

Table of Contents

- ***AFGHANISTAN: Herat woman whipped by Taliban for alleged affair***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: woman shot, blinded, for getting a job***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Afghan women illegally forced into 'virginity tests'***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: In conservative Kandahar, new gym creates safe space for Afghan women***
- ***AFGHANISTAN to appoint female deputy governors, starting with President's home province***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: 'There hasn't been rehabilitation': Afghanistan struggles with fate of 'Daesh wives'***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Afghan soldier stabs sister in 'honour killing'***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Women with disabilities face systemic abuse***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Ventilator from old car parts? Afghan girls pursue prototype***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Women negotiators seeking to preserve rights in Afghan peace talks***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: A crucial moment for women's rights in Afghanistan***
- ***ASIA: Pandemic fallout hampers women's sport in Asia***
- ***ASIA: International Women's Day: Meet 11 of Asia's trailblazers***
- ***BANGLADESH: Why is it so difficult for Bangladeshi women to get justice?***
- ***BANGLADESH: approves death penalty for rape after protests***
- ***CHINA's birth rate push trumps gender equality, with women hit with 'parenthood penalty'***
- ***CHINA jails citizen journalist Zhang Zhan for four years over Wuhan coronavirus reports***
- ***CHINA: Xinjiang government confirms huge birth rate drop but denies forced sterilization of women***
- ***CHINA: Gender equality in China, from birth ratio to politics and unpaid care work, still has a long way to go: report***
- ***CHINA: Sterilizations, IUDs, and mandatory birth control: The CCP's campaign to suppress Uyghur birthrates in Xinjiang***
- ***CHINA: Chinese social justice activist 'disappeared'***
- ***INDIA: 'Pay up': Indian trafficking victims left destitute by compensation delays***
- ***INDIA: 'It's not a grave we must fit in': the Kashmir women fighting for marital rights***
- ***INDIA: Generational change in India: How might raising the legal age of marriage from 18 to 21 change the lives of girls?***

- **INDIA: Women at risk of sexual abuse at work**
- **INDIA: Balrampur: Anger grows after new India 'gang rape' death**
- **INDIA: Dalit woman dies weeks after gang rape, triggering protest**
- **INDIA's Covid crisis sees rise in child marriage and trafficking**
- **INDIA's COVID-19 gender blind spot**
- **INDIA: Indian women protest new citizenship laws, joining a global 'fourth wave' feminist movement**
- **INDIA: Landmark ruling grants women equal rights in Indian army**
- **INDIA: Unnao rape case: Indian woman set on fire on way to hearing dies**
- **INDONESIA bans mandatory Islamic 'hijab' scarves for schoolgirls**
- **KAZAKHSTAN: Kazakh women demand financial support**
- **PAKISTAN: Virginity tests for female rape survivors outlawed by Pakistani court**
- **PAKISTAN arrests suspects in highway gang rape case amid protests**
- **PAKISTAN: Pakistani female journalists face 'coordinated' campaign of online threats**
- **PAKISTAN: Teenage girls shot dead by relatives over online footage**
- **PAKISTAN: Several injured as conservatives throw stones at Women's Day March in Pakistan**
- **PAKISTAN: How blackmail, harassment forced Pakistani women from university**
- **SOUTH-KOREA: Seoul court orders Japan to compensate 12 Korean sex slaves**
- **SOUTH-KOREA: Single women in South Korea have rights to a family too**
- **SOUTH-KOREA: Lee Hyo-jae, champion of women's rights in South Korea, dies at 95**
- **SOUTH-KOREA: Shocked public wants Telegram trafficker identified**

AFGHANISTAN: Herat woman whipped by Taliban for alleged affair

The Herat Department of Women's Affairs on Wednesday said that Taliban fighters publicly lashed a woman from Oba district over reports that she had an affair with a man.

Tolo News (14.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2Qq7tge> - The video footage, which was widely shared on social media, appears to show dozens of Taliban fighters surrounding a woman and lashing her.

The video footage, which was widely shared on social media, appears to show dozens of Taliban fighters surrounding a woman and lashing her.

"Based on the information that we have, the incident happened in the Greshk area of Oba district in Herat," said Anisa Sarwari, the head of the Herat Women's Affairs Department.

"Is it appropriate that the people see such events by the Taliban during the peace process, how the Taliban claims that they want to make peace and reconcile with the people," said Monisa Hassanzada, the deputy governor of Herat.

Coming at the same time as the announcement of the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the unclear fate of the peace process, this event has worried women in Herat.

Women have warned that if the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan is not done in a responsible way, the achievements of Afghan women in the past two decades will be lost and they will once again face severe restrictions.

"We are in a situation where targeted attacks are carried out against the women, most of the attacks are claimed by the Taliban, there is still acts of violence by the Taliban against women in Herat and other remote areas of Afghanistan," said civil society activist Zahra Karamat.

"If the US forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan is done in an irresponsible way, the women will face an insecure peace and their humanitarian rights and liberties will be sacrificed and the women will face a dark future," said Halima Salimi, the head of the Afghan's Women Network in Herat.

"If someone commits a crime, first there is a need for an investigation and evidence to prove that a crime was committed, then there should be an authorized court to issue a verdict but not in the kangaroo court," said religious scholar Abdul Khaliq Haqqani.

The Taliban has said that they will investigate the footage.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told TOLONews that the group had not held such a trial in recent months in Herat.

AFGHANISTAN: woman shot, blinded, for getting a job

By Abdul Qadir Sediqi

Reuters (10.11.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2UzFwRq> - The last thing 33-year-old Khatera saw were the three men on a motorcycle who attacked her just after she left her job at a police station in Afghanistan's central Ghazni province, shooting at her and stabbing her with a knife in the eyes.

Waking up in hospital, everything was dark.

"I asked the doctors, why I can't see anything? They told me that my eyes are still bandaged because of the wounds. But at that moment, I knew my eyes had been taken from me," she said.

She and local authorities blame the attack on Taliban militants - who deny involvement - and say the assailants acted on a tip-off from her father who vehemently opposed her working outside the home.

For Khatera, the attack caused not just the loss of her sight but the loss of a dream she had battled to achieve - to have an independent career. She joined the Ghazni police as an officer in its crime branch a few months ago.

"I wish I had served in police at least a year. If this had happened to me after that, it would have been less painful. It happened too soon ... I only got to work and live my dream for three months," she told Reuters.

The attack on Khatera, who only uses one name, is indicative of a growing trend, human rights activists say, of an intense and often violent backlash against women taking jobs, especially in public roles. In Khatera's case, being a police officer could have also angered the Taliban.

The rights activists believe a mix of Afghanistan's conservative social norms and an emboldened Taliban gaining influence while the United States withdraws its troops from the country is driving the escalation.

The Taliban are currently negotiating in Doha, Qatar, with the Afghan government to broker a peace deal in which many expect them to formally return to power, but progress is slow and there has been an uptick in fighting and attacks on officials and prominent women around the country.

In recent months, the Taliban have said they will respect women's rights under Sharia law but many educated women say they have doubts. The insurgent group has opposed a reform to add mother's names to identity cards, one of the first concrete stances they have revealed on women's rights as they engage in the peace process.

"Though the situation for Afghan women in public roles has always been perilous, the recent spike in violence across the country has made matters even worse," said Samira Hamidi, Amnesty International's Afghanistan campaigner. "The great strides made on women's rights in Afghanistan over more than a decade must not become a casualty of any peace deal with the Taliban."

Childhood dream dashed

Khatera's dream as a child was to work outside the home and after years of trying to convince her father, to no avail, she was able to find support from her husband.

But her father, she said, did not give up on his opposition.

"Many times, as I went to duty, I saw my father following me ... he started contacting the Taliban in the nearby area and asked them to prevent me from going to my job," she said.

She said that he provided the Taliban with a copy of her ID card to prove she worked for police and that he had called her throughout the day she was attacked, asking for her location.

Ghazni's police spokesman confirmed they believed the Taliban were behind the attack and that Khatera's father had been taken into custody. Reuters was unable to reach him directly for comment.

A Taliban spokesman said the group was aware of the case, but that it was a family matter and they were not involved.

Khatera and her family, including five children, are now hiding out in Kabul, where she is recovering and mourning the career she lost.

She struggles to sleep, jumps when she hears a motorbike and has had to cut off contact with her extended family, including her mother, who blame her for her father's arrest. She hopes desperately that a doctor overseas might somehow be able to partially restore her sight.

"If it is possible, I get back my eyesight, I will resume my job and serve in the police again," she said, adding in part she needed an income to avoid destitution. "But the main reason is my passion to do a job outside the home."

AFGHANISTAN: Afghan women illegally forced into 'virginity tests'

By Stefanie Glinski

Thomson Reuters Foundation (19.10.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2HoPC4s> - Women in Afghanistan are being forced to undergo so-called virginity tests, more than two years after a law requiring consent was introduced, researchers said on Thursday.

The test involves a doctor performing an examination to identify whether the hymen - the thin tissue that may partially cover the vagina - is intact, and has been condemned by the United Nations as "painful, humiliating and traumatic".

A study by Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission found forced gynaecological examinations were still being conducted without the consent of the patient or a court order, as required by a 2018 law.

The Commission interviewed 129 women across Afghanistan and found 92% of tests were performed without consent or a court order.

Most of the victims were prisoners, while nine were under police surveillance. Just nine said they had agreed to the examination and one said she had received a court order, said the Commission, which wants the tests to be banned completely.

"Afghan women have always been victims of violence, with women often mistreated due to crimes committed by men," said chairwoman Shaharзад Akbar.

"Compulsory gynaecological examinations are one of the types of violence that have been perpetrated against Afghan women and violate their human dignity by humiliating and insulting them."

Global health and women's rights organisations have called for the practice to be banned, with the World Health Organization calling it a "violation of the victim's human rights."

Medical experts say the test does not prove whether a girl or woman has had sex as the hymen can be torn during physical activity or use of a tampon. Some girls are born without a hymen.

Yet it remains widespread in some countries, including Indonesia, where women applying to the police are often required to undergo tests for “mental health and morality reasons”.

In Iraq, Yazidi women who had been kidnaped by the Islamic State were routinely tested by Kurdish officials until 2016.

Lyla Schwartz, a psychologist who set up a mental health initiative after working with young Afghan women forced to undergo testing, said they were often used to prove intercourse outside of marriage.

“Girls and women feel assaulted and violated – and girls who may have endured traumatic experiences and undergo testing feel assaulted yet again,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

“It is degrading and serves to retraumatise the assault survivor.”

Fatimeh, a woman living in detention who underwent a forced test, said she was “shocked” to discover she had been referred.

“I felt humiliated and insulted. I will never forget the experience,” Fatimeh, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, told the researchers.

AFGHANISTAN: In conservative Kandahar, new gym creates safe space for Afghan women

Reuters (24.09.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3kS9afG> - In Afghanistan’s southern province of Kandahar, rights activist Maryam Durani has found a fresh outlet for her decades of advocacy - a new fitness centre for women.

Durani, 36, is a fierce campaigner for women’s rights in the conservative stronghold where the Islamist Taliban militant group have major sway and take a conservative stance on the position of women, who mostly wear the burqa in public.

She runs a radio station for women, has served on the provincial council and was presented with the International Women of Courage Award by Michelle Obama for in 2012. Last year, Durani switched tack to open a female-only gym, which draws about 50 women attend each day.

“The reaction of the ladies was very positive because they needed it,” she said, shortly after working out with a group of clients. “What bothered me was the reaction of the men...who reacted negatively to our club and even insulted me because they thought our club was in opposition to Sharia.”

With a troop withdrawal signed between the United States and the Taliban, who have fought a bloody war for 19 years, many women in Afghanistan worry the militant group may exert its influence through formal political channels.

When the Taliban ruled the country between 1996 and 2001, they banned education for females and barred women from leaving the house without a male relative.

The group says it has changed but many women remain sceptical.

"My only concern is about their view of women's rights and what freedoms and restrictions they will impose on me," said Durani.

For now, her focus is on serving the dozens of women who attend the club, whom she describes as a cross-section of society including housewives and women who work outside the home.

"My only wish is to be seen as a human in this society," she said.

AFGHANISTAN to appoint female deputy governors, starting with President's home province

Radio Free Afghanistan RFE/RL (09.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ewMGO1> - A new decree from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani states that all of the country's 34 provinces will appoint women as deputy governors.

Syed Shah Saqim, a spokesman for the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), said the appointment will start with the southeastern province of Logar, home province of the Afghan president.

Speaking to Radio Free Afghanistan on July 9, Saqim said the appointment of female deputies in all provinces has begun. "One of the women is set to be appointed as deputy governor today in Logar Province, and this will continue in other provinces, as well," he said.

He added that "after being interviewed by the president, the female deputy governors will be selected and appointed based on merit and competence."

Earlier, presidential spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said the cabinet had decided that women would be appointed deputy governor in every province.

According to information from the president's office, the proposal to elect female deputy governors for all 34 provinces was initiated by the Women's Affairs Ministry and was approved by the cabinet earlier this week.

Vice President Amrullah Saleh also expressed support for including women in high-ranking government positions. In a recent tweet, he stated that "each province, as a MUST, will have a [female] deputy governor. This is part of our structural reform to further empower women."

"This is a quota which has to be implemented in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan," he continued. "It must be done soon. Even if a woman becomes a governor the quota still holds & applies."

Women in Afghanistan have made substantial gains in employment, education, and legal protections since the fall of the hard-line Taliban regime nearly two decades ago. Their regime banned women's employment and education.

However, Afghan women still face numerous challenges because of domestic abuse, discrimination, taboos, and violence.

AFGHANISTAN: 'There hasn't been rehabilitation': Afghanistan struggles with fate of 'Daesh wives'

The Afghan government is facing hard decisions over the futures of hundreds of detained radicalised women and their children.

By Elise Blanchard

The Guardian (26.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38cp8w6> - The "Daesh wives" from the Afghan branch of Islamic State look very young. Most are already mothers.

Hundreds of them have fled combat, airstrikes and near-starvation in eastern Afghanistan where the faction of Isis known as Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) has been under fierce bombardment from Afghan and US special forces, as well as involved in violent clashes with rival militants the Taliban.

Last November, after a military operation, President Ashraf Ghani declared Isis "obliterated" in the region where it first gained a foothold in 2014, and more than 225 militants, 190 women and 208 children surrendered.

In Jalalabad city, separated from the male fighters who were taken to other detention centres or prisons, the women were first housed by local authorities in a makeshift accommodation centre, awaiting transfer to Kabul or back to the remote Afghan and Pakistani tribal areas where most originated.

In the centre, children were everywhere – running, laughing, playing with colourful toys. On the walls they'd drawn drones, explosions, men shooting AK-47s from pickup trucks – memories of their time spent in hell near the Pakistani border in Nangarhar province, ISK's former stronghold.

Weakened and pushed farther north, the group, with an estimated 2,200 armed fighters, retains sleeper cells in cities such as Kabul, and continues to claim responsibility for murderous attacks on civilians.

Most of the girls and women the Guardian spoke to in Jalalabad and in the detention centre of the Afghan intelligence services in Kabul refuse to criticise ISK.

"Only God knows if Daesh is good or bad," says Asma, 15, from the tribal areas, and mother of a little girl. Why did she join the fighters? "My father gave me to my husband," she says. "I was scared."

Lyla Schwartz, a psychologist supporting some of the girls in the Kabul juvenile detention centre, says this was probably true. "In this context and culture, I don't think it's very likely that all of these girls had a say if they joined or not.

"The children and women experience sexual abuse," she adds. "Do they support the group? No. Ideologies? Yes. Do they believe in an Islamic state where people practise certain things and believe certain situations and things they have been taught? Yes. And is that pretty strict and conservative? I would say yes. But they don't agree in the fighting, and the war and the trauma that they see."

But Schwartz, founder of the NGO Peace of Mind Afghanistan, is concerned at the lack of care for the women and girls. "There hasn't been rehabilitation, like education, psychological processing of trauma."

Asma followed her husband when he crossed the border with Isis but she had to surrender, she says, to escape “the bombs that fall from the sky”.

Most of the dozens of family members we interviewed spoke of airstrikes that had killed many women and children. It was in this region in 2017 that President Donald Trump tested the largest conventional bomb ever dropped by in combat by the US, his “mother of all bombs”. –

“A bomb blast killed my baby and I picked up his body piece by piece,” says Hamida, who said she was “19 or 20”.

“Americans did it,” she adds. Like Asma, Hamida is an ethnic Pashtun from the tribal areas. She joined at 15, with a husband who was also underage at the time. “Isis taught him how to use weapons and that fighting with others was good work,” she says.

In another room, Mariam, 16, was resting, heavily pregnant with her second child. Her Afghan village, Takhto, was the theatre for shocking atrocities. One video showed ISK members killing local elders by making them kneel on explosives.

Mariam says she misses her husband, a Pakistani fighter twice her age. She was given to him as a wife by her brother-in-law after ISK took over her village.

“We stayed back home and served our husbands,” recounts her cousin, another 15-year-old Afghan mother. “Now we want to go back to our home.”

Other women came from farther afield, from central and south Asia or from Europe, sometimes more educated, sometimes joining a son or brother.

Deeba, 52, sold her house in Lahore and came to Afghanistan with her family to join her son, already living with Isis there. “He told us only here is pure Islam, that coming is like the Islamic [hajj],” she says, seated in the detention centre.

In the mountains, Deeba kept running the family: she remarried her daughter-in-law to another of her sons when the first was killed in an airstrike. She arranged the marriage of her widowed daughter, Rewa -- who had lost her husband in combat just a month after their wedding -- to a nephew who himself had lost his first wife in a rocket explosion.

Despite so much sorrow in her 22 years, Rewa is cheerful. “Life was simple there, we chose to live just like our prophet used to live ... we were happy,” she says.

“The men in Daesh were better than the men here ... they would turn their eyes not to look at us.” And attacks on civilians? “I swear it’s a big lie ... they have never done anything like that,” she responds.

Atfah, 24, from Punjab, arrived from Pakistan to live with Isis about three years ago, with her sisters and mother, an ex-English teacher. One brother died fighting in Syria. A second one told them to join him in Afghanistan.

“My brother called us to come for jihad,” she says. “He said that the Americans drop airstrikes and put bombs on Muslims, and kill our children and women ... That’s why we do jihad.”

Handling hundreds of women and children is an unprecedented challenge for the government.

For Javid Faisal, spokesman of the Afghan National Security Council, the women are a threat. "Wives and children of Daesh fighters were all radicalised to an extreme level," he warned. "We can't release them the way they are right now."

