ph/content/domestic-violence-0) (between the ages of 15 to 49, have experienced sexual, physical, or emotional abuse from a husband or partner. The Commission on Human rights [has already urged](https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/6/Coronavirus-quarantine-domestic-violence-child-abuse-hotlines.html) the government to protect vulnerable sectors against domestic abuse.

In fact, during the start of the lockdown in Cavite, nonprofit organization Likhaan was made aware of a woman from the province who was seen sleeping outside of their house to get away from her abusive husband. The team has now been coordinating with the LGU to allow them to rescue this woman.

Likhaan have also [raised concerns](https://www.licas.news/2020/03/26/filipino-community-workers-cope-to-support-women-amid-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR2mzEtHxAW-UFTqYM81YQNiJFVoeTnCMMqD55HnB4hFpASRyzn74VvQJM) about the lockdown's impact on their family planning program. Keep in mind that the organization caters to women mostly in urban poor communities, where one household often has more than three children. With the quarantine measures in strict order, there are fewer women who have been able to go to the clinic and consult about family planning approaches that may be needed, making it logical to deduce that unplanned pregnancies can spike while the lockdown is in place.

**"There are many gaps in the COVID-19 response. There's the discrimination against many older women who are homeless or have low income. How about those who are living alone? Groceries and pharmacies have been told to prioritize but not all do that."**

Taking this into consideration, Roots of Health, a nonprofit organization based in Palawan that seeks to help improve the health of women and girls, has spearheaded [an initiative](https://www.facebook.com/rootsofhealth/posts/10158421947451289?_xts__[0]=68.ARA7ghUGYeLbIdKhRw7wFrVf9jfvdx5qGuXUnz_7rDylAmycCfb6lsyFuxci27VAir16KqPEOy28VSxoJIVYCDDyA2y8MgotDdHHZpVAOaEfX4tYv2MZtjhYw2xyX-VmrrgTufSskVrPeRPptJNkt-IDMwYTfB2PxsEm4riQpzj7MYAHk5QYPWsj2CU4y92c8pbVbGphjsCFTdMOIE&__tn__=-R) in Puerto Princesa, where their nurses went to different barangays to distribute contraceptive pills to women who need them. There have also been online initiatives like [Lunas Collective](https://www.facebook.com/LunasCollective/), a volunteer-operated messenger helpline, where survivors of harassment and violence can report, and those who are in need of contraceptive products can seek support.

Efforts such as these are crucial during a pandemic. If there is a surge in unplanned or teenage pregnancies, especially in urban and rural poor areas, these will all the more compromise women's health and finances, on top of the risk posed by a COVID-19 exposure.

enant women, the elderly are also often told to take extra precautions against COVID-19. According to the services for the elderly (COSE), women comprise 55% of those aged 65 or over, and older women also form a significant portion of the informal sector whose jobs and livelihoods were abruptly halted in a bid to contain the virus.

"There are many gaps in the COVID-19 response," said Rochelle Agualin, the community development officer of COSE. "There's the discrimination against many older women who are homeless or have low income. How about those who are living alone? Groceries and pharmacies have been told to prioritize but not all do that."

Two days after the enhanced quarantine, a 69-year-old female street dweller [was arrested](https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/03/17/street-dweller-found-sleeping-on-manila-sidewalk-after-curfew-arrested/) (https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/03/17/street-dweller-found-sleeping-on-manila-sidewalk-after-curfew-arrested/) and brought to the Malate Police Station where she was detained. According to Manila's City Ordinance No. 8616, violators such as the elderly woman would need to pay a fine of ₱5,000 or face imprisonment. This kind of story is also exacerbated by the fact that over 900,000 indigent senior citizens received their pension late. Add to the delay of payments is the [pensioners' exclusion](https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/06/20/pensioners-excluded-from-govt-covid-19-subsidy-program-nograles?fbclid=IwAR3eQEmQ_zZJ4ldiVxkBSivFORgX8j5h1Cu_4NnmELitXwpf1wi0JfJK7s) (https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/06/20/pensioners-excluded-from-govt-covid-19-subsidy-program-nograles?fbclid=IwAR3eQEmQ\_zZJ4ldiVxkBSivFORgX8j5h1Cu\_4NnmELitXwpf1wi0JfJK7s) from the government's subsidy COVID-19 emergency program that aims to help 18 million low-income Filipinos. For the elderly, low-income women who have been dependent on the pension that is meant for them in the first place, COVID-19 puts them at an even more hapless position.

Despite all these circumstances, women have still been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. The World Health Organization states that women make up 70% of the health and social workforce. Barangay health workers are also mostly made up of women who have, even before the pandemic, ensured that the health of their communities are checked, monitored, and kept strong.

A study conducted by the Women's Legal and Human Rights' Bureau (WLB), with respondents from Samar, Zambales, Negros, and Quezon, showed that majority of the women are indeed in the frontlines, as the barangays have tasked them to monitor the checkpoints as well as the arrival of OFWs in their areas. The WLB, however, states that, like many other health workers across the country, they have not been provided with proper personal protective equipment.

All of these are blindspots that need to be continually recognized. Women's issues should not be put by the wayside to service "more urgent" or "more important" matters; they should be embedded in our response and in our actions. As the country trudges through the socioeconomic implications of this lockdown, the government, the private sector, civil society organizations, and the entire citizenry must take steps that err toward the side of social justice, while also acknowledging the persistent vulnerability and invisibility of women.

As the country's fight against COVID-19 continues, so does the women's fight to be seen.

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