

MONGOLIA: GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19



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Girls and Young Women's Experiences from Inner Asia, Central Asia, and particularly Mongolia during COVID-19

COVID-19 exacerbated existing systems rooted with great inequality in Inner Asia, including part of Central Asia. Many countries in Inner Asia have experienced a long post-transition of democracy and free-market economy system since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990. Since the global pandemic hit in early 2020, most countries in this region had no choice but to close the borders between March - June due to the vulnerability of the healthcare system.

Subsequently, schools, local businesses, and public gatherings have been shut (UN Women, 2020). Gender-based violence, particularly trafficking in person and domestic violence increased sharply when everyone was expected to be at home. The situation is particularly alarming in Kyrgyzstan with a 65% increase

in reported domestic violence compared with the same period in 2019. Similarly, in Kazakhstan (18%), Georgia (19%) and Turkey (15%), where considerable proportions of the population have felt or heard of increases in domestic violence since the pandemic's spread (UNDP, 2020). Added to this, reproductive health services, including abortion, unwanted pregnancy, caring responsibility with household chores and feminist movements and activism were impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Mongolia took strict measures in response to COVID-19, with the closure of borders, schools and public gatherings from January 2020. While local transmissions have not been confirmed since October 2020, the Mongolian economy fell drastically due to its geopolitical vulnerability neighbouring Russia and China, and being somewhere-in-between Central Asia and East Asia.

Mongolia's economy heavily relies on China's import products and many small businesses led by women shut down due to the shortage of raw material after the borders' closure. Caring responsibility, children's education and remote working have added more pressure on women's shoulders in Mongolia. Meanwhile, domestic violence, specifically intimate partner violence was a sharp increase of 42% compared to 2019 during the first quarter of 2020 (UNFPA Mongolia, 2020). Domestic violence shelter services suddenly increased by 62% with the rising number of hotline calls and from the second and third quarter of 2020, child incidents, child neglect, child sexual abuse, and women's mental health reported significant increases (UNFPA Mongolia, 2020 and Beautiful Hearts NGO). Another issue was that Mongolian sex workers were stranded abroad during the lockdown. Most of them could not return home and were neglected by structural violence from Mongolian and Malaysian government decisions associated with COVID-19 and were brutally abused in police violence (Eagle news, 2020; G. Prasakh and Loheswar, 2020; Palansamy, 2020). Enormous efforts were made by the Mongolian Gender Equality Center

NGO who first identified and reported human rights violation on sex trafficking cases in Malaysia through social media. They responded with immediate action, in cooperation with Malaysian NGOs, and stressed the situations to both governments and donor organisations to bring 13 sex workers back to Mongolia during the lockdown.

The local grass-roots organisations' workload in addressing domestic violence and psycho-social services has doubled. One of those is Beautiful Hearts Against Sexual Violence NGO (Beautiful Hearts) that focuses on child sexual abuse and young survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence through core activities with social media, activism, and trauma-informed psychosocial services. Established in 2012, it has a vision of eliminating gender-based violence and promoting the practice of feminist leadership in local settings. In these complex times, a flexible and rapid fund is crucial to address the current situation, and some of the donor organisations' policies need to change their existing systems on granting systems based on the local context. ■

INTERVIEW 1:

Onontuul, human rights activist and project manager for Strong Girls Strong Nation at Beautiful Hearts.

“We witnessed how COVID-19 and related policies and rules worsen domestic violence in Mongolia. Previously, we received an urgent message from a survivor once a week through our social media page. After the lockdown started, messages increased sharply to almost every day from young women and girls. Psycho-social counselling services now banned in-person, we are providing hotline and online services to clients. Sometimes we have to reach out to the girls and boys who are at the most risk to child sexual abuse at home in peri-urban areas during pandemic despite the strict lockdown. Some of the kids do not have cell phones or TV at home to get information from us. Besides, most of the planned activities under donor organisations were postponed as well, thus, we struggled to get salaries. In this region, transformative feminist movements have been hampered by neoliberal feminist approaches since the collapse of the Soviet Union regime. Western feminist discourses arrived through development intervention but are shifting from nomadic culture to urbanisation, and at the same time,

shifting into democracy from the socialist system that has intensified the great inequality in the region. Since the pandemic appeared globally, feminist movements have, effectively, interrupted or stopped their advocacy at all levels. For example, in Mongolia and Buryat community in Russia, they could not organise their march to end gender discrimination and gender violence during International Women’s Day.

INTERVIEW 2:

Maria, Coordinator of I-Freedom Initiative in Buryat Republic and Oyundari, General Coordinator at Beautiful Hearts in Mongolia.

“Collaborating with local NGOs across the countries in the region is critical to building transnational and transformative feminist movements in this region. Initially, Beautiful Hearts NGO from Mongolia and I-Freedom NGO from the Buryat Republic from Russia had planned to organise a feminist conference in the context of nomadic culture. Regrettably, it was all postponed due to the global pandemic outbreak. It was very sad. If the pandemic continues until 2022, we will have to recreate our strategy based on online activism.” Overall, COVID-19 has presented many challenges in existing systems while feminist and local NGOs’ workload

has doubled in the area of gender-based violence. At an individual level, care responsibility and mental health issues rest on women's shoulders, while collective movements, interrupted entirely by government measures, are associated with pandemic. Local grassroots groups are positive and resistant to change this new normality and they adopt to fix gender inequality rather than waiting for the pandemic to end.

EXPECTED CHANGE THAT NEVER CAME

Not the twentieth year of life,
Not the gorgeous wedding ring,
but two red lines on the pregnancy test,
It is the time that life starts to grow inside,
that marks the beginning of a woman's life

When that unknown perfume came near,
When he turned to the unknown,
And when he starts beating his pregnant wife,
It is the time that I erase from memory,
The five years we spent together.

Longing for the time he changes,
Hoping he will realise and tolerate the beating,
Hoping he will stop for the sweet child.

The expected change never came,
Only it was me that prayed.
The expected change never came,
Only it was me that could change.

No suffering I felt physically must continue psychologically,
And no days with full of tears must remain in my head,
As the baby with my milk is now inside me,
I am a mother with courage, who no longer makes a mistake.

Do not expect that he will change
Expect you, who has the power to change all
Leave the past behind
Look at the future optimistically

Because we are not victims
Because we are the survivors

A poem by a domestic violence survivor for One Billion Rising - Women's March on Mongolia.

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