But the reality is more nuanced. According to a security source working on the issue, although some women did have an active role and are awaiting trial for membership of a terrorist group, others "are here because they were accompanying their husbands, and didn't participate as fighters or support".

For these women, authorities are trying to establish identities, to send them back to their families or embassies. It is a long process, dogged by political wrangling.

While many women fear being sent home, Ela, 30, wants to leave at any cost. Originally from Turkey, she was troubled by what she found in the rough, remote mountains of Nangarhar. "Afghanistan is like a different planet," she says.

She is one of the few with harsh words about the fighters: "They think women don't understand anything."

AFGHANISTAN: Afghan soldier stabs sister in 'honour killing'

Former politician from Badakhshan blames police for mishandling the case.

The National (05.05.20202) - <https://bit.ly/2AjkzmQ> - An Afghan soldier stabbed his teenage sister to death after she rejected a marriage proposal arranged by her family, police said on Tuesday.

The woman, 18, was killed Monday in Baharak district of the north-eastern province of Badakhshan.

Her brother later fled to a Taliban-controlled area, provincial police spokesman Sanaullah Rohani said.

Mr Rohani said the victim was first throttled with a rope then stabbed to death.

He said police had launched a search operation to arrest her brother.

The victim wanted to marry a man she loved but her family wanted her to marry someone else, Badakhshan activist Asifa Karimi said.

"She rejected her family's proposal and handed herself in to the police, but the police gave her back to her family," Ms Karimi said.

"Her brother, a soldier, took her home and killed her brutally in a case of 'honour killing'."

Parts of Afghan society operate under a strict code of "honour" that gives women little or no say in matters such as who they can marry and whether they can get an education.

Fawzia Koofi, a former politician from Badakhshan, blamed the police for mishandling the case.

Many in Afghanistan, including some in the police and judiciary, believe killing is a suitable punishment for women who elope, Ms Koofi said.

"Women in Afghanistan are still the most vulnerable part of society, not only under the Taliban-controlled areas," she said.

During their rule in the late 1990s, the Taliban banned women from working and going to school, and ordered them to be fully covered when leaving their homes.

Activists say violence against women remains common across Afghanistan.

Last year, the country's Human Rights Commission recorded more than 2,700 cases of violence against women in Afghanistan, a 9 per cent increase from 2018.

AFGHANISTAN: Women with disabilities face systemic abuse

Barriers, discrimination in health care, education.

HRW (27.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Yzlda3> - Afghan women and girls with disabilities face high barriers, discrimination, and sexual harassment in accessing government assistance, health care, and schools, Human Rights Watch said today.

The 31-page report, "[Disability Is Not Weakness: Discrimination and Barriers Facing Women and Girls with Disabilities in Afghanistan](#)," details the everyday barriers that Afghan women and girls with disabilities face in one of the world's poorest countries. Decades of conflict have decimated government institutions, and development efforts have failed to reach many communities most in need. The Afghan government should urgently reform policies and practices that prevent women and girls with disabilities from enjoying their basic rights to health, education, and work. Afghanistan's donors should support and advocate for the rights of all Afghans with disabilities.

"All Afghans with disabilities face stigma and discrimination in getting government services, but women and girls are the 'invisible' victims of this abuse," said Patricia Gossman, associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch and author of the report. "The Covid-19 crisis will make it even harder for women and girls with disabilities to get adequate health care."

Afghanistan has one of the world's largest populations per capita of people with disabilities. More than four decades of war have left millions of Afghans with amputated limbs, visual or hearing disabilities, and depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. The under-resourced Afghan health services are failing to meet the needs of this population, and women and girls with disabilities are far less likely to obtain any assistance.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 26 women and girls with disabilities and their families in the cities of Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e Sharif, and 14 health and education professionals in these cities.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates the problems faced by many people with disabilities. For Afghan women with disabilities who live in rural areas far from medical clinics, the absence of transportation, lack of paved roads, and long distances to clinics can create insurmountable barriers to obtaining health care. The Afghan government should

undertake a comprehensive review of health services for people with disabilities, particularly in rural areas, to improve outreach and access.

A young woman whose family moved to the city because of her disability said: "I know people who are in remote districts, but since they have no one [to bring them], they cannot benefit from [healthcare] services."

Government officials have sexually harassed women with disabilities, including when they visit ministries to claim disability benefits. The stigma associated with reporting abuse of this kind means that few women, especially those with disabilities, report those responsible. A woman in Kabul said: "I went to the ministry to get this certificate [for assistance]. They asked me whether I am married and when I said no, they told me that they can find me a husband. When I refused, the ministry employee told me that I can get this certificate only if I agree to be his girlfriend."

Entrenched discrimination means that people with disabilities face significant obstacles to education, employment, and health care, rights guaranteed under the Afghan constitution and international human rights law. For example, many people with disabilities in Afghanistan have not been able to acquire the national identity card (taskera) needed to obtain many government services.

An estimated 80 percent of girls with disabilities are not enrolled in school. Resistance from schools to accommodate children with disabilities, lack of dedicated transportation, and families' reluctance to send children with disabilities to school are major factors preventing children with disabilities from attending school. The Afghan government should develop sustainable solutions to increase access to quality, inclusive education for children with disabilities, particularly girls.

Girls with disabilities are far more likely to be kept home from school because of compounded socio-economic barriers and violence. An official with a humanitarian group said that children with disabilities "cannot go to regular schools due to lack of ramps. In some cases, the school principals do not want to enroll them, because they need to be taken care of."

Afghan women and girls with disabilities are frequently socially isolated, humiliated in public or within their own families, considered a source of shame for the family, or denied access to public spaces and community or family social events. "I'm supposed to get married, but my future in-laws think I cannot now," said a woman injured during fighting in 2017. "I have no hope for the future, but if I get treatment, I would have hope."

"In preparing for possible peace talks, Afghanistan's leaders have generally ignored the large population of Afghans who have disabilities, many as a direct result of the conflict," Gossman said. "The government needs to ensure that anyone with a disability gets the assistance they need, now and in the future."

AFGHANISTAN: Ventilator from old car parts? Afghan girls pursue prototype

By Tameem Akhgar

AP News (19.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2KikEJg> - On most mornings, Somaya Farooqi and four other teen-age girls pile into her dad's car and head to a mechanic's workshop. They use back roads to skirt police checkpoints set up to enforce a lockdown in their city of Herat, one of Afghanistan's hot spots of the coronavirus pandemic.

The members of Afghanistan's prize-winning girls' robotics team say they're on a life-saving mission — to build a ventilator from used car parts and help their war-stricken country battle the virus.

"If we even save one life with our device, we will be proud," said Farooqi, 17.

Their pursuit of a low-cost breathing machine is particularly remarkable in conservative Afghanistan. Only a generation ago, during the rule of the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban in the late 1990s, girls weren't allowed to go to school. Farooqi's mother was pulled from school in third grade.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, girls returned to schools, but gaining equal rights remains a struggle. Farooqi is undaunted. "We are the new generation," she said in a phone interview. "We fight and work for people. Girl and boy, it does not matter anymore."

Afghanistan faces the pandemic nearly empty-handed. It has only 400 ventilators for a population of more than 36.6 million. So far, it has reported just over 900 coronavirus cases, including 30 deaths, but the actual number is suspected to be much higher since test kits are in short supply.

Herat province in western Afghanistan is one of the nation's hot spots because of its proximity to Iran, the region's epicenter of the outbreak.

This has spurred Farooqi and her team members, ages 14 to 17, to help come up with a solution.

On a typical morning, Farooqi's father collects the girls from their homes and drives them to the team's office in Herat, zigzagging through side streets to skirt checkpoints. From there, another car takes them to a mechanic's workshop on the outskirts of the city.

In Herat, residents are only permitted to leave their homes for urgent needs. The robotics team has a limited number of special permits for cars.

So far, Farooqi's father hasn't been able to get one, but the girls are in a hurry. "We are concerned about security driving out of the city but there is no other option, we have to try to save people's lives," Farooqi said.

At the workshop, the team is experimenting with two different designs, including an open-source blueprint from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The parts being used include the motor of a Toyota windshield wiper, batteries and sets of bag valve masks, or manual oxygen pumps. A group of mechanics helps them build the frame of a ventilator.

Daniela Rus, a professor at MIT, welcomed the team's initiative to develop the prototype. "It will be excellent to see it tested and locally produced," she said.

Tech entrepreneur Roya Mahboob, who founded the team and raises funds to empower girls, said she hopes Farooqi's group will finish building a prototype by May or June. In all, the team has 15 members who work on various projects.

The ventilator model, once completed, would then be sent to the Health Ministry for testing, initially on animals, said spokesman Wahid Mayar.

Farooqi, who was just 14 years old when she participated in the first World Robot Olympiad in the U.S., in 2017, said she and her team members hope to make a contribution.

"Afghans should be helping Afghanistan in this pandemic," she said. "We should not wait for others."

AFGHANISTAN: Women negotiators seeking to preserve rights in Afghan peace talks

By Abubakar Siddique & Feroza Azizi

RFE/RL (30.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UMvKfG> - Women named as part of an Afghan delegation tasked with conducting peace talks with the Taliban say they will be attempting to preserve women's rights in complex negotiations with the hard-line Islamist movement aimed at ending four decades of war in Afghanistan.

"We will be aiming to discuss women's citizenship rights, which will cumulatively include all political, social, and economic rights within the framework of a republican [political system]," Habiba Sarabi, a leading member of the Afghan delegation, told Radio Free Afghanistan.

Sarabi, a physician and deputy leader of the government's peace council, says they will be specifically looking to preserve the right to vote, right to candidacy, work, free speech, and all other human and women rights in the peace talks with the Taliban. "We don't expect these issues to be resolved in the coming months because negotiations are a long, drawn-out process," she said.

Factions and politicians supporting the current political system, formally called Afghanistan's Islamic Republic, and the Taliban have already missed the March 10 deadline to begin direct negotiations. The fragile process is threatened by mounting violence and disagreements between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which in turn is facing a political crisis. The global coronavirus pandemic also threatens Afghanistan's future as the country struggles with a lack of healthcare resources and the imminent fallout of global economic decline.

Shahla Fareed, another Afghan peace negotiator, says she hopes her country can avoid a catastrophe by promptly beginning peace negotiations.

"We are likely to face many obstacles in these negotiations, but we hope to convince the Taliban that only Afghans are the victims of war in their country," she told Radio Free Afghanistan. "I demand that both sides conduct these talks in a calm atmosphere."

Fareed, however, acknowledged that they still have no agenda for the talks, which she hopes will be put together by the 21-member delegation. Five of its members are women. She said they would hopefully be able to discuss women's representation, education, work, their participation in security and politics along with guarantees to access healthcare.

So far, the Taliban have vaguely signaled that unlike their hard-line regime in the 1990s, they will be granting women some rights.

"We together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam -- from the right to

education to the right to work -- are protected," the movement's deputy leader wrote in an op-ed published by the New York Times last month.

On the ground in Afghanistan, however, the Taliban and the Afghan government appeared to be on a trajectory of escalating hostilities. President Ashraf Ghani and his rival former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah have so far failed to agree on power-sharing despite a \$1 billion U.S. aid cut and public frustration with their political conflict.

On March 30, the country's national security council postponed the release of 100 Taliban prisoners. A day earlier, presidential adviser Waheed Omar called on the Taliban "to not make any excuses" after the Taliban refused to deal with the 21-member delegation Kabul announced for holding talks with the insurgents. The Taliban said the team was not inclusive and failed to represent the country's diversity.

The fragile process is also threatened by mounting Taliban attacks on the Afghan forces. The militants killed at least 28 Afghan soldiers in remote provinces in the south and north of the country. The violence escalates amid mounting fears that a coronavirus pandemic might ravage communities across Afghanistan because the war-torn nation's anemic healthcare system might not be able to cope with the pandemic.

Last week, the country's health minister warned as many as 110,000 Afghans will be killed by COVID-19, the disease caused by a coronavirus infection.

AFGHANISTAN: A crucial moment for women's rights in Afghanistan

By Heather Barr

Human Rights Watch (05.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TEjM7r> - This is a moment of both fear and hope for Afghan women — and an urgent time for the world to support their hard-won rights. The Feb. 29 deal between the US and the Taliban could pave the way for a peace that Afghans desperately seek. But there are huge risks for women's rights in this process.

Women have suffered deeply during Afghanistan's 40 years of war, and they desperately long for peace. They have also fought ferociously for equality in the years since the fall of the Taliban government and have made great progress. Today there are women ministers and governors and judges and police and soldiers, and Afghanistan's parliament has a higher percentage of women than does the US Congress.

But Afghan women's rights activists have faced resistance from the Afghan government — and lack of support from international donors — as they fought for their rightful place at the negotiating table for peace talks. This exclusion, combined with the Taliban's relentless discrimination against women and girls, increases fears that women's rights could easily be a casualty of this process.

The US-Taliban deal is focused on foreign troop withdrawal and preventing Taliban support for international terrorism attacks. It also triggers "intra-Afghan" talks between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and other factions, which are slated to start March 10. But women's rights were not included in the Feb. 29 deal. Zalmay Khalilzad, the lead US envoy to the talks, repeatedly said that women's rights — and other issues relating to human rights, political structures and power sharing — should be resolved through the subsequent intra-Afghan talks. This has been a source of frustration to activists.

The Taliban remain deeply misogynistic. Their 1996 to 2001 regime was notorious for denying women and girls access to education, employment, freedom of movement and health care, and subjecting them to violence including public lashing or execution by stoning. Taliban rhetoric and conduct has moderated somewhat in subsequent years, with some Taliban commanders permitting girls to attend primary schools, typically in response to community pressure. But the Taliban also continue to carry out violent attacks against girls' schools and block women and girls from exercising many of their basic rights, and remain deeply opposed to gender equality.

In February, a Taliban leader wrote, "[W]e together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam — from the right to education to the right to work — are protected." Skeptics noted the comma separating women from equal rights, and that from 1996 to 2001 the Taliban also argued that women were enjoying all rights "granted by Islam."

The Afghan government has been an unreliable supporter — and sometimes even an enemy — of women's rights. The administrations of both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani have frequently brushed aside women's rights. Both have mostly rebuffed activists' demands for women to have full participation in the peace process, as provided under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Foreign donors have been more willing to engage in photo ops and grant agreements than to expend political capital to press for Afghan women to be in the room, at the table, during negotiations.

Lack of clarity about the intra-Afghan talks and the designated negotiators has further heightened fears about the implications for women's rights. Political infighting following the disputed Afghan presidential election has delayed the appointment of the government negotiation team. Pressure to divvy up these roles among power brokers threatens to squeeze women out. The absence of clear information about what country will host the talks and who will facilitate them prevents women's rights activists from lobbying for including women.

A fight over whether a release of prisoners will move ahead is muddying the waters further and calling into question the timeline for the intra-Afghan talks. Meanwhile, violence, reduced ahead of the deal's signing, threatens to escalate again.

Several years back it was common to hear Afghan feminists argue that there should be no negotiations with the Taliban — a group that refused to recognize women's full humanity. Today those calls are all but gone. Even the staunchest women's rights activists have mostly accepted that there is no path to peace in Afghanistan but through negotiations with the Taliban.

But protecting women's rights needs to be one of the key objectives of this process, and for that to happen, women need to be at the negotiating table. Governments increasingly recognize that the role of women in peace processes is not just an afterthought, but critical to sustainable and implementable peace accords. The Afghan government and all its international partners need to back Afghan women, who are in the fight of their lives.

ASIA: Pandemic fallout hampers women's sport in Asia

Optimistic growth forecasts threatened as men's games are given priority.

By John Duerden

Nikkei Asia (10.12.2020) - <https://s.nikkei.com/382tjLx> - This year started promisingly for women's sport in the Asia-Pacific. On March 8, more than 86,000 people crammed

into the Melbourne Cricket Ground to watch Australia defeat India in the final of the Women's T20 World Cup.

India loves cricket, and was starting to take more notice of women's events. "Women's cricket was thriving in early 2020," said Vishal Yadav, founder of Female Cricket, a Mumbai academy dedicated to helping people achieve their dreams in the popular game.

"Overall, there was massive progress as they geared up for the World Cup in Australia," Yadav said. "There was a massive crowd there with lots of Indian fans. Domestic cricket was moving forward, and there was optimism."

If women's cricket was starting to go places in India, the same can be said of women's soccer in Indonesia. Esti Lestari, the chairwoman of Women's Football Network Indonesia, was helping the game to grow in the soccer-mad country.

The founder of Persija Kartini, Indonesia's first professional female team, established in 2016, Lestari also helped to found a new professional league, Liga 1 Putri, in 2019. "We started the league for women last year, and everything was positive," she said. "We were not flush with sponsors, but it was sustainable and all the clubs finished the season."

Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, however, the 2020 season has not yet started for Indonesian women's soccer and many other sports around the region. The Women's T20 World Cup cricket final was one of the last major international sporting events to take place before COVID-19 brought sport around the world to a halt earlier this year.

By August, some sports were returning. There may have been no tennis fans in New York to watch the U.S. Open women's singles final on Sept. 12, but millions tuned in on TV to watch Japan's Naomi Osaka, the world's top-rated player, beat Victoria Azarenka of Belarus. In golf, Kim Sei-young continued South Korea's domination of the women's game on Oct. 11 by winning the Women's PGA Championship in the United States to collect \$645,000 in prize money.

In other sports, however, especially team games such as soccer, cricket and rugby, women have often had to watch the men restart while their own sports have remained in abeyance. That could threaten the future of some -- including sports that were riding a wave of optimism before the pandemic began. Earlier this year, for example, the global association representing professional soccer players warned that the economic effects of the coronavirus would affect female players more than their male equivalents.

"The lack of written contracts, the short-term duration of employment contracts, the lack of health insurance and medical coverage, and the absence of basic worker protections and workers' rights leaves many female players -- some of whom were already teetering on the margins -- at great risk of losing their livelihoods," said the organization, known as FIFPRO.

In India, women's cricket has taken a huge hit, both on and off the field and at the international and domestic levels. "There is a vast difference in the pay scale between male and female cricketers," said Yadav. "Therefore, the female players are left with fewer or sometimes no resources to fight back against such unforeseen economic adversities."

With a population of nearly 270 million, Indonesia has huge potential in global soccer. But it is not clear whether its nascent professional women's league can continue after the interruption caused by the pandemic -- in part because of the greater priority given to restarting the men's game.

"We are back to where we were before. I don't think there will be a league this year. After the pandemic, women's football became less and less of a priority," said Lestari. "Men's football was given priority in getting games playing again."

Lestari added that financial assistance from the Indonesian government and the Football Federation of Indonesia is "crucial" to keep women's professional clubs alive. "They must assist or next year 260 players will have no team," she said.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel. The cost of running women's sport in team games such as soccer, rugby and cricket is far lower than for men's sport, which makes entry costs for corporate sponsors more attractive.

"The cost of entry to support women's sport is much less at the moment," Steve Martin, global chief executive of the M&C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment agency, part of the U.K.-based M&C Saatchi Group, told SportsPro Media, a London-based sports media organization.

Martin added that if his marketing and sponsorship budget were halved, he would reconsider his options. "I maybe can't put all of that 50% into men's sport, so I'll be looking at the deals I have in place and looking at the opportunity in women's sport because I think it can be very cost-effective."

Women's sport in Asia should also benefit from the impact of major sporting events in the region over the next few years, including the Olympics in Tokyo in 2021 and the Women's World Cup soccer finals in Australia and New Zealand in 2023. If the soccer tournament goes ahead as planned it will be the first to be staged in the southern hemisphere, and the first to feature 32 teams -- up from 24 at the 2019 tournament in France and double the number that competed as recently as 2011.

"We have some great opportunities," said Moya Dodd, a former Australian international soccer player. "Everyone in sport is struggling with the uncertainty of COVID right now, but in Asia we have the two most important world tournaments right here, in the next three years. That gives us a comparative advantage. I hope we can use that to boost fan interest, media reach and commercial value."

Dodd said that planning for the resumption of women's sports should be given the same priority by administrators and governments as the comparable men's games, and called for long-term changes to strengthen women's competitions in the wake of the short-term pain inflicted by the pandemic.

"As old habits are broken, we should look to rebuild sport with the equality that we want to see for future generations," she said.

ASIA: International Women's Day: Meet 11 of Asia's trailblazers

From leading Netflix's India ambitions to funding the next unicorn, these are the names to know.

Nikkei Asian Review (04.03.2020) - <https://s.nikkei.com/2IkKzPs> - Despite progress over the past few decades, women in Asia still face significant, structural barriers to success. Ahead of International Women's Day 2020, Nikkei Asian Review has selected 11 inspiring female leaders in business, politics, activism and the arts -- pathbreaking women who are driving change.

Denise Ho Wan-See, Hong Kong (singer and activist)

In the sea of masked, black-clad protesters rallying on the streets of Hong Kong, there is always a familiar face in the crowd. Cantonese pop diva Denise Ho Wan-see has been at the forefront of Hong Kong's fight for freedom since the former British colony was handed over to China in 1997.

Her participation in the "Umbrella Movement" in 2014 -- a 79-day mass sit-in to call for universal suffrage -- came at a huge personal cost. She has since been banned in the lucrative mainland China market, dropped from sponsorship deals and even by her record label.

Six years on, the 42-year-old Ho is now a prominent ambassador for Hong Kong's leaderless democracy movement. As street protests rumbled across the city last year, she went on a global tour to speak on behalf of her comrades at home, giving speeches at a host of conferences overseas, including the Oslo Freedom Forum, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

"The main message I want to deliver is that Hong Kong protesters are actually in a global fight for universal values," Ho told the Nikkei Asian Review. "This is a fight against suppression and censorship, which are also spreading to more and more old democracies. Therefore we should all stand with Hong Kong."

Ho is outspoken not only on the political front: In 2012 she became the first mainstream singer in Hong Kong to come out publicly as a lesbian. Her advocacy of LGBT rights in the sexually conservative society has made her a frequent target of hate speech.

"There have been many personal attacks based on my gender and sexual orientation," she recalled, "and people would undermine my words because of that. ... But it will only make me speak louder. It's horrendous. How ridiculous when people believe that [sexual orientation] is something they can attack you [for] in 2020."

It is an encouraging trend that women are taking an increasingly vocal role in social movements, Ho said. But speaking out can come at a price. She spoke of her friend Mai Khoi, a Vietnamese singer whose songs often center on resistance and women's rights, and who resorted to underground performances after becoming an enemy of the government.

"It is devastating to see what my friend is going through," she said. "I imagine this is an equally difficult fight for many out there, especially those from repressive countries where women are not supposed to speak up."

Democratic rights -- including people's right to choose their leaders -- are essential for promoting gender equality, Ho argues, citing rights for sexual minorities as an example.

She said LGBT rights in Hong Kong have not advanced at all since she came out eight years ago, while in Taiwan, where the government is democratically elected, same-sex marriage has been legalized.

"This is exactly why we need to fight for democracy and a system in which everyone's voice is well-represented," Ho said. "It is not just about gender rights, but also human rights and all kinds of rights people think they deserve."

For now, Ho is juggling the arduous work of activism with her artistic career. She is in the process of producing a new album, which has been on hold for the past months due to

the prolonged protests. Meanwhile, her advocacy is about to embark on a new phase, with Yale University and the Women in the World Summit in New York as her next destinations.

"International interest in Hong Kong is still high, even though the protests are not as high-energy nowadays due to the [coronavirus] outbreak," she said. "The sentiment is definitely staying, and I am almost sure that things are going to pick up again once the right timing comes."

While street battles have quietened down, Ho believes it is "not only what's happening on the streets that counts," but more importantly, how people "live that spirit in daily lives."

Music is one of the ways to pass on the spirit, Ho said. As she composes new songs inspired by the pursuit of freedom, she hopes that people around the globe, especially women, can gain the courage to speak up and speak their minds.

"My words to these girl fighters are, please remember we are not alone in these fights," she said. "Although we don't know each other and might not ever see each other, we are fighting the same fight together."

(Reported: Michelle Chan)

Amina Sugimoto, Japan (co-founder and chief operating officer, Fermata)

Throughout her childhood, Amina Sugimoto moved around the world, first following her parents' work in international development and then as a student. She aspired to be a doctor, but during pre-med training she decided that she was just too squeamish to practice medicine. Instead, she studied health care economics, obtaining a Ph.D. at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Returning to work in Japan again in her late 20s, Sugimoto, just like many other women, said that she felt the pressure to think about marriage, having children and building her career. She joined Mistletoe, a Japanese venture capital fund led by Taizo Son -- brother of SoftBank Group founder Masayoshi Son -- where she was introduced to the U.S. startup Modern Fertility, which offers home hormone tests that give women better insight into their fertility.

"I was not interested in feminism at all," Sugimoto said. "Our work is not really about spearheading feminism. It is more of, like, isn't it interesting to know a little bit more about your body?"

Looking into the emerging "femtech" field, she found that there was little appetite among existing investors. Venture capitalists, including those in Mistletoe, were predominantly male and "simply do not understand" the products that are about female bodies, she said. Even though the sector clearly has potential -- consultancy Frost and Sullivan predicts that the market could be worth \$50 billion by 2025 -- investors are still not backing startups. "They are waiting in line to see who would go first," Sugimoto said.

Sugimoto has set out to change that. Last year, along with co-founder Hiroko Nakamura, she set up Fermata, a community for femtech entrepreneurs and users. By November this year they will have moved into actively supporting startups with a new 2.5 billion yen (\$23.1 million) fund. Taizo Son is an early investor. The fund will look for investments across Asia, and attempt to seed a market that, Sugimoto said, does not yet exist -- in part because the subject of women's health often remains taboo.

"For [women's wellness and sexual wellness], problems are not verbalized because no one is talking about them," Sugimoto said. "Unless they are put into words and put into questions, people do not buy even the best product. What I mean is, there is no market."

(Reporter: Akane Okutsu)

Kao Chia-Yu, Taiwan (lawmaker)

When Kao Chia-yu began her 2009 bid to become a city councilor in Taipei, aged 29, she had no money, no support from within the Democratic Progressive Party of which she was a member, and no profile among voters. Rather than buying ads on buses, TV commercials and banners, like other candidates, she went out into the community, meeting voters at parks, markets and restaurants. She rang doorbell after doorbell, followed garbage trucks on their routes around the city and reached out through social media platforms. It was her third attempt at achieving public office, and, she said, it felt like her last chance.

"At that time, I was at the crossroads of my career," she told Nikkei. "Most of my classmates had become lawyers, prosecutors and judges. ... But I wanted to give myself a last try in my own way, as I really love to talk to people and help people solve problems."

Kao went on to win three consecutive council elections, and this year took a seat in the national legislature. Her star is still rising. With a national profile, she is viewed as one of the likely challengers for the post of Taipei City mayor in 2022, a position that is often a steppingstone to higher office. Her approach to engaging voters, mixing digital platforms with ground-level interactions -- such as livestreaming her breakfast at small cafes -- has been widely imitated.

Even though Taiwan has a relatively strong record of women's participation in politics -- 40% of lawmakers are female, the highest in Asia -- women still face cultural and social barriers to high office. Balancing family life with front-line politics is difficult, and there are choices to be made. Two powerful female politicians, President Tsai Ing-wen and Presidential Office Secretary-General Chen Chu, an activist who spent more than six years in prison, remain single. When seeking reelection, former New Power Party lawmaker Hung Tzu-yung was criticized by Foxconn Technology Group founder Terry Gou of being "busy with getting married and having a child" -- a criticism not faced by male politicians.

Kao has faced down critics from within the DPP over her lack of experience. Attempts to sideline and belittle her have been met with characteristically blunt straight-talk. She is still seen as an outsider, dubbed a "lone bird" -- a description she seems to embrace.

"I don't owe anyone any favors, but I also don't have anyone to count on," Kao told Nikkei. "I only have myself, as always."

(Reporter: Cheng Ting-Fang, Lauly Li)

Srishti Behl Arya, India (director for international original film, Netflix India)

On the cover of her MacBook, Srishti Behl Arya has a sticker that says: "On an adventure." Ever since she was brought on board by streaming giant Netflix to head international original film in India in May 2018, that has been her life.

"I have the best job in the whole world," she says. "I get to enable creators to tell the best stories of their lives on the best service they can."

That means that on any given day Behl Arya, 47, is wading through scripts, pitches, books, concepts, all the while looking to connect directors and storytellers. "India is a land of storytellers and we have the problem of plenty," she said.

India has 451 million active monthly internet users, the highest in the world after China, thanks to an explosion of cheap data and affordable smartphones. And Netflix, which launched in India in January 2016, is just one of 30 streaming platforms trying to draw some of those eyeballs. Video streaming service Amazon Prime, The Walt Disney Co.-owned Hotstar and homegrown platforms like Zee5 and ALTBalaji are some of the others in the race for viewers. Disney's streaming service Disney+ will be joining the fray on March 29.

In the past year alone, Behl Arya's unit -- which she co-leads with Aashish Singh -- has announced 17 films. For some of them, Behl Arya has turned to her Bollywood pedigree. The daughter, and granddaughter, of filmmakers -- she also ran a production house with her brother before joining Netflix -- Bollywood is home. For others, she's brought on new writers and directors.

Her mantra is to have "content for every mood," says Behl Arya. That requires "not just diversity of content, but diversity of minds, because that's how you get the real differentiation," she says. For that she has recruited two debutante female directors, three female producers, as well as many women writers who have created female protagonists. This is rare in an industry which has for decades been entirely controlled by men, and has rarely, if ever, told stories from a female perspective.

Behl Arya agrees that because she works at Netflix, she can "lean much more into risk." Bringing on board diverse voices, she said, "is a privilege. I use that word a lot, but I live in a lot of gratitude."

(Reporter: Megha Bahree)

Pocket Sun, China/U.S. (co-founder and managing partner, SoGal Ventures)

Pocket Sun's journey into venture capital began when she lost her job. Back in 2014, Sun, a Chinese native, fell afoul of the U.S. visa lottery and had to leave her job. She signed up for a master's degree program, thinking it would buy her time while she looked for a chance to get back into the corporate world.

As soon as she set foot in the University of Southern California to study entrepreneurship and innovation, she "felt out of place," she told Nikkei. Most of her classmates were male, as were the entrepreneurs who visited to share their experiences.

"Those male entrepreneurs were extraordinary people, but I just found it hard to connect with their stories," Sun said.

In search of like-minded female entrepreneurs, she founded the SoGal Foundation in late 2014, a "women for women" business community. What started out as a high-tea party in a classroom at USC has now become one of the largest businesswomen's networks in the world, counting more than 100,000 members.

In 2016, along with Elizabeth Galbut, Sun founded an investment fund, SoGal Ventures, to support women-led startups and to overcome the structural bias against women in the VC business. In 2019, female founders attracted less than 3% of all the VC investing in the U.S., according to industry information portal PitchBook.

At first, Sun used her own savings, working as a consultant and doing public speaking to make money, but was able to bootstrap \$14 million from outside investors. Although the size of their fund is small, Sun believes it can make a real difference in shaping the future of technology. For now, fewer than 10% of decision-makers at U.S. VC companies are women, according to a 2019 Axios analysis.

SoGal has backed 24 women-led startups so far, including a company making customized prosthetic breasts for cancer survivors, and another that supplies kits for rape victims to collect evidence at any time, sparing them from spending hours finding a designated clinic that runs the tests.

"Venture capitalists have a say on which technology would be developed, and how society is evolving," Sun said. "If this decision-making process is only led by one voice, it is unfair to the rest of the world."

(Reporter: Coco Liu)

Li Yang, China (co-founder, Prop Roots Education Center)

Li Yang says that she is the mother of some 200 children. In 2009, after visiting Jingpo communities in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan with her husband, a Dutch linguist who was studying the Jingpo language, Li found herself drawn into the life of the indigenous group. A Beijing native, Li was impressed by the Jingpo children's knowledge of the natural world, and the depth of their culture. She also discovered a darker side to life.

Drug addiction has become rife in Dehong -- a border region a stone's throw from Myanmar, home to most of China's 150,000-strong Jingpo population -- and the community is in the midst of an identity crisis. They can no longer make a living with their centurieslong hunting tradition, but equally, they have been left behind in China's rapid march toward modernization. Li, who called the situation "heartbreaking," decided to take the matter into her own hands, and started Prop Roots Education Center, a nongovernmental organization that has supported 200 local children.

Every day, children come to a bamboo house in Yinping village to listen to stories, do their homework, and to prepare for urban life through training and roleplay. About 98% of the children Li taught have managed to stay away from drugs, while that figure is less than 50% in nearby villages. Li attributes the difference to her parenting role. "What rural children really need is not money, but our company," she said.

(Reporter: Coco Liu)

Garima Arora, Thailand (chef and co-owner, Restaurant Gaa)

Garima Arora moves quickly. By the age of 29, she had already left a career in journalism to work under the infamous Gordon Ramsay at Verre, then Noma's Rene Redzepi. By 32, her Thai-Indian fusion restaurant in Bangkok, Gaa, had garnered a Michelin star -- a first for an Indian woman -- and debuted on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list. That same year, she was also awarded the title of Asia's best female chef. Even so, "ambition doesn't have a gender," she told Nikkei.

A handful of women hold the prestigious tally of three Michelin stars, compared to over a hundred male chefs. "I don't think there's any conspiracy to keep women out of the kitchen ... but the truth is, it's very hard for them to stick around," said Arora. "At some point in their lives, they have to choose between working these crazy hours and having a family, and it's impossible to have both. Women are forced to make unrealistic choices."

In her childhood, Arora's father planted the seeds of an obsession with food, as he traveled for work as an event organizer and returned with exotic flavors for his Mumbai-based, Punjabi family. At Gaa, Arora plays with the boundaries of her native cuisine, her upcoming menu asking customers to eat with their hands as they move through five "feasts," from refined hawker fare to seafood.

The chef also ties her rise to lessons learned with Ramsay -- "humility" -- and Redzepi -- "food as an intellectual exercise" -- combined with an instinct to challenge. "I've carried my curiosity throughout my whole career. In everything that I do, I think about it and constantly question it."

(Reporter: Sarah Hilton)

Nicole Yap, Indonesia (managing director, Digitalaya)

Nicole Yap's parents moved from Indonesia to Canada before she was born. Although she had visited regularly, it wasn't until she took part in MIT's Global Startup Lab in 2013, teaching entrepreneurship at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia's Yogyakarta Province, that she began to think about the country's business potential. She returned to North America, working as a global health consultant in California, and spent some time in Nairobi at a social enterprise.

Then, during a trip to Indonesia in 2017, she saw that the landscape had changed completely. Ride-hailing startup Gojek had become a unicorn -- a private company valued at more than \$1 billion -- and the technology sector was buzzing.

"I feel that there are a lot more interesting problems to be solved here in Indonesia, and that tech and entrepreneurship and startups can do a lot more to actually solve these challenges," she said.

Along with her co-founder Yansen Kamto, Yap launched startup accelerator Digitalaya in 2018. Nearly 100 startups from 12 countries have participated in its programs to date. Digitalaya is the exclusive partner of both Google for Startups and Google Developers Launchpad in Indonesia, and is also a partner to UBS, Indonesia's ride-hailing giant Gojek, and largest private lender Bank Central Asia.

The accelerator's success has established Yap, 34, as a leading figure in a male-dominated industry. Aware that having a strong network is important for women, only a few of whom have senior positions in the industry, Digitalaya has established Simona Ventures, an accelerator program dedicated to women-led startups.

"We think ... having a community of women that they can actually share with, learn from, connect with is even more important in this industry," Yap said.

(Reporter: Erwida Maulia)

Eni Lestari, Indonesia/Kong Kong (chairperson, International Migrants Alliance)

Eni Lestari had always dreamed of going to university, but when the Asian financial crisis hit her native Indonesia, she had to abandon her studies and search for jobs overseas to bail her family out of debt.

Eni first arrived in Hong Kong to work as a domestic helper in 1999, only to find herself deprived of basic labor rights. "I was paid half of the minimum wage and no holiday was

given," she said. "I didn't know anything about the regulations in Hong Kong, so it took months for me to find out I was actually tricked by my employer and the agency."

A friend introduced Eni to a nongovernmental organization offering legal aid and shelter to migrant workers. Living there, she volunteered to answer the counseling hotline; in doing so, she noticed that many helpers were facing similar ordeals in the city.

In 2000, she established the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers, and is now the chairperson of the International Migrants Alliance, a global association with more than 4,000 members. In 2016, she was chosen to address the first United Nations summit on refugees and migrants in New York. And this is only her side job -- she is still working as a helper on weekdays.

"Knowledge can be so empowering," she said. "In the past, some girls just cried to us and returned home doing nothing. Now, there is a community, both online and offline."

Eni said she hopes other helpers will not give up on learning and self-enrichment because of the nature of their jobs. "You'll never know your possibilities if you don't explore."

(Reporter: Michelle Chan)

Akiko Naka, Japan (founder and CEO, Wantedly)

Akiko Naka's career path, jumping from Goldman Sachs analyst to would-be manga artist to Facebook marketer, is not unthinkable for any hungry person in her early 30s. But in her home country of Japan, it has been wildly unorthodox. "For my grandparents, maybe 80% to 90% of them worked for a company. If you changed jobs, or quit, you were considered an outcast," said Naka.

For her peers, that is changing. Naka's job-matching platform, Wantedly, has signed up 34,000 companies, mostly small to midsize, and has a total user base of 4 million. Job posters do not mention salary -- instead, they advertise by vision and values, challenging the once-a-year-hiring, job-for-life model that undergirds Japan's rigid labor system. Wantedly, founded in 2010, first struggled with resistance from human resources departments that have gradually adopted the service; now, it is listed on the Mothers board for startups, where it has also seen ups and downs.

Fueled by a recent rise in domestic angel investors and venture capital, Naka's is among a small upswell of startups seeking to change the business models of century-old enterprises. "Historically, Japanese people -- we're not willing to make change until it starts to overflow," said Naka. "At some point it snaps, and you have to make change all at once."

(Reporter: Sarah Hilton)

Rossana Hu, China (founding partner, Neri & Hu)

Rossana Hu was born in the southern Taiwanese port city of Kaohsiung and moved to the U.S. at the age of 12. After studying architecture and music at the University of California, Berkeley, and receiving a Master's degree in architecture and urban planning from Princeton University, she worked for major architecture companies in the U.S. before founding her own practice, Neri & Hu, with partner Lyndon Neri, in Shanghai in 2004.

"[A] client requested to have Lyndon's physical presence there for a short stay; the short stay led to a long stay, and we realized how much we would be able to contribute and be a part of an exciting era for Chinese architecture, so we made the move," she told Nikkei.

Neri & Hu has established itself as one of Asia's leading architecture and design practices, merging traditional Chinese design with modern touches. Hu and her partner are the masterminds behind the flagship store of South Korean skin-care brand Sulwhasoo in Seoul, Alila Bangsar, a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur, and the New Shanghai Theatre.

"Architecture has never been an easy profession for women," Hu said. Earlier in her career, she was often the only young woman working on projects. However, Neri & Hu has more senior female architects than men. "We have been blessed to not foster a biased working environment for the young staff in our office," she said.

(Reporter: Cheng Ting-Fang, Lauly Li)

BANGLADESH: Why is it so difficult for Bangladeshi women to get justice?

16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

By Meenakshi Ganguly

HRW (25.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33CTZR8> - In 2015, Salma's husband and his parents held her down and poured nitric acid down her throat because they wanted more than the Tk 100,000 (USD 1,100) that her parents had already paid in dowry. For months since the wedding, her father-in-law had beat her repeatedly, demanding more. Salma went to stay with her parents to escape the abuse. But when villagers started gossiping about her broken marriage, her parents told her to return to her in-laws. When she said she was being physically abused, they told her "you just need to endure." Now, she is fed through a tube in her stomach.

Salma's story is disturbingly common in Bangladesh, where over 70 percent of married women and girls have faced some form of intimate partner abuse, about half of whom say their partners physically assaulted them. But the majority of women never told anyone about this abuse and only three percent take legal action.

In many cases like Salma's, survivors seeking help are turned away—by family, community, and the police—and can be in even more danger when forced to return to their abuser. When Salma tried to escape the violence, she was met with stigma and—with only a handful of government-run shelters in the country and limited access to support services—she had nowhere else to go.

Salma has fought for a legal remedy for over five years now, but to little avail. Her father, meanwhile, had a stroke and the family cannot afford to continue pursuing justice. The public prosecutor bringing the case told her that her in-laws were paying more bribes so she "should pay more money." "That is how you will get justice," he told her. He too, of course, requested bribes, she said.

Every time they go to court to find out the status of the case, court officials, police and the prosecutor all ask for "tea and snacks costs," Salma said. Now she says she is telling her father, "You have been going to the courts for the last five years and nothing is happening. Let's just give up."

But there are concrete actions the Bangladesh government and donor governments can take now—during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence—so that Salma and other women and girls seeking legal recourse never have to give up.

The 16 Days of Activism is an annual international campaign in which governments and activists come together to address violence against women and girls. It runs from November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, until December 10, Human Rights Day.

The Bangladesh government should work with concerned donor governments, activists and the UN to conduct an audit of currently available shelters, disseminate this information, and commit to opening at least one shelter in each of Bangladesh's 67 districts by 2025. Shelters should remove restrictions that limit their accessibility, such as requiring court orders to stay there or restricting the presence of children. No woman or girl should ever have to "just endure" violence because there is nowhere else to go.

The law ministry should immediately create an independent commission to appoint public prosecutors to ensure their independence. Donor governments like the US that are involved in justice reform should ensure that training for public prosecutors and police emphasises working with victims of gender-based violence and consider joint training for prosecutors and investigating officers to improve coordination on cases of gender-based violence.

As Salma described, as cases go on for years, justice officials frequently demand bribes, making it more and more difficult to continue to pursue justice. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of transparency and accessibility of case information, given Bangladesh's 3.7 million-case backlog. Without a centralised filing system, cases get lost and survivors are forced to pay bribes to get court officials to find their case information and move cases forward. The German government led an impressive justice audit in Bangladesh and would be well-placed to spearhead a project to move case files into a centralised online filing system—gender-based violence cases would be a good place to start.

The Bangladesh government should ensure that legal aid is reaching women and girls in need and that they are aware of their rights. Last year, the national legal aid services organisation distributed funds to 2.5 times more men than women.

The law commission drafted a witness protection law nearly a decade ago—it should be passed into law in consultation with Bangladeshi women's rights organisations, and donor governments should support the implementation of a witness protection programme.

Violence against women and girls is so pervasive in Bangladesh, it is sometimes dismissed as unsolvable. For these 16 days of activism, the government and donors should listen to activists who are offering workable solutions.

Here are 16 actions the Bangladesh government should take for the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence:

1. Commit to creating at least one shelter for women and girls fleeing violence in each of Bangladesh's 67 districts by 2025.

Shelter services are so limited that for most women and girls facing violence there is nowhere to go to escape abuse. The shelters that do exist often allow only short-term stays of a few days, and most shelters have specific criteria for who can use them, excluding some survivors from any access to shelter.

2. Pass a long-promised witness protection law.

Bangladesh has no witness protection law, meaning that survivors seeking justice and those willing to testify on their behalf risk serious threats, intimidation, harassment, and even death. The Law Commission proposed draft legislation nearly 15 years ago but it has yet to move forward.

3. Replace the rape law with a law that sets out a comprehensive definition of sexual assault, recognizes all potential victims, and criminalizes as sexual assault any sexual act occurring without consent.

The current legal definition of rape in Bangladesh specifically excludes rape within marriage and defines as rape only acts by a man against a woman, excluding men, boys, and transgender, hijra, or intersex people from protection. There is no definition of penetration under the law, meaning that cases of rape that include the insertion of objects or other parts of the rapist's body are more likely to lead to acquittal.

4. Repeal the newly passed death penalty for rape and instead work with activists to institute real reforms.

The Bangladesh government recently passed an amendment to allow for the death penalty as punishment for rape, after widespread protests in response to several recent gang rape cases. There is no conclusive evidence that the death penalty curbs any crime, including rape, and it could end up deterring reporting or even encouraging rapists to murder their victims to reduce the likelihood of arrest. Instead, the government should carry out real reforms advocated by experts and activists.

5. Amend the Evidence Act to prohibit use of character evidence against rape survivors.

Lawyers and rights groups have repeatedly called for the repeal of section 155(4) of the Evidence Act 1872, which allows defense lawyers in rape cases to defend their clients by showing that the victim was of "generally immoral character." This provision is a clear disincentive to victims stepping forward.

6. Make sure legal aid reaches women and girls in need.

Survivors of gender-based violence are entitled to apply for free legal aid from the government. However, this aid is inaccessible for most survivors of gender-based violence. The national legal aid service said in its 2019-2020 annual report that legal aid was provided to over 2.5 times more men than women.

7. Pass an anti-sexual harassment law.

Bangladesh does not have a comprehensive law governing sexual harassment. In 2009, the High Court issued a judgment providing detailed guidelines governing sexual harassment in all workplaces and educational institutions, but they are rarely followed. The government should systematically monitor these sites to make sure that these guidelines are followed and finalize a draft bill on sexual harassment.

8. Provide sufficient training to police, prosecutors, and judges on handling gender-based violence cases and hold them accountable when they mishandle these cases.

Survivors of sexual and other gender-based violence who go to the police often face a refusal to file a case, bias, victim blaming, stigma, and humiliation. A women's rights lawyer told Human Rights Watch that "the police frequently have a negative attitude and don't believe the victim. A lot of police have no knowledge of how to handle gender-based violence cases." All justice officials should be adequately trained in working with survivors of gender-based violence and should undergo training on gender equality—and the government should provide a system to allow survivors mistreated by police to file complaints and ensure that their complaints are taken seriously.

9. Better resource the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act Enforcement Officer position.

The act created an enforcement officer position for each upazila (sub-district) who is responsible for making applications to the court for protection orders, accessing legal aid, and referring victims to a safe shelter when necessary. However, enforcement officers are often severely overburdened and underequipped.

10. Introduce mandatory comprehensive sexuality education classes in all schools including teaching about consent, gender equity, and healthy relationships.

Violence against women and girls is so socially normalized in Bangladesh that survivors often don't feel they have any right to complain or seek help. Sexual violence is ubiquitous, as is the victim-blaming that follows. Schools have a crucial role to play in changing the attitudes of boys and girls and building a healthier and more equitable society. The government should develop a curriculum on these topics starting from a young age, with age appropriate material, and require it to be taught in all schools.

11. Amend the Dowry Prevention Act, 2018 ensuring that it does not deter victims from reporting dowry demands.

In September 2018, parliament passed a new Dowry Prevention Act, 2018. However, some aspects of the law may actually lessen protections for women. In particular, criminalizing dowry payments could deter reporting cases in which a bride's family is coerced into giving dowry through violence, the threat of violence, or other forms of pressure.

12. Revise the Child Marriage Restraint Act to set the minimum age of marriage at 18 for women and men with no exceptions.

In Bangladesh, 22 percent of girls marry before age 15 and 59 percent marry before age 18, the highest percentage in Asia and the fourth highest in the world. In 2017, as countries around the world cracked down on child marriage, Bangladesh took the extraordinary step of essentially re-legalizing child marriage by passing legislation permitting girls under 18, with no specified minimum age, to marry under undefined "special circumstances."

13. Adopt and implement a comprehensive national action plan to end all child marriage.

The Bangladesh prime minister pledged in 2014 to end child marriage and to create a national action plan toward that end. But the government has not published an action plan and there has been little progress toward ending child marriage, in spite of a United Nations Sustainable Development Goals target for all countries to end all marriage before age 18 by 2030.

14. Create an online centralized filing system for all gender-based violence cases, and make relevant case information accessible to all parties free of charge.

Bangladesh has a backlog of about 3.7 million pending legal cases. The government should work with donor governments to train judges and implement a centralized organized system for tracking court cases in order to reduce the backlog and increase access to legal information. The lack of transparency without an organized and accessible system for case files often leads to demands for bribes and other forms of corruption. Women seldom have proper access to information and legal counsel, leaving them particularly vulnerable to such corruption and abuse.

15. Commit resources to expanding and increasing the capacity of Victim Support Centers.

The Bangladesh police have eight Victim Support Centers to provide emergency shelter for a maximum of five days, and coordinate health care, legal advice, psychological counseling, and access to rehabilitation programs. However, they have limited resources and capacity. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police Victims Support Center has even published recommendations to improve its own capacity to reach and support victims, including increasing safe home facilities, but those are yet to be carried out.

16. Ensure that One Stop Crisis Centers and Cells are available and that staff are properly trained to support survivors.

The government created nine One-Stop Crisis Centers to provide social service support, immediate medical assistance, psychosocial counseling, and coordination with police and legal aid providers. But women's rights activists say the actual functioning of the centers varies and other service providers have reported instances of crisis centers and cells being inoperative or shut down. Activists said that some staff at the centers have been known to treat survivors with disbelief, stigma, and even discourage them from filing a case, particularly in cases of sexual violence.

BANGLADESH: approves death penalty for rape after protests

Move comes after nationwide demonstrations sparked by series of sexual assaults.

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen

The Guardian (12.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2H0T84M> - Bangladesh will introduce the death penalty for rape cases, after several high-profile sexual assaults prompted a wave of protests across the country in recent weeks.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, cabinet secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam confirmed that the cabinet had approved a bill ruling that anyone convicted of rape would be punished with death or "rigorous imprisonment" for life.

The death penalty amendment to the women and children repression prevention bill, which currently stipulates a maximum life sentence for rape cases, will come into effect on Tuesday, said the law and justice minister, Anisul Huq.

Last month, footage of a young woman being violently assaulted and gang-raped by a group of men in the south-eastern Noakhali district went viral on Facebook, after the video was released by the attackers to blackmail and shame the victim. Eight people have been arrested in connection with the case.

It led to an eruption of protests in the capital, Dhaka, and other cities at the failures to tackle the endemic problem of sexual assault and rape in Bangladesh.

"This truly disturbing footage demonstrates the shocking violence that Bangladeshi women are routinely being subjected to. In the vast majority of these cases, the justice system fails to hold the perpetrators responsible," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, south Asia researcher at Amnesty International.

Outrage had already been mounting after several members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the governing party, were arrested and charged with gang-raping a woman in the northern town of Sylhet a few weeks earlier.

Many of the protesters on Dhaka's streets had called for stricter punishment, including the death penalty, and the crowds carried placards bearing messages such as "Hang the rapists" and "No mercy to rapists".

However, Amnesty pointed out that the issue in Bangladesh was not the severity of punishment for rape, but a failure of the courts to bring convictions in rape cases and the victims' fear of coming forward.

Naripokkho, a women's rights organisation, found that in six districts between 2011 and 2018, only five out of 4,372 cases resulted in a conviction. Overall, only 3.56% of cases filed under the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act have ended up in court, and only 0.37% have resulted in convictions.

The problem appears to be worsening. Between January and September 2020, at least 975 rape cases were reported in Bangladesh, including 208 gang rapes, according to statistics gathered by human rights organisation Ain-o-Salish Kendra. In over 40 of the cases, the women died.

The UN also released a statement last week expressing its concern at the escalating cases of sexual violence against women: "The recent case of the woman from Noakhali that was circulated through social media has yet again underlined the state of social, behavioral and structural misogyny that exist."

The statement said urgent reform was needed to "to the criminal justice system to support and protect victims and witness, and to speed up the slow trial process".

In January, after a student at Dhaka University was raped, the government was ordered by the courts to form a commission to address the rise in sexual assaults and put together a report by June. The commission has yet to be formed.

CHINA's birth rate push trumps gender equality, with women hit with 'parenthood penalty'

China's birth rate is declining so Beijing is encouraging couples to have more children, but employers are worried about extra maternity costs. China still exceeds the global average participation rate for women in the workplace at 60 per cent in 2019, but the rate has been falling since 1990.

By Sidney Leng

South China Morning Post (09.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2LnTS6k> - China's ongoing battle to boost its population is having a knock-on effect on its efforts to ensure gender equality in the workplace, with female applicants increasingly being told they are unsuitable for roles for "unsubstantiated" reasons, including because the role required overtime work, business trips, driving or even moving books.

"These excuses are so unsubstantiated. Overtime and business trips have nothing to do with gender. It's up to your abilities and tolerance. It can not persuade us at all," said Helen Tang, who has been battling gender equality while claiming to be the victim of discriminatory practices since 2018.

China has been struggling with a declining birth rate in recent years and so is encouraging couples to have more children. But with employers worried about maternity costs, discrimination, at least recently, has been rising, particularly since Beijing officially ended its one-child policy in 2016.

While China exceeds the global average participation rate for women in the workplace of 47 per cent with 60 per cent in 2019, the rate has fallen by more than 12 percentage points since 1990, according to the United Nations-backed International Labour Organization.

The gap between male and female labour participation rates in China expanded from 11.6 percentage points to 14.8 percentage points between 1990 and 2019, while it has been shrinking in major economies during the same period.

"I am puzzled. I don't understand why a clerk role is only offered to men," added Tang, who was told male applicants would be prioritised when she called to inquire about the position.

Her treatment saw Tang reach out to Workplace Gender Equality Watch, an informal social media group, and discovered that the problem was more prevalent than she first feared. She later volunteered to work for the organisation.

Founded in 2014, the group is made up of more than 50 part-time volunteers who regularly highlight on social media hiring practises that they believe are discriminatory. The group also files complaints with relevant authorities and companies, and sometimes provides legal help.

"Although China has laws and regulations to protect women's employment rights, gender discrimination in the workplace is still very serious," said Ren Zeping, chief economist at the Evergrande Research Institute.

"Generally speaking, a smaller labour participation gap between men and women means better protection of women's employment rights and higher fertility rates."

China ranked 106th behind Hungary last year on the annual gender gap index compiled by the World Economic Forum, having been 61st in 2008. The index considers employment opportunity, education attainment, health and political empowerment.

In a survey of more than 66,000 people conducted by recruitment portal Zhaopin last year, overall pay for female workers was 17 per cent lower than male workers, and only 5 per cent of women took management roles compared to 9 per cent of men.

Within the Communist Party, less than 30 per cent of members were women in 2018, and less than 27 per cent of party and government leadership roles were taken by women in 2017, according to government data.

Last year, Workplace Gender Equality Watch published notices on more than 100 discriminatory job listings on average per month, up from an average of 69 in 2019.

Based on submissions via social media, many of the roles involved law firms, public institutions, state-owned construction and engineering firms, as well as schools.

The civil service, particularly at the local level, is a hot bed for gender discrimination, according to an analysis of all published jobs from 2017 to 2020 conducted by the group. The share of roles preferring men accounted for more than 10 per cent of all listings each year of the study, with women preferred for just over 1 per cent of roles last year, up from zero in 2019.

Based on official data, the government of Guangdong province, an economic powerhouse in the south of the country, had the most gender discriminatory roles than other provinces, offering 1,449 civil servant roles for men only last year, six times more than for female-only offerings.

Workplace Gender Equality Watch also argued that while some government agencies offered the same number of jobs for men and women, there remains discrimination in hiring practices with less qualified men often hired instead of more qualified women.

In a study conducted before and after China officially abolished its one-child policy in 2016, three researchers led by He Haoran from Beijing Normal University sent fictitious résumés with varied gender information to real job postings in the three most developed cities to test labour market discrimination against expected motherhood.

They found that women, particularly those seen to be within childbearing ages, received fewer responses than before 2016, indicating that women were suffering from a “parenthood penalty” that did not apply to men.

Unlike the planned economy era, when state-owned firms built schools and dormitories to take care of employees’ children and provide social services, China today has a large shortage of nurseries and childcare services that has forced some working aged women to leave the workforce.

In the Zhaopin survey, close to 60 per cent of women said they had encountered questions about their marriage and maternity status during the hiring process.

“For companies, maternity costs are a big consideration ... the costs of having children cannot be shared by the society, they can only be shared by firms,” added Tang.

“When they take this into consideration, they will reduce job opportunities for women and prefer men more.”

By law, China protects equal employment, and in 2019 the government started imposing a fine of up to 50,000 yuan (US\$7,700) for gender discriminatory job postings.

At the end of last year, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security also published a notice banning gender discrimination via online recruitment.

But less than a third of women surveyed by Zhaopin believed that the rules could actually improve the work environment for women.

Lawsuits against gender discrimination during recruitment, though, are rare. One of the first such cases appeared in Zhejiang province in eastern China in 2014, when a new graduate sued a culinary school for repeatedly declining her applications for a clerk role. She was eventually awarded 2,000 yuan (US\$309), which failed to even cover her legal fees.

"We are fully aware that recruitment is only the first step. There is more hidden gender discrimination at work, too," said Tang.

"What we can do is to get rid of discrimination in the hiring process first. And hopefully we can have more government oversight in the future."

CHINA jails citizen journalist Zhang Zhan for four years over Wuhan coronavirus reports

Court in Shanghai hands sentence down to Zhang after she was found guilty of 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble'. Supporters denied entry to the courtroom to see Zhang, who has been on a hunger strike while awaiting trial and attended court in a wheelchair.

By Guo Rui

South China Morning Post (28.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3hVLTtd> - Citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was sentenced to four years in prison in Shanghai on Monday for her reporting on the coronavirus pandemic in central Chinese city of Wuhan early this year, one of her lawyers said.

Zhang, 37, was found guilty by Shanghai Pudong New Area People's Court on Monday morning of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble", a broadly defined offence which carries a maximum sentence of five years and is often used by police to stifle dissent.

"Zhang Zhan attended the trial in a wheelchair and was in poor health," lawyer Zhang Keke said.

"She did not immediately say if she would appeal [against the sentence]."

On social media after the trial, Zhang Keke said: "[During the trial] the prosecutor only read out the list of evidence, without showing most of it, including the core evidence. Zhang Zhan said citizens' speech should not be censored. But apart from that, she basically did not speak."

Zhang Zhan, who has been held in a detention centre in Pudong district in Shanghai since mid-May, has maintained her innocence and in June she started refusing to take food to protest against her arrest, legal sources said.

She was one of the few citizen journalists in China to report on the early experiences of people in Wuhan during the city's lockdown. The others have either been detained or ordered to stop their online reporting.

In front of the Pudong court, dozens of people who came from all over the country to support Zhang Zhan were driven away by police, according to witnesses.

Li Dawei, 58, a rights activist and former police officer from Gansu province, said he took the train to Shanghai to show support. He said he arrived at the court at around 9am and asked to enter the courtroom to observe the trial but was stopped by police.

He said he argued with police, asserting that the charge against Zhang was only “provoking trouble”, which did not involve state secrets or personal privacy, and questioned why, as a public trial, citizens could not walk in and listen.

Li said police told him he should have applied to the judge in advance, but Li said this violated the freedom of citizens to observe an open court case.

After an argument, Li was taken to the police station and was released at around 1pm, he said.

“I have not met Zhang Zhan, just chatted with her on social media, and after knowing that she went to Wuhan alone I was very worried,” Li said.

“We kept in touch until she was arrested. Knowing that she was on a hunger strike made me even more anxious. I have to support her. I was shocked by the sentence. She should be released right now and get treatment.”

A Wuhan resident who would only identify herself as “Xiaomu”, travelled from Wuhan to Shanghai on Sunday. She had met Zhang Zhan in the central Chinese city in April.

“We were full of fears about the virus and the future during the Wuhan lockdown, so we thanked Zhang Zhan for arriving in Wuhan. So brave. I heard that she bought a train ticket to Chongqing and got off in Wuhan alone,” she said.

She said she also tried to enter the court to observe the trial and was refused by the police who told her she could not go in because of epidemic prevention and control measures in place.

“Zhang Zhan is the one paying the biggest price for Wuhan, a price of blood and tears, of health and life. Zhang Zhan is unbelievably determined for the truth and faith. As a Wuhan native, I must support her,” she said.

Wu Yangwei, a Guangzhou-based activist, was critical of the sentence.

“The four-year sentence is too heavy,” said Wu who uses the pseudonym Ye Du on social media. “But for anyone who understands this regime, this was within expectations.

“This regime stands on two pillars: lies and power. It covers up the truth about the pandemic with lies so it can carry on its rule ... and uses power to intimidate and shut up the ordinary people, and heavy sentences [to punish] people who are not afraid of the intimidation.”

CHINA: Xinjiang government confirms huge birth rate drop but denies forced sterilization of women

By Ivan Watson, Rebecca Wright and Ben Westcott

CNN (21.09.2020) - <https://cnn.it/3hPVa4h> - Chinese officials have officially acknowledged birth rates in Xinjiang dropped by almost a third in 2018, compared to the

previous year, in a letter to CNN in which they also denied reports of forced sterilization and genocide by authorities in the far western region.

The Xinjiang government sent CNN the six-page fax in response to questions for an article published in July that documented a campaign of abuse and control by Beijing targeting women from the Uyghur minority, a Muslim ethnic group numbering more than 10 million people. The fax didn't arrive until September 1, a month after the story was published.

These aren't the first accusations of widespread human rights abuses by the Chinese government in Xinjiang. Up to 2 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are believed to have been placed in mass detention centers in the region, according to the US State Department, where they have allegedly been subject to indoctrination and abuse.

Beijing claims that these centers are voluntary and provide vocational training as part of a de-radicalization program in Xinjiang, which saw a spate of violent attacks in recent years.

But CNN's reporting found that some Uyghur women were being forced to use birth control and undergo sterilization as part of a deliberate attempt to push down birth rates among minorities in Xinjiang.

The article was based on a report by Adrian Zenz, a senior fellow at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation known for his research on Xinjiang, who quoted official Chinese documents showing a surge in the number of sterilizations performed in the region -- from fewer than 50 per 100,000 people in 2016 to almost 250 per 100,000 people in 2018.

Zenz said that these actions fell under the United Nations definition of "genocide" specifically "imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group."

In its response, the Xinjiang government strongly denied the claims of genocide, arguing instead that the Uyghur population has been "growing continuously" during the past decade and that Zenz's report was not "in line with the real situation in Xinjiang."

According to the government, the population of Xinjiang rose by more than 3 million people, or almost 14%, between 2010 and 2018, with the Uyghur population growing faster than the region's average rate.

"The rights and interests of Uyghur and other ethnic minorities have been fully protected," the response said. "The so-called 'genocide' is pure nonsense."

Birth rate plunges

But the government didn't dispute the rise in sterilizations or the gap in the ratio of new intrauterine devices (IUDs) between Xinjiang and the rest of mainland China. While IUD implants have plunged in China overall, falling to just 21 per 100,000 people in 2018, in Xinjiang they are becoming increasingly common.

According to local government statistics, there were almost 1,000 new IUD implants per 100,000 people in Xinjiang in 2018, or 80% of China's total for that year.

The Xinjiang government said in its response that the birth rate in the region had dropped from 15.88 per 1,000 people in 2017 to 10.69 per 1,000 people in 2018. The fax said that the drop was due to "the comprehensive implementation of the family planning policy."

Up until 2015, the Chinese government enforced a "one-child" family planning policy countrywide, which allowed most urban couples no more than one baby. Ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghur people, were typically allowed to have up to three but Xinjiang expert Zenz said that families from these groups often had many more children. When China officially began the two-child policy in January 2016, Uyghur citizens living in cities were limited to two children for the first time as well -- their rural counterparts could still have up to three.

The Xinjiang government attributed the sudden drop in population to Beijing's family planning policies finally being properly implemented in the region after 2017.

"In 2018, the number of newborns decreased by approximately 120,000 compared with 2017, of which about 80,000 were because of better implementation of family planning policy in accordance with law, according to estimates by the health and statistics department," the response to CNN said. The government insisted that those who complied with the family planning policies did so voluntarily.

The government attributed the remaining 40,000 fewer babies to increased education and economic development, resulting in fewer children in the region. The Xinjiang government did not include the 2019 birth figures for the region.

"As a part of China, Xinjiang implements family planning policies in accordance with national laws and regulations, and has never formulated and implemented family planning policies for a single ethnic minority," the response said.

But Zenz pointed out that changes to the natural birth rate should take place over several years or even a decade, not in the space of 12 to 36 months.

In reference to the government's claims that compliance with the family planning policies were voluntary, Zenz questioned how likely it was that "17 times more women spontaneously wanted to be sterilized."

"Han Chinese academics from Xinjiang have themselves written that the Uyghurs resist any type of contraceptive (and especially sterilization)," he said in a statement to CNN.

In their fax, the Xinjiang government also attacked Zenz personally, saying that he was "deliberately fabricating lies" and accused him of being a religious fanatic who believed he was "led by God" to oppose China.

Zenz dismissed the Chinese government's allegations, saying they were "resorting to personal attacks" because they couldn't disprove his research. "Far more egregious than these personal attacks on me are Beijing's smears against the Uyghur witnesses," he said in a statement.

Attacks on women

The Xinjiang government also zeroed in on claims made by two female Uyghurs quoted in CNN's article -- Zumrat Dawut and Gulbakhar Jalilova.

Dawut said she had been forced into sterilization by the local government in Xinjiang when she went to a government office to pay a fine for having one too many children. Dawut also said she had been in a detention center in Xinjiang for about three months from March 2018.

In their response, the government said that Dawut had never been inside a voluntary "education and training center," the name used by the Chinese government for the alleged detention centers, and that she had signed a form agreeing to the procedure known as tubal ligation.

In CNN's article, Jalilova, who is a citizen of Kazakhstan and an ethnic Uyghur, said she was held in a detention center for 15 months after being arrested suddenly and without explanation during a business trip to Xinjiang in May 2017.

Jalilova claimed she suffered humiliation and torture while inside the camps and said she was raped by one of the guards.

The Xinjiang government confirmed Jalilova's claims that she had been detained for 15 months from May 2017, alleging she was arrested "on suspicion of aiding terrorist activities." In August 2018 she was released on bail, after which she returned to Kazakhstan.

In their statement, the government denied that Jalilova had been raped or tortured, saying that all of her "rights were fully guaranteed" and the staff who were in her cell could prove it.

When asked to respond to the Chinese government's statement, Jalilova stood by her claims and demanded the Xinjiang authorities provide their proof. "Why don't they show a video? Why don't they show a photo during my time in prison showing that I was well fed and not beaten. The cameras were working 24 hours," she said.

"I am a citizen of Kazakhstan, what right did they have to detain me for a year and a half?"

CHINA: Gender equality in China, from birth ratio to politics and unpaid care work, still has a long way to go: report

Chinese government report published by the UN Population Fund finds business leadership and politics remain heavily skewed towards men. Gender disparity in education continues to be far higher in rural areas.

By Mandy Zuo

South China Morning Post (23.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34uFY9W> - From a biased sex ratio at birth to low representation of women in leadership positions, women in China are still at a great disadvantage in many areas, according to a new report by the Chinese government.

While most of the unpaid work is done by women, men still dominate important positions in the political system, top academies and judicial systems, according to the report, "Women and Men in China, Facts and Figures 2019".

Development of women in China had "reached a brand new level", but it was still an "arduous" task because of factors relating to economic growth, historical and cultural reasons, said the report, published on the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) website this week.

It was issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and is its sixth report on the theme since 1995. The UNFPA provided technical and financial support.

The ratio of boys to girls at birth, a reflection of sex preference, remained high. There were nearly 112 boys born for every 100 girls in 2017, according to the report.

The natural ratio in this regard is often considered to be around 105 boys for every 100 girls, according to the World Health Organisation.

In 2015, a year after China allowed a second child for some couples, the sex ratio for the second child was over 113 boys for every 100 girls. When it comes to the third child, whose parents need to pay a social support fee as punishment, the ratio was over 148.

In employment, women accounted for just 30 per cent of leadership positions, the report indicated.

The number of women in China's legislature is rising, but there are still far fewer than men. Women made up only one-quarter of the National People's Congress membership, it showed. There is just one woman in the 25-member Politburo of the Communist Party.

Taking care of family was the top reason women lost their jobs, while the time they spent on unpaid care work was more than double that done by men.

Gender disparity continued to be much higher in rural areas, the report suggested.

While China has closed the gender education gap with both sexes achieving universal literacy in urban areas after imposing a nine-year compulsory education, many born in poor villages are still not able to finish school. The average period of education received in rural areas is 7.3 years for girls, comparing to 8.1 years for boys.

For senior rural dwellers, about 57 per cent of women live supported by their family members, compared with 35 per cent for men, the report showed.

Feng Yuan, co-founder of Equality, an NGO for women's rights, said: "Progress is slow and in some ways it's even going backwards, because there has been no practical policy and measures [from the government]."

She urged the central government to take the major responsibility for pushing gender equality forwards.

"It needs more determination from the top leadership," she said.

China ranked 106th among 153 countries in the World Economic Forum's annual ranking on global gender equality last year.

It was the 11th decline in a row, mainly because of slow improvement in its male-dominated political landscape, the report said.

It was 63rd in 2006 when the organisation began compiling the rankings.

CHINA: Sterilizations, IUDs, and mandatory birth control: The CCP's campaign to suppress Uyghur birthrates in Xinjiang

The Jamestown Foundation (29.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3iLdJbE> - Dr. Adrian Zenz is one of the world's leading scholars on People's Republic of China (PRC) government policies towards the country's western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. Research performed by Dr. Zenz in 2017-2018 played a significant role in bringing to light the Chinese government's campaign of repression and mass internment directed against ethnic Uyghur persons in Xinjiang (China Brief, September 21, 2017; China Brief, May 15, 2018; China Brief, November 5, 2018). Dr. Zenz has also testified before the U.S. Congress about state exploitation of the labor of incarcerated Uyghur persons (CECC, October 17, 2019), and was the author earlier this year of an in-depth analysis of the "Karakax List," a leaked PRC government document relating to repressive practices directed against religious practice among Uyghur Muslims (Journal of Political Risk, February 17, 2020).

In this special Jamestown Foundation [report](#), Dr. Zenz presents detailed analysis of another troubling aspect of state policy in Xinjiang: measures to forcibly suppress birthrates among ethnic Uyghur communities, to include the mass application of mandatory birth control and sterilizations. This policy, directed by the authorities of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is intended to reduce the Uyghur population in Xinjiang relative to the numbers of ethnic Han Chinese—and thereby to promote more rapid Uyghur assimilation into the "Chinese Nation-Race" (中华民族, Zhonghua Minzu), a priority goal of national-level ethnic policy under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Based on research in original Chinese-language source materials, Dr. Zenz presents a compelling case that the CCP party-state apparatus in Xinjiang is engaged in severe human rights violations that meet the criteria for genocide as defined by the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

CHINA: Chinese social justice activist 'disappeared'

Li Qiaochu's last tweet: 'Let's go through the tough time together'.

By Yaqiu Wang

HRW (11.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dcZwS6> - Li Qiaochu, a Beijing-based women's rights and labor activist, tweeted on January 24 about the Chinese authorities' attempted coverup of the COVID-19 outbreak: "Wish everyone a peaceful [Lunar] New Year. Let's remember the pain... and the lives that left us without even being tallied.... Let's use civic engagement to pursue those responsible for trampling lives."

Early on the morning of February 16, Beijing authorities took Li into custody. It is unclear where she is now and with what crime she has been charged.

Some international media have reported Li's enforced disappearance in relation to the recent arbitrary detention of her partner, Xu Zhiyong, a prominent and previously imprisoned legal activist. But what has often been overlooked is Li's own tireless work on social justice issues, and the repeated police harassment and intimidation she has endured.

During the freezing winter of 2017, when Beijing authorities forcibly evicted tens of thousands of migrant workers from their homes during a citywide "clean-up campaign,"

Li worked with other volunteers to find free or cheap housing for the newly homeless. Since 2018, she played an active role in China's #MeToo movement, collecting cases of sexual harassment and publishing reports online.

As the coronavirus crisis unfolded, Li joined a volunteer team that handed out free masks to sanitation workers in Beijing. She also helped pregnant women in quarantine areas to find doctors, and organized volunteers to help those who suffered domestic violence – instances of which rose markedly while households across the country were under quarantine or other forms of restriction.

"Let's go through the tough time together." This is the last tweet Li posted before her disappearance, in reply to a tweet by Luo Shengchun, the wife of the arbitrarily detained human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi. In the past several years, despite the government of Xi Jinping's ever-tightening grip on civil society, countless people have chosen to embrace one of China's toughest life paths – challenging the powerful authoritarian government. Let's remember the pain they endure in the struggle for human rights in China.

INDIA: 'Pay up': Indian trafficking victims left destitute by compensation delays

Hit by COVID-19 delays, some 12,000 survivors of trafficking, sexual assault and acid attacks are waiting for claims to be assessed

By Anuradha Nagaraj

Thomson Reuters Foundation (06.04.2021) - After being trafficked for sex as a girl of 16, Malika hoped that government compensation would get her back on her feet - but the young mother is now jobless, living on the streets and 200,000 Indian rupees (\$2,727) in debt.

Despite being awarded 150,000 rupees in compensation in 2019, Malika is among thousands of women survivors of trafficking, sexual assault and acid attacks waiting for payment since the COVID-19 pandemic struck last year.

"We are living in an open ground with a plastic sheet over our heads," the 20-year-old mother of two, who declined to give her full name, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from her makeshift shelter in India's West Bengal state.

"I applied for victim compensation to build a better life but I am living a terrible one instead," she said, adding that her husband had travelled to look for odd jobs, leaving her with the children who kept falling ill.

Malika said creditors regularly hounded her to repay loans she has taken to feed her children but when the compensation does arrive, it will not even clear her debts.

There were more than 400,000 cases of crimes against women and girls in 2019, government data shows, with sexual assault, rape and domestic violence being the most common.

India has a scheme to compensate women and girls who survive sexual assault, acid attacks and trafficking, but only a fraction receive compensation due to low awareness of the scheme and the high burden of proof required, studies show.

Government data shared with the Thomson Reuters Foundation shows that more than 12,000 women and girl survivors of these crimes were waiting to have their applications for compensation assessed in January, up from about 11,000 in 2019.

West Bengal State Legal Services Authority, which is responsible for paying compensation to survivors like Malika, had "exhausted funds by March 2020 and had just 5,000 rupees in the account", said its member secretary Raju Mukherjee.

"We could do nothing, make no payments," said Mukherjee, whose state has among the highest number of trafficking survivors in India. "But we have recently received funds ... and are trying to expedite the process now."

NO MONEY

Women's rights campaigners have long complained that the compensation scheme is too slow, with survivors waiting years to testify in court to determine the size of their award, while state authorities often run short of funds.

This cumbersome process has been exacerbated during the pandemic, said Ashok Jain, member secretary for the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), the umbrella body for all of the state level authorities that make payments to survivors.

With courts functioning at limited capacity, survivors unable to travel to follow up on cases and priority shifting to containing the pandemic, compensation applications were not cleared and money was not dispersed, legal aid officials said.

"Many acid attack survivors had to stop their ongoing treatment during the pandemic as compensation was not coming through," said Dibyaloke Rai Chaudhuri, coordinator for Acid Survivors and Women Welfare Foundation.

Part compensation needs to be paid within 15 days of the application being cleared, Chaudhuri said, adding that the need for money was most urgent in the initial days, particularly for medical treatment.

NALSA said that the sums offered do take into account the severity of trauma, physical harm, medical expenses, loss of education, employment and financial condition of the survivor.

Frustrated that one of his clients - a child who had been sexually abused - had waited two years for 40,000 rupees in compensation, lawyer Zishaan Iskandari filed a petition in the Delhi High Court last June, during a two-month lockdown.

"It was a migrant family who literally had a hand-to-mouth existence and could not even go back to their village," said Iskandari, who provides legal aid to charity HAQ Centre for Child Rights.

"It had been two years since the compensation was awarded and I had at least 25 similar cases. It took a court order for the Delhi Legal Services Authority to release the money within 48 hours."

Across states, lawyers and charities said that routine checks by legal services authorities before clearing a compensation application is a slow process that was practically halted during the pandemic, with state cash flows badly hit.

"Survivors ... are often from the most marginalised communities. How can you tell them there is no money?" asked Iskandari.

"PAY UP"

While COVID-19 infections and deaths have fallen since their peak in September, coronavirus cases are on the rise in India, which has recorded more than 160,000 deaths - the fourth highest globally after the United States, Brazil and Mexico.

Survivor networks have urged state governments to step up support during the pandemic as stigma makes it even harder for survivors to get jobs or financial aid amid massive job losses.

"Very few (survivors) are aware of the compensation scheme and actually apply for it," said Ram Mohan, secretary of anti-trafficking charity HELP, which supports survivors, mostly poor women and children lured by promises of work.

"Those who do, wait endlessly. But the wait during the pandemic was probably the longest for many because there were no jobs and no other source of income."

The hardship suffered by survivors during the pandemic has sparked fresh calls for reform of the compensation system, with women's rights campaigners calling for faster, more generous payments.

"Survivors are becoming more aware, demanding their rights," said Amina Khatun Laskar, secretary of anti-trafficking NGO Bansra Birangana Seva Samity.

"The system is not supporting them. They cannot afford these delays and (states) need to pay up."

(\$1 = 73.3510 Indian rupees)

INDIA: 'It's not a grave we must fit in': the Kashmir women fighting for marital rights

Women are slowly gaining rights and finding the strength to shake off the social taboos around ending a bad relationship.

By Furkan Latif Khan

The Guardian (09.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38hh10J> - Parveena Jabeen was all set to get married, but in Kashmir weddings are extravagant affairs.

Traditionally, brides in the valley of Kashmir would take a trousseau with them to the groom's house, including clothes, jewellery, makeup, gifts for the in-laws and even furniture.

Jabeen's father died when she was 19 and so, as the eldest of four, she worked as a tutor to feed her family. In August 2019, when Kashmir was put under a political lockdown, she lost her job.

Jabeen was worried that she might be mocked if she asked relatives for help, but then she heard of a group that supported women. "I approached them because I felt that they would not talk about helping us throughout the town," she says.

Kashmir weddings, an important social function, are notorious for their extravagance and at times the state has intervened to put restrictions on expenses.

"Families end up selling their properties, taking out loans, for unnecessary social customs. We don't want to encourage that practice, so we do not buy gifts for in-laws or home furnishings," says Shehryar Khanum, a founding member of Mehram, a charity to help struggling brides.

The organisation also supports new brides and women trying to leave bad marriages. "She explained to me how I should take care of myself after marriage, to be vigilant and responsible. She insisted that I should not give up work, no matter what happens, because that is the only way to keep my future secure," says Jabeen.

This advice is essential, says Khanum: "We come across so many women who are asked to give up work after marriage. It is an unspoken rule that this is a reasonable thing to say, which it is not," she says. "In Kashmir very few women are upfront about their rights – religious or legal. As an organisation, we believe that they should be."

In Kashmir, tradition has a big impact on decision-making, says Prof Muzammil Jan, who has studied Kashmiri women's changing roles in society. "Even religion is misused in the context of women's empowerment.

"The majority of women's decisions are forced on them by male decision-making power, whether she is married or unmarried."

Most marriages are under sharia law, where a document is signed by both the bride and the groom, and the clauses are often seen as set and so are rarely edited. But Mehram is trying to change that. "We are working on a model, nikkah-naama, where we want to include the rights of the bride in writing," says Khanum.

While the Indian constitution has been adjusting to enshrine women's rights, the legal structure of Kashmir has been slower to catch up. In August 2019, a constitutional amendment withdrew Kashmir's special status, extending laws from India to the region, and it is now possible for women to demand compensation for abuse in a marriage, as well as medical expenses and residential rights.

"The new laws aim to provide women with legal remedies by way of independent adjudicating bodies like family courts. These laws give women right to claim maintenance from court under exclusive provisions," says Viqas Malik, a lawyer in Kashmir.

But bureaucracy is slow. The state's only women's commission was disbanded and it is not yet known when a new one will be established. There is little trust in legal structures to deliver justice to women.

"Institutions here are almost always inclined towards reconciliation. That means that you are overlooking justice and replacing it with what is socially acceptable, which may not always be just," says Khanum.

Sarah Mir (not her real name), 35, has been frequenting Mehram's office for several months. Mir's marriage was arranged by her brother. "I met my husband for the first time on the day of my ring ceremony. I barely saw his face. I saw his face on the photos of the ceremony later," she says.

Mir found she was expected to be her husband's housemaid. "I was disrespected, neglected and even beaten by him," she says. "But I did not share any of the abuse with my family because I did not want to worry them."

Eight months into her marriage, Mir's father died and she went home. "Eventually, he came with all his family members, asking me to adjust to the life I was given and only then I would be accepted back in his family."

Mir registered complaints against her husband with multiple agencies but nothing persuaded him to discuss the marriage. Even her local police station did not file a complaint, Mir claims. "He wants the divorce to take place in a cave, so that the judgment is in his favour," says Mir.

In Kashmir, the predominant body for marital settlements are mohalla committees, a group of local people, who are invited to mediate by the families. But most mohalla committees are headed by men, says Khanum. "So it is often just a superimposition of the social view, rather than justice."

Mir sees no solution yet in sight but visits to Mehram have been therapeutic. "I am thankful, for the mental support. Otherwise, I feel like I would have committed suicide," she says. "Most women going through distressed marriages struggle to find support and are told that marriage is a grave and they must fit in it."

Mehram is trying to fill that void. "Right now, I think some women are here just to talk. We are trying to create a space where women feel that it is their place, talk to each other and share their experiences," says Khanum.

There is a WhatsApp group where women can share insights on their legal and marital rights.

"I faced a lot of problems while growing up. And I was worried that I would not be able to sustain if I face marital problems. But after joining this group and getting in touch with other women, I have been feeling so much more secure," says Jabeen. "I feel supported."

INDIA: Generational change in India: How might raising the legal age of marriage from 18 to 21 change the lives of girls?

By Aarushi Khanna

Equal Measures 2030 (04.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3lXN6jS> - India is home to the highest number of child brides in the world. UNICEF estimates that almost half of the child marriages in the world happen in South Asia, 1-in-3 of which are in India[1]. The existing legal framework sets the minimum legal age of marriage for girls in India at 18 which the current political leadership is considering revising to 21. An announcement in this regard was recently made by the Indian Prime Minister in August 2020. Women's rights organisations and gender equality advocates have expressed their apprehension about the proposed change in the law.

Decisions around marriage in India are governed by a complex set of compounding factors: poverty; dowry where the younger the bride, the lower the dowry expectation; a way to protect the family honour; a means to prevent rape and pre-marital sex; and perceptions around labour and productivity[2]. All these factors serve as obstacles to conforming to the child marriage law. This is also the reason families consider education for young girls as less of a priority and more of a futile investment since girl's productive capacities are often believed to benefit her marital family. The practise of early marriage

is often justified by parents and guardians as a means of securing girls' future and protecting them from the risk of physical and sexual violence. The law in its current form is also used by parents and community members to control and punish girls from choosing their own partner. In reality, it is a means of exercising control over young women's bodily autonomy.

Though declining, the practise of child marriage is clearly rampant in India. Even 40 years after the enactment of the current Child Marriage Prohibition Act, the number of young women to be married under 18 remains extremely high, 1-in-4 [3]. The proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married before age 18 was 50% in 1992–93, 47% in 2005–06 and only saw a noticeable dip of 19% between 2005 and 2015[4]. Increased access to education, increased literacy of mothers, and government investment were contributing factors that have enabled this impressive dip in the last decade. India's progress has been strong but not fast enough to eliminate the practise by 2030. So why is the government looking to revise the age of marriage law?

Two reasons:

- To achieve better maternal health outcomes: Early marriage in India is linked to early pregnancy and the subsequent increased risk of maternal mortality. The government is of the view that increasing age at marriage would delay age at first pregnancy and would lead to better maternal and child health outcomes.
- The other compelling argument supports demographics: Delaying age of marriage is linked to delaying age at pregnancies and likely to reduce the overall number of pregnancies[5].

Sahaj, our partner in India is of the view that this approach is rather simplistic and removed from the ground reality. Improved maternal and child health outcomes rely on financial stability, good nutrition, and level of education and not just the age at pregnancy. Being part of the national and state level advocacy on the issue, Sahaj believes that the conversation needs to focus on factors that enable young women to be empowered to make informed decisions. Over the last decade India has seen a decline in both child marriage and fertility, these shifts have not been an outcome of legislative changes but a result of investment and interventions in health, education, skilling, and financial inclusion. The government must be cognizant of these factors and recognise that a legal intervention at this point is unnecessary.

"In my opinion changing the age at marriage won't lead to a reduction in maternal mortality. The real cause for that is the lack of and poor quality of maternal health services available." 18 years old, peer educator, Vadodara, Gujarat.

So, what can the government do? Here is a list of other areas that the government might focus on to eliminate this harmful practice by 2030.

- Invest in improving education outcomes for girls. At the current pace of change an estimated 68% of girls ages 20–24 will have completed secondary education by 2030[6]. All barriers that lead to increased dropouts by girls must be identified and addressed to ensure that every girl completes secondary education by 2030.
- Improve access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to promote bodily autonomy, increased decision making and healthy sexual behaviours and activities that are linked to a decrease in risky behaviour and contribute to eliminating harmful practices. School closures due to Covid-19 are further hindering the delivery of CSE and reproductive health information.
- Invest more to ensure universal access to quality contraception, maternal health services, and safe abortion services. India's progress on meeting contraception needs of married women only improved by 6.9% between 2008 and 2018[7].

Reproductive health services have been severely impacted by Covid-19 and are likely to impact progress on contraceptive access across India.

- Create job opportunities. The pandemic triggered a migration crisis in India. The announcement of the lockdown resulted in massive job losses of daily wage laborers who had migrated to large cities for work. It is estimated that over 10.6 million migrant workers returned to their home state with no further income prospects [8]. In such times of socio-economic uncertainty, migrant parents with young daughters are marrying them off early to secure their future and ensure their well-being.
- Listen to girls and keep their interest at the centre of all policy and programme. Covid-19 has led to major disruption in the education system with the closure of schools and their lives, increasing risk of early marriage and other harmful practices. When Sahaj spoke to young women in different parts of Vadodara (Gujarat) about their thoughts on proposed change in law they said...

"Its my appeal to the government to change the education system, improve the quality of teaching in government schools, provide compulsory computer training, provide scholarships and vocational training to start businesses and work so girls are not a financial burden on their family and can negotiate life decisions." 21 years old, Vadodara, Gujarat.

"India has committed to eliminating the practice of child marriage by 2030 as a part of the Sustainable Development Agenda. Covid-19 is adding another layer of complexity, there is a fear that years of progress made on the issue may rescind. The children's helpline in India has already reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage in June-July this year compared to 2019[8]. In this context India must prioritise improving access to education, quality sexual and reproductive health and nutrition while empowering young women and girls."

**Members of the Sahaj team include Hemal Shah, Nilangi Sardeshpande, Rashmi Deshpande, Renu Khanna, Vaishali Zararia

Footnotes:

- [1] <https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/end-childmarriage#:~:text=While%20the%20prevalence%20of%20girls,the%20prevalence%20of%20the%20practice.>
- [2] <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>
- [3] <https://www.unicef.org/india/media/1176/file/Ending-Child-Marriage.pdf>
- [4] National Family Health Survey — 2,3,4 estimates <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>
- [5] <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-may-relook-age-of-marriage-for-women/article32364889.ece>
- [6] Equal Measures 2020 Data hub <https://data.em2030.org/2020-index-projections/data-explorer-by-country/>.
- [7] Sahaj Bending the Curve Factsheet, 2020 <http://www.sahaj.org.in/factsheets.php>
- [8] https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/struggling-to-find-work-under-mqnregs-bihar-migrants-head-back-to-cities-120101900238_1.html
- [9] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54186709>

INDIA: Women at risk of sexual abuse at work

Poorly enforced laws leave informal workers no recourse.

HRW (14.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31rJeQV> - The Indian government's failure to properly enforce its sexual harassment law leaves millions of women in the workplace exposed to

abuse without remedy, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. The government should urgently ensure compliance with its 2013 [Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace \(Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal\) Act](#), or POSH Act as it is popularly known.

The 56-page report, "[No #MeToo for Women Like Us': Poor Enforcement of India's Sexual Harassment Law](#)," finds that while women in India are increasingly speaking out against sexual abuse at work, in part due to the global #MeToo movement, many, particularly in the informal sector, are still constrained by stigma, fear of retribution, and institutional barriers to justice. The central and local governments have failed to promote, establish, and monitor complaints committees – a central feature of the POSH Act – to receive complaints of sexual harassment, conduct inquiries, and recommend actions against abusers.

"The #MeToo movement helped to shine a light on violence and harassment at work, but the experiences of millions of women in India's informal sector remain invisible," said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "India has progressive laws to protect women from sexual abuse by bosses, colleagues, and clients, but has failed to take basic steps to enforce these laws."

Human Rights Watch conducted field research and over 85 interviews in Tamil Nadu, Haryana, and Delhi, including with women working in both the formal and informal sectors, trade union officials, labor and women rights activists, lawyers, and academics. The findings also draw upon research by Indian organizations.

Women, inspired by the global #MeToo movement, who came forward with complaints against men in senior positions have often encountered a backlash, including threats, intimidation, retaliation, attempted bribes, gaps and bias in legal procedure, and stigma. Those accused have frequently used the colonial-era criminal defamation law against the women who dare to speak out. These produce a chilling effect deterring other victims from coming forward.

The September 2020 alleged gang rape and murder of a 19-year-old Dalit woman in Uttar Pradesh state highlighted both rampant violence against women in India and structural violence against poor and marginalized communities. The authorities' response illustrates the barriers women face in accessing justice.

The vast majority of India's women workers, 95 percent (195 million), are employed in the informal sector. These include jobs from street vendors, domestic work, agriculture, and construction, to home-based work, such as weaving or embroidery. There are also 2.6 million early-childhood care and nutrition workers under the government's Integrated Child Development Services; over 1 million Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) who work as community health workers; and 2.5 million midday meal cooks, who prepare the free lunches provided in government schools.

"For women like me, what is #MeToo? Poverty and stigma mean we can never speak out," said a part-time domestic worker who was sexually harassed by a security guard. "There is no place safe for women like us."

The 2013 POSH Act mandates employers to take steps to protect female employees from sexual harassment in the workplace and to provide procedures for resolution, settlement, or prosecution. It widened the definition of the workplace and covered the informal sector, including domestic workers. It protects all workers in any place visited by the employee during the course of her employment, including transportation.

The law builds upon the 1997 “Vishaka Guidelines” set out by the Supreme Court, mandating that employers take steps to protect female employees from sexual harassment at work after Bhanwari Devi, a government social worker, was gang raped in 1992 by men angered by her efforts to stop a child marriage in their family.

The POSH Act requires employers to create an Internal Committee at each office with 10 or more employees. For other establishments with less than 10 employees and for women working in the informal sector, the state government’s district officer or collector is required to form a Local Committee in each district.

These committees handle complaints and recommend actions ranging from a written apology to termination of employment, providing an alternative to filing a criminal complaint with police. Under the POSH Act, the government is also responsible for developing training and educational materials, organizing awareness programs, monitoring implementation of the law, and maintaining data on the number of sexual harassment cases filed and resolved in the workplace. But studies show that many of these Local Committees simply do not exist, and when they do, there is no publicly available information on how to access them.

“Most women suffer in silence until it becomes unbearable, and then they just try to get another job,” said Sonia George, a senior official at a trade union. “They do not want to tell their families either because they are afraid that they will be prevented from working.”

Domestic workers are especially at risk of sexual harassment and violence due to their isolation in private homes and their exclusion from many key labor protections guaranteed to other workers. For domestic workers, the POSH Act says that Local Committees must refer the case to the police, leaving no civil remedy. The Indian government should amend the law to ensure that domestic workers have the same access to time-bound justice through the Local Committees as other workers, Human Rights Watch said.

While most private sector companies have Internal Committees, many exist merely on paper to show compliance without any commitment to improving the workplace culture. Employers do little to fulfill their other duties, such as prevention, raising awareness about what constitutes sexual harassment, and consequences for such behavior.

In both the formal and informal sectors, the government should set up effective monitoring systems for committees and publish regular reports to ensure transparency and accountability. The government should establish Local Committees at every level of the local government to ensure easy access and conduct regular training for committee members, district magistrates, and other relevant district officials.

In June 2019, the Indian government, representatives of Indian workers’ groups, and representatives from Indian employers’ associations all voted in favor of the International Labour Organization Violence and Harassment Convention, a landmark treaty that establishes global standards to prevent and respond to violence and harassment in the workplace.

India should ratify the ILO treaty and fully enforce the POSH Act, Human Rights Watch said.

“The Indian government should stand for the rights of women, whether they are domestic workers, government scheme workers, or office workers, to work in safety and dignity,” Ganguly said. “The government should coordinate with workers’ organizations and rights groups to address sexual harassment and violence as a key workplace issue,

partner in information campaigns, and ensure that those who face abuse can get the support and remedies they deserve.”

Illustrative cases from the report

Shanta (name changed), health worker

Shanta, 38, an ASHA health worker in Haryana, said that health workers are particularly vulnerable when they are called to work at night. If they bring a complaint, they come under intense pressure from family of the accused, society, and their own family to withdraw it. In January 2014, Shanta was called by a contractor at a construction site to help a woman who was about to give birth. She said she accompanied the woman to a hospital, but the ambulance driver tried to molest her on the way back:

I didn't say anything at home because I was scared, but I called the medical-in-charge and told him what happened. The staff and supervisors helped me, and we found the driver after three days. But then the police and other ASHA workers asked me to compromise. He apologized in front of dozens of ASHA workers and they asked me not to file an official complaint. But no one told me that there was a law, and I could file a complaint at a Local Committee.

Kainaat (name changed), domestic worker

Kainaat, 25, became a domestic worker when she was 12 after her family migrated from West Bengal to Gurgaon in search of work. For the first few years, as a child, she labored as a live-in domestic worker in various homes, suffering beatings and threats. In 2012, when she was 17, an older man sexually harassed her:

When his children and grandchildren would go out, he would purposely stay home and keep following me around. He would pat my back, but then his hands would wander. I tried to ignore. Once when he did this, there was no one at home so I went to the washroom and did not come out until others returned. I knew no one would believe me if I told them, so I kept quiet. That man used to tell me, “Wear a short dress, you will look better in it.” I put up with it because I had to earn to support my family. But I finally quit because I was so frustrated and decided not to work as a live-in maid anymore.

Shalini (name changed), domestic worker

Shalini was sexually harassed for months by a security guard of the apartment complex in Gurgaon, Haryana, where she worked as a part-time domestic worker:

He would say he loved me. He would wait by the elevator at the end of my shift and when I was alone in the elevator, he would make lewd remarks. One day, it went too far when the guard took out money, forced it into my hands, and asked me to go with him. That day, I cried endlessly when I went home and told my husband I wanted to go back to the village. My husband and my brother-in-law went to the colony and complained to the head of security, whom they knew, and the guard was quietly transferred. If my employers had come to know, they would have likely blamed me. That is why I kept quiet.

For women like me, what is #MeToo? Poverty and stigma mean we can never speak out. There is no place safe for women like us. Not our workplaces, nor our homes, and not the road we take.

INDIA: Balrampur: Anger grows after new India 'gang rape' death

The death of a second Dalit woman in a few days after an alleged gang rape has shocked and angered India.

BBC News (02.10.2020) - <https://bbc.in/33AmZJW> - The 22-year-old was dragged into a vehicle after going to apply for admission at a local school and raped, her mother told the BBC.

The news follows the death of another Dalit woman, 19, on Tuesday after an alleged gang rape by upper-caste men.

Dalits are at the bottom of the caste system. Despite laws to protect them, they face widespread discrimination.

Both attacks took place in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. News of the first sparked protests in the streets in the state.

Police have registered complaints of rape and murder and arrested two men in connection with the latest case, which took place in Balrampur district.

The earlier attack happened some 500km (310 miles) away in Hathras district. The victim was grievously injured and died in a Delhi hospital on Tuesday after fighting for her life for two weeks.

Police said on Thursday that according to a forensic report the first victim was not raped. But a Delhi hospital recorded on admission that she was both raped and strangled on 14 September. The woman's family also said she had been raped - her mother telling media that she found her daughter naked, bleeding and seriously injured in a field.

The second victim also died on Tuesday but national media picked up the news on Thursday, after a heavy backlash on social media over sexual assault and caste violence in India.

Dalits, formerly known as untouchables, have suffered public shaming and attacks for generations at the hands of upper-caste Hindus.

What do we know about the latest incident?

The victim's mother told the BBC that the family started to panic when she did not arrive home at her usual time on Tuesday evening. She said her daughter had gone to a nearby school to apply for admission on Tuesday morning. When she was returning home, a group of three or four men stopped her and forced her into their vehicle.

The mother alleges that they drugged her before raping her. "They broke my daughter's leg, they broke her waist," she said, adding that the men put her in a rickshaw after and sent her home.

"When she arrived, she looked very weak. Our daughter couldn't speak or get up. When we asked her what had happened, she couldn't answer," she added.

Ten minutes later, the victim complained of a "burning sensation" in her stomach, prompting the family to rush her to a local hospital.

"But since her condition was very serious, the doctor asked us to take her to a larger hospital in the city - but she died on the way there," the mother added.

"While officials are not confirming whether the victim was raped, they have also not denied the family's allegation," local journalist Saurabh Mishra said.

What reaction has there been?

The news has spurred furious reactions on social media. The state's former chief minister, who sits in opposition now, hit out at the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

"After Hathras, another daughter has been gang raped and brutalised in Balrampur," Akhilesh Yadav tweeted, adding that the government should act quickly in this incident.

On Twitter, the case has been among the top discussion trends with thousands of tweets from political leaders and Indians decrying the attack.

The previous incident also continued to dominate social media and news. Officials imposed Section 144 in the district, which means no more than four people will be able to gather - a measure often used to contain protests.

On Thursday, Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi, leaders of the opposition Congress Party, walked into Hathras to meet the victim's family after the leaders' vehicle was stopped by officials. Video footage on social media showed Mr Gandhi falling down in the ruckus which ensued as Congress party workers walked alongside the Gandhis, even as police officials try to stop them.

The two leaders were later seen being taken away in vehicles by police.

Startling pictures and video footage have also emerged showing of hundreds of workers from the Samajwadi Party, which sits in opposition in the state, being rounded up and detained by police in the area.

Earlier on Wednesday, activists condemned the police after the family accused them of cremating her body without their permission. Protests also broke out in Hathras and other cities, including the capital, Delhi.

A senior district administration official, however, denied the allegation, saying the family's consent had been obtained.

Rape and sexual violence have been under the spotlight in India since the 2012 gang rape and murder of a woman in Delhi, which led to huge protests and changes to the country's rape laws.

But there has been no sign of crimes against women and girls abating.

INDIA: Dalit woman dies weeks after gang rape, triggering protest

The 19-year-old victim was gang raped by four men in Uttar Pradesh's Hathras town, about 100km from New Delhi.

Al Jazeera (29.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34cR2GZ> - A woman died in hospital in the Indian capital, New Delhi, on Tuesday, weeks after authorities said she was raped by a group of men, triggering protests and opposition criticism over what it said was a failure to protect women.

Her case was the latest in a string of gruesome crimes against women in India that have given it the dismal reputation of being one of the worst places in the world to be female.

One woman reported a rape every 15 minutes on average in India in 2018, according to the latest government data released in January.

"There is next to no protection for women. Criminals are openly committing crimes," Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, a leader of the opposition Congress party, said on Twitter.

The 19-year-old victim, belonging to the Dalit community – formerly known as "untouchables" – was attacked and raped on September 14 at a field near her home in Hathras district, 100km (62-mile) from New Delhi, authorities said.

Police have arrested four men in connection with the crime.

On Monday, the woman was brought from a hospital in Uttar Pradesh state to New Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital, where she died while undergoing treatment, authorities said.

About 300 protesters from the Bhim Army, a party championing the rights of Dalits, entered the hospital building and shouted slogans near the mortuary where the woman's body was kept.

"We will take the matter to fast-track court for the faster investigation and collection of evidence," district authorities in Hathras said in a statement.

#Hathras trended on Twitter as social media users expressed outrage at the latest case of gruesome sexual assault.

The woman's home state of Uttar Pradesh, which is governed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), ranks as the most unsafe state for women in the country.

Last December, a 23-year-old Dalit woman was set ablaze by a gang of men as she made her way to a court in Uttar Pradesh to press rape charges.

INDIA's Covid crisis sees rise in child marriage and trafficking

India's coronavirus lockdown has had an adverse impact on children, pushing up incidents of child marriage and child labour, reports the BBC's Divya Arya.

BBC (18.09.2020) - <https://bbc.in/2FWHNT5> - Thirteen-year-old Rani has just won her first battle in life. Her parents tried to force her to marry this summer, but Rani reached out for help and managed to stop the wedding.

Rani (not her real name) was in the eighth grade when India's federal government suddenly imposed a lockdown in March, shuttering everything from schools to businesses to stop the spread of coronavirus.

Within a month, Rani's father, who was battling tuberculosis, found her a match. Rani was not happy. "I don't understand why everyone is in a rush to marry girls," she said. "They don't understand that it is important to go to school, start earning and be independent."

It is illegal for girls under the age of 18 to marry in India. But the country is home to the largest number of child brides in the world, accounting for a third of the global total, according to UNICEF. The charity estimates that at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married here each year.

This year might be worse. Childline, a children's helpline, has reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage of girls in June and July this year compared to 2019.

Millions lost their jobs during the prolonged lockdown from the end of March to early June. Many of them included India's informal and unprotected workers, who, have been pushed deeper into poverty.

According to the government, more than 10 million of these workers, many of them young men, returned to their hometowns and villages during the lockdown because of loss of work. So parents of young girls - worried for their safety and anxious about their future prospects - are marrying their daughters off to ensure their wellbeing.

Another reason is that parents are expected to pay for big weddings, but covid restrictions have limited the size of weddings.

So parents who have received offers of marriage this year have been quick to take them up, according to Manisha Biraris, the assistant commissioner for Women and Child Welfare in Maharashtra state.

"It was easier, cheaper and they could get away with inviting very few people."

Although the country began reopening in June, many jobs have not returned and the economy is still struggling. Schools are still shut, leaving vulnerable adolescents at home.

Schools have been agents of change in India, especially in poor communities like the eastern state of Odisha, where Rani lives. They are a space where girls can reach out to teachers and friends for help when facing pressure to marry from their family.

But with schools closed, a crucial safety net is gone.

"In extremely poor communities, girls are already not encouraged to study. Once they leave school it's hard to convince families to get them back in," said Smita Khanjow from Action Aid, which has been working on UNICEF's special program on child marriage in the five most-affected states.

Rani's close school friend was married off early this year, she said. But Rani said she was able to stop her wedding after she called the emergency national helpline for children, Childline. Along with the help of a local NGO and the police, staff at Childline were able to stop the ceremony.

But Rani's troubles didn't end there. Her father passed away soon after.

"I want to go back to school when it reopens, and now I need to work harder as my father is no more," she said. "It is my responsibility to help my mother run the household."

The situation has been dire for boys too. According to Ms Khanjow, from Action Aid. She and her colleagues are increasingly coming across cases of teenage boys being pushed into working in factories to support their families

In India, it is a criminal offense to employ a child for work. But according to the last census, in 2011, 10 million of India's 260 million children were found to be child labourers.

It's not an easy decision for families. Four months into the lockdown, Pankaj Lal gave in to a trafficker's offer for his 13-year-old son. He had five children to feed but almost no earnings from pulling his rickshaw.

Mr Lal agreed to send his son more than a 1,000km (690 miles) from his native Bihar state to Rajasthan to work in a bangle manufacturing factory for 5,000 rupees (\$68; £52) per month. That is a substantial sum for a family struggling to survive.

Mr Lal broke down as he described his decision to send his son so far away.

"My children had not eaten for two days," he said. "I volunteered myself to the trafficker, but he said nimble fingers were needed for this work and I was of no use to him. I had almost no choice but to send my son away."

Despite restrictions on transport and movement, traffickers were able to tap into their powerful nexus to move children across state lines using new routes and luxury buses. Suresh Kumar, who runs NGO Centre Direct, says a crisis is waiting to happen. He has been rescuing child labourers from traffickers for more than 25 years.

"The number of children we have rescued has more than doubled from last year. Villages have emptied out and the past months have seen the traffickers grow stronger and make use of the lockdown which has stretched authorities and the police," he said.

Childline, however, reported a drop in distress calls related to child labour. Activists say this could be because children give in to their parents cry for help.

The government has taken steps to stop trafficking, including passing a more stringent law, and asking states to strengthen and expand anti-human trafficking in the wake of the lockdown.

States have also been asked to spread awareness about trafficking, and keep shelters for women and children accessible even during the pandemic.

But, activists say, most traffickers get away with paying fines because they are connected to powerful people. Mr Kumar said families rarely report trafficking, and those that do register police complaints are threatened.

Mr Lal 's family got lucky - the bus carrying his son was stopped while on its way and the children inside were rescued. His son is now quarantining in a child care centre in Rajasthan and will return home soon.

"It was a moment of weakness," he said. "I will never send my child to work again even if it means we have to survive on morsels."

INDIA's COVID-19 gender blind spot

India's women stand to lose from the country's COVID-19 policies in many ways.

By Bansari Kamdar

The Diplomat (27.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eVEybf> - The second most populous country in the world, India, has been under a nationwide lockdown since March 24, 2020 – one it intends to continue till May 3, 2020. At the time of writing, there have been a total of 27,890 confirmed cases and 882 deaths from the pandemic in India. While most agree that the lockdown was necessary to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the problem remains in how it was implemented.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's eager and abrupt lockdown policy came with many blind spots – putting the country's most vulnerable at a disproportionately greater risk than others. According to The Print, nearly 200 people, largely migrant workers, have died during the lockdown due exhaustion, hunger, denial of medical care, suicide, and even vigilante killings.

Women, who make up around half the nation's population, also remained largely absent from the government's COVID-19 policy, to the extent that the government had to be reminded that feminine hygiene products like sanitary napkins were essential items during the lockdown.

A rise in domestic violence

There has been an uptick of intimate partner violence (IPV) cases around the globe associated with lockdown policies, from the United States and United Kingdom to France, China, and India. In their eagerness to flatten the curve and limit the spread of coronavirus, government-instituted lockdowns may be endangering the lives of women, particularly in the absence of policies to check and balance against the rising violence against women.

In India, a woman is subjected to an act of domestic violence every 4.4 minutes, according to the Crime in India Report 2018 by the Indian National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB). One in three women will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetimes. There is already an uptick in these cases, with the National Commission for Women (NCW) in India registering 587 cases between March 23 and April 16, up from 396 cases between February 27 and March 22, reports Al Jazeera.

In response, the NCW has also recently launched a WhatsApp number making it easier for women to ask for help, alongside a helpline and email option.

Past research has shown that domestic violence cases rise significantly as mobility restrictions foster more tension and strain in the household over security, health, and job losses. State governments in India have been encouraging women to report violence and India's Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani asked the states to ensure that women's helplines are functioning. However, this may not be enough.

IPV cases are often gravely underreported. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) of 2015-2016, less than 1 percent of the victims of domestic abuse sought help. Women's limited mobility and lack of access to helplines and the internet could greatly limit this reporting. Only 29 percent of Indian women have access to the internet, according to a recent UNICEF report.

In New York City, while calls to domestic violence helplines dropped, organizations helping women find emergency shelter observed a steep increase with one showing a 35 percent increase in calls from women looking for shelter. However, shelters for victims of abuse in India remain unsafe and inadequate.

There is a dire need for a policy, like the one in France, where the government provides abuse victims with a place to stay away from their abusers. Additionally, reaching these women in distress has to be constituted as an “essential service” in India.

India’s falling female labor force participation rate

Women face increased financial instability in times of crisis. According to a report by Bain & Company and Google, women were already the worst hit by India’s unemployment crisis. While the overall Indian unemployment rate was at 7 percent before the lockdown, it was already as high as 18 percent for women.

As the pandemic worsens India’s unemployment problem, women will often be the first to let go when firms start cutting costs given cultural norms devaluing women’s work and also because women are less likely to work in sectors where telecommuting is possible.

According to the Indian government’s Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS) of 2017-18 by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), only one of four women aged 15 years and above are working or seeking work. India has one of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world and it has been falling over the past decade. The World Economic Forum ranks India the fifth lowest (149th) on its Global Gender Gap Report on economic participation and opportunity metric, trailed only by Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

In response to the crisis, the Indian government has announced cash transfers of 500 rupees (\$6.50) to the women who have a Jan Dhan account over the course of the next three months, but that may be inadequate as many lose their jobs and economic mobility.

Furthermore, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), 81 percent of Indian women work in the informal economy. The informal sector, which makes up a majority of the Indian economy, is the worst hit by the coronavirus-imposed economic slowdown and requires targeted economic policies, government bailouts, and support measures. The economic costs of the lockdown may be disproportionately borne by women in the end.

The additional burden of care

One of the primary reasons that women leave the workforce or do not enter it in the first place is their unpaid caregiving responsibilities at home. Longstanding patriarchal social norms and cultural expectations have put the burden of caring for children, the elderly, and the household on Indian women.

In India, according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), women perform nearly 6 hours of unpaid work each day, while men spend a paltry 52 minutes. This burden is likely to increase amid the lockdown as Indian men continue to not help in the household.

Not only does the burden of unpaid work limit women’s economic mobility and time, there are also dangerous consequences to women neglecting them. Nearly 41 percent of participants in a survey by OXFAM India stated that it was acceptable to beat a woman if she failed to prepare a meal for the men in the family and one in three thought that it

was acceptable to beat women who failed to care for children or left a dependent unattended.

Girls education and nutrition

According to a recent statement by the Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the gross educational enrollment of girls is higher than boys in India. However, their mean years of schooling remain almost half that of boys, with girls getting 4.7 years of schooling in comparison to 8.2 years of schooling for boys. Girls are spending nearly half as many years in school as boys. With the economic downturn, girls' education could be even less prioritized.

Nearly 96 percent of children in rural India are studying in government-run schools that provide cooked mid-day meals to children. With the schools shut down till May, children's education is likely to suffer, along with an increase in malnourishment. The situation will worsen for girls as they are more dependent on the mid-day meal programs given the gendered nature of nutrition provision in households with limited resources

The way forward

These are just a few examples of how pandemics often heighten gender inequities and affect men and women differently. Disasters expose and intensify the systemic and structural cracks in the current system and lockdown has shown that gender-blind policies could worsen these issues and leave women and girls more vulnerable than ever.

As the lockdown begins to be lifted or partially lifted around the country, India urgently needs gender-sensitive policies addressing the increasing violence against women, the widening gender disparities in labor force participation, rising school dropouts and malnutrition among girls, and women's disproportionate unpaid work and caregiving responsibilities.

INDIA: Indian women protest new citizenship laws, joining a global 'fourth wave' feminist movement

By Alka Kurian

The Conversation (24.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2PrKihE> - Women are among the strongest opponents of two new laws in India that threaten the citizenship rights of vulnerable groups like Muslims, poor women, oppressed castes and LGBTQ people.

The Citizenship Amendment Act, passed in December 2019, fast-tracks Indian citizenship for undocumented refugees from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan – but only those who are non-Muslim. Another law - the National Register of Citizens – will require all residents in India to furnish extensive legal documentation to prove their citizenship as soon as 2021.

Critics see the two laws as part of the government's efforts to redefine the meaning of belonging in India and make this constitutionally secular country a Hindu nation.

Since Dec. 4, 2019, Indians of all ages, ethnicities and religions have been protesting the new citizenship initiatives in scattered but complementary nationwide demonstrations. The uprisings have persisted through weeks of arrests, beatings and even killings across India by the police.

But the most enduring pocket of resistance is an around-the-clock sit-in of mostly hijab-wearing women in a working-class Delhi neighborhood called Shaheen Bagh.

Women take charge

Since Dec. 15, 2019, women of all ages – from students to 90-year-old grandmothers – have abandoned their daily duties and braved near-freezing temperatures to block a major highway in the Indian capital.

This is a striking act of resistance in a patriarchal country where women – but particularly Muslim women – have historically had their rights denied.

The Shaheen Bagh protests are as novel in their methods as they are in their makeup. Protesters are using artwork, book readings, lectures, poetry recitals, songs, interfaith prayers and communal cooking to explain their resistance to citizenship laws that, they say, will discriminate against not just Muslims but also women, who usually don't have state or property papers in their own names.

On Jan. 11, women in the Indian city of Kolkata performed a Bengali-language version of a Chilean feminist anthem called "The Rapist is You." This choreographed public flash dance, first staged in Santiago, Chile in November 2019, calls out the police, judiciary and government for violating women's human rights.

A dangerous place for women

India is the world's most dangerous country for women, according to the Thompson Reuters Foundation. One-third of married women are physically abused. Two-thirds of rapes go unpunished.

Gender discrimination is so pervasive that around 1 million female fetuses are aborted each year. In some parts of India, there are 126 men for every 100 women.

Indian women have come together in protest before, to speak out against these and other issues. But most prior women's protests were limited in scope and geography. The 2012 brutal gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old Delhi woman – which sparked nationwide protests – was a watershed moment. All at once, the country witnessed the power of women's rage.

The current women-led anti-citizenship law demonstrations are even greater in number and power. Beyond Shaheen Bagh, Indian women across caste, religion and ethnicity are putting their bodies and reputations on the line.

Female students are intervening to shield fellow students from police violence at campus protests. Actresses from Bollywood, India's film industry, are speaking out against gender violence, too.

Women's secular agenda

With their non-violent tactics and inclusive strategy, the Shaheen Bagh women are proving to be effective critics of the government's Hindu-centric agenda. Their leaderless epicenter of resistance raises up national symbols like the Indian flag, the national anthem and the Indian Constitution as reminders that India is secular and plural – a place where people can be both Muslim and Indian.

The Shaheen Bagh movement's novel and enduring strategy has triggered activism elsewhere in the country.

Thousands of women in the northern Indian city of Lucknow started their own sit-in in late January. Similar "Shaheen Baghs" have sprung up since, in the cities of Patna and even Chennai, which is located 1,500 miles from Delhi.

Global women's spring

India's Shaheen Bagh protests form part of a broader global trend in women's movements. Worldwide, female activists are combining attention to women's issues with a wider call for social justice across gender, class and geographic borders.

In January 2019 alone, women in nearly 90 countries took to the streets demanding equal pay, reproductive rights and the end of violence. Young women were also at the forefront of the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, Lebanon, Sudan, Brazil and Colombia.

As I write in my 2017 book, such inclusive activism is the defining characteristic of what's called "fourth wave feminism."

There isn't a common definition of the first three feminist waves. In the United States, they generally refer to the early 20th century suffragette movement, the radical women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the more mainstream feminism of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Fourth wave feminism appears to be more universal. Today's activists fully embrace the idea that women's freedom means little if other groups are still oppressed. With its economic critique, disavowal of caste oppression and solidarity across religious divides, India's Shaheen Bagh sit-in shares attributes with the women's uprisings in Chile, Lebanon, Hong Kong and beyond.

The last time women came together in such numbers worldwide was the #MeToo movement, a campaign against sexual harassment which emerged on social media in the United States in 2017 and quickly spread across the globe.

Shaheen Bagh and similarly far-reaching women's uprisings underway in other countries take #MeToo to the next level, moving from a purely feminist agenda to a wider call for social justice. Women protesters want rights – not just for themselves, but human rights for all.

INDIA: Landmark ruling grants women equal rights in Indian army

By Swati Gupta

CNN (17.02.2020) <https://cnn.it/32wU3Ra> - India's Supreme Court ruled on Monday in favor of equal rights in the armed forces, ordering the government to grant permanent commission and command positions to women officers on par with men.

The judgment, seen as a landmark decision for the Indian military, means that all women will now be eligible for the same promotions, ranks, benefits and pensions as their male counterparts, irrespective of their years of service or whether they had retired.

Female officers have long campaigned for this change, which will allow them to serve a full tenure and achieve a higher rank, with greater salary and leadership potential.

Currently, women are inducted into the army through short service commissions, which only permit them to serve for 10 to 14 years.

"This change will lift up women -- not just in the army but all girls across the country and the world," said Lt. Col. Seema Singh to reporters after the court ruling.

Though the court's ruling does not permit women to serve in army combat units, like the infantry or artillery corps, they are now eligible to command entire battalions or head the intelligence department. Promotions to command positions will be considered on a case-by-case basis, said Archana Pathak Dave, one of the lawyers representing the female officers.

The decision comes after the government told the court that female officers were not physically and physiologically suitable to hold permanent commissions in the armed forces.

"Women officers must deal with pregnancy, motherhood and domestic obligations towards their children and families and may not be well suited to the life of a soldier in the armed forces," the central government stated.

The court said that the government's arguments were based on discriminatory gender stereotypes, and rejected their plea to overturn a 2010 Delhi high court order on the same policy.

In its 2010 ruling, the Delhi court stated: "A PC (Permanent Commission) carries with it certain privileges of rank, including pension. These women officers have served well the armed forces of the country in the areas of operation they were recruited for and have worked in this capacity for 14 to 15 years. They deserved better from the respondents."

"In matters of gender discrimination a greater sensitivity is expected and required," it added.

The Indian government agreed last year to give permanent commissions to women, but said it would only apply to female officers who had served less than 14 years -- excluding hundreds of women who had already served out their short service commissions.

Aishwary Bhati, one of the lawyers representing female officers, said the government's decision denied women a route to leadership positions: "It is not about money, it is about career prospects."

In handing down its verdict on Monday, the Supreme Court delivered a powerful defense of equality, saying in the judgment that it was time for change in India's armed forces.

"The time has come for a realization that women officers in the army are not adjuncts to a male dominated establishment whose presence must be 'tolerated' within narrow confines," the court said.

INDIA: Unnao rape case: Indian woman set on fire on way to hearing dies

An Indian woman who was set on fire on her way to testify against her alleged rapists has died of her injuries.

BBC News (07.12.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2Rz3o7x> - The 23-year-old died late on Friday after suffering cardiac arrest at a Delhi hospital. She had 90% burns.

She was attacked on Thursday as she was walking to a hearing in the rape case she filed against two men in March in Unnao, in northern Uttar Pradesh state.

Five men, including the alleged rapists, have been arrested, Indian police say.

The sister of the victim, whose name has not been released, told the BBC that she wanted the death penalty for the pair.

She said the family would continue to fight the case against them in court.

Rape and sexual violence against women have been in focus in India since the December 2012 gang-rape and murder of a young woman on a bus in the capital, Delhi.

But there has been no sign that crimes against women are abating.

According to government figures, police registered 33,658 cases of rape in India in 2017, an average of 92 rapes every day.

Unnao district has itself been in the news over another rape case.

Police opened a murder investigation against a ruling party lawmaker in July after a woman who accused him of rape was seriously injured in a car crash. Two of her aunts were killed and her lawyer was injured.

Separately, on Friday, Indian police shot dead four men suspected of raping and killing a young female vet in the southern city of Hyderabad last week.

That case sparked widespread outrage, and the killing of the suspects, in what rights activists believe may have been an extra-judicial killing, sparked jubilation among local residents.

INDONESIA bans mandatory Islamic 'hijab' scarves for schoolgirls

AFP/ Dawn (06.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3rAuWrY> - Indonesia has banned schools from forcing girls to wear Islamic "hijab" headscarves after the case of a Christian pupil pressured to cover up sparked outrage in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

The move was applauded Friday by rights activists, who say non-Muslim girls have been forced for years to wear a hijab in conservative parts of the country.

State schools across the Southeast Asian archipelago of nearly 270 million will face sanctions if they fail to comply with the edict from education minister Nadiem Makarim.

On Wednesday he said religious attire was an individual choice, and said schools "cannot make it compulsory".

Schools that violate the rules could see their government funding cut, he added.

"The decree is a positive step to protect women's rights in Indonesia," said Andreas Harsono, senior researcher at Human Rights Watch in Jakarta.

He said public schools had forced millions of girls and women teachers to wear a hijab, prompting "bullying, intimidation, social pressures -- and in some cases, expulsion and forced resignation" if they didn't.

There have been concerns about growing religious intolerance in a nation where nearly 90 percent of the population follows Islam.

The headscarf issue grabbed headlines after a Christian student in West Sumatra's Padang City was pressured to wear a hijab.

She refused, and her parents later secretly recorded a meeting with an official who insisted that school rules required all girls to wear a hijab, regardless of their religion.

The school later issued an apology after the video went viral.

Religious affairs minister Yaquut Cholil Qoumas described the Sumatra case as the "tip of the iceberg".

"Religion is not supposed to be a reason for conflict or a justification to act unfairly towards those with different beliefs," he said.

The new regulations will not apply to conservative Aceh province, which follows religious law under a longstanding autonomy deal.

KAZAKHSTAN: Kazakh women demand financial support

RFE/RL (09.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3egDBJW> - Women from lower-income families are continuing to demand government assistance as coronavirus restrictions in the Central Asian state are eased.

Some 20 women on June 9 resumed their so-called "silent protest" after spending the night in front of the Ministry of Labor and Social Support.

The women were wearing sanitary masks marked with an "X" on them, which they said symbolized "the fact that we are not allowed to speak up."

They also held posters saying: "Cheap mortgages for families in need," "Financial support for each child," "Amnesty for poor families' bank credits," and "We are on a hunger strike."

Rallies and pickets by poor women have been held regularly in Nur-Sultan and other Kazakh cities since February 2019, after five children from a single family died in a fire at night when their parents were working.

The tragedy triggered anger across the country and demonstrations where protesters demanded increased government support for families that have several children.

The protests were held periodically until restrictions to slow the spread of the coronavirus were introduced in mid-March.

Dauren Babamuratov, an adviser to Nur-Sultan's mayor, and Arman Qurbanov, a representative of the city's health authorities, met with the women on June 9 and attempted to persuade them to leave the site, but the women refused.

Since the protests began last year, the government has announced a special program to support families with more than three children.

Initially, such families were provided with an additional monthly allowance of 21,000 tenges (\$50) per child. However, the sum has since been cut twice. From January, the allowances were given only to families officially recognized as living in poverty.

The protesters are demanding a return of the benefits to initial levels, as well as for more benefits to be given to all families with more than three children.

PAKISTAN: Virginty tests for female rape survivors outlawed by Pakistani court

By Haroon Janjua

WUNRN (04.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3jwOSZQ> - On 6 January 2021, a Pakistani court has outlawed the practice of subjecting female rape survivors to a virginty test in an unprecedented ruling.

Lahore's high court ruled on Monday that the virginty test has no legal basis and "offends the personal dignitv of the female victim".

Making the judgment, Justice Ayesha Malik said: "Virginty testing is highly invasive, having no scientific or medical requirement, yet carried out in the name of medical protocols in sexual violence cases.

"It is a humiliating practice, which is used to cast suspicion on the victim, as opposed to focusing on the accused and the incident of sexual violence."

In a 2018 [report](#), the UN said that virginty tests, a medically dubious internal examination of a woman's hymen, still take place in 20 countries, and can be conducted with or without consent in rape cases or when a woman is accused of a "moral" crime such as premarital sex or running away.

Premarital sex remains a crime in Pakistan for men and women and carries a five-year prison sentence.

"The verdict is the culmination of a history of activism and built on the hard work that the feminist movement has been engaging in for decades. The test is part of a larger structure of patriarchy that hinges victimhood on women's characters and perpetuates the myth of the 'perfect victim'," Nighat Dad, a lawyer and rights activist told the Guardian.

"The barriers in place for women to report cases of rape are insurmountable, but this historic verdict will go a long way in dismantling those barriers," she said.

In October Human Rights Watch [said](#) virginty examinations had long been a routine part of criminal proceedings in Pakistan, based on a misogynistic assumption that a woman "habituated to sexual intercourse" is less likely to have been raped. Police and

prosecutors have used the results to accuse rape victims of illegal sexual intercourse and to treat them as criminals.

Pakistan's minister for human rights, Shireen Mazari, lauded the judgment, which will apply only in the state of Punjab, on [Twitter](#).

PAKISTAN arrests suspects in highway gang rape case amid protests

One of two suspects arrested amid demonstrations over handling of probe into attack on mother travelling with children.

Al Jazeera (13.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3kfZNGp> - Pakistani police say they have arrested one of two suspects in the rape of a woman who was dragged from her car and attacked after her car broke down on a desolate highway in central Punjab province.

The woman, who police say is in her early 30s, was driving late on Wednesday night outside the eastern city of Lahore with her two children when her vehicle ran out of fuel.

She phoned the police for help, but before they arrived, two men took her and her children out of the vehicle at gunpoint and raped her in a field along the highway.

The suspects are also accused of stealing cash and jewelry from the woman before fleeing.

Chief of the criminal investigation wing of the Punjab police, Atif Nazeer, on Sunday said the arrest of one of the men was made after they tracked phone records and collected forensic evidence from the scene.

Nazeer said the suspect denies any involvement in the rape. Local media reported that the suspect turned himself over to police to plead his innocence.

The arrest came after protests continued across Pakistan for a second day on Saturday over the handling of an investigation into the assault.

Inam Ghani, Inspector General of Punjab province had told reporters on Saturday night that police had identified the two suspects through DNA tracing.

"I am hopeful very soon we will reach them and arrest them," he said.

Musarrat Cheema, a spokesperson in the eastern Punjab province, said raids were being conducted to find the culprits.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's office said the protection of women is a first priority and responsibility of the government, adding that "such brutality and bestiality cannot be allowed in any civilised society".

But protesters are not satisfied, and called for the sacking of the lead police investigator assigned to the case, Omar Sheikh, who has reportedly pointed out what he felt the victim had done wrong.

Sheikh is reported to have said the woman should have taken a different, busier, highway, not travelled at night, and made sure her vehicle had enough fuel.

He also said she appeared to be under the impression Pakistan was as safe for women as France, "her country of residence". Requests for comment to the French Embassy in Islamabad went unanswered

In Islamabad, several hundred protesters gathered, some waved French flags, and others held signs saying "hang the rapists".

"It's very simple, these sort of incidents are not very new the issue is that rather than catching the criminals or catching the perpetrators, we always blame the victims," said Aleena Alvi.

"I think the laws have also changed around the rape victims, there was a law of women's protection act, instead of this act, there has now been no protection that has been given to victims."

Hundreds, mostly women, also gathered in Lahore, Karachi, and the northwestern city of Peshawar. "Shatter the silence, stop the violence," read one placard in Peshawar.

Global rights watchdogs have pointed out that Pakistan has not done enough to stem violence against women, including ensuring perpetrators are held accountable.

The attack has especially angered women who say public space in the country was already limited.

"And now the police are telling you that you are responsible for your own safety," said Yamna Rehman at the Islamabad protest, organised by the Women Democratic Front collective.

PAKISTAN: Pakistani female journalists face 'coordinated' campaign of online threats

RFE/RL (19.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3j4Lx2A> - Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is calling on Pakistani authorities to take immediate action to stop online harassment against female journalists that puts their professional duties and lives at risk.

The call from the Paris-based advocacy group on August 19 came in response to a joint statement signed by some 50 women journalists in Pakistan condemning a "well-defined and coordinated campaign" of harassment on social media, including abusive language and threats of violence.

"We regard the highest levels of the Pakistani government as either responsible or complicit in these recent cyberharassment campaigns against certain women journalists who don't toe the official line," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk.

"This tactic, which clearly aims to intimidate all government critics, is a flagrant violation of article 19A of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan's constitution. We call on Prime Minister Imran Khan to ensure that this unacceptable use of hate speech is brought to a stop," he said.

The joint statement, issued on August 12, outlined online social media harassment of women journalists and commentators, alleging that the attacks are "instigated by government officials" and then amplified by pro-government Twitter accounts and trolls.

"The target of these attacks are women with differing viewpoints and those whose reports have been critical of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government, and more specifically its handling of the coronavirus pandemic," the statement said.

Gender-based slurs

Types of harassment include threats of rape and physical violence, releasing personal details of women journalists and analysts, and gender-based slurs. The online-bullying also seeks to discredit and intimidate journalists, referring to them as peddlers of "fake news" and an "enemy of the people."

"These have the potential to incite violence and lead to hate crimes, putting our physical safety at risk," the journalists wrote.

Women in the media, especially those on social-media platforms, are now reportedly finding it untenable to engage on social media, depriving them of their right to free speech and providing information to the public.

"Many now self-censor, refrain from sharing information, giving their opinion or actively engaging online," the statement said.

Pakistan is ranked 145th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

In 2019, four journalists and bloggers were killed in connection with their reporting.

Among them was Arooj Iqbal, who was shot dead in Lahore in November in a case that has gone unpunished.

Iqbal wanted to be the first woman journalist to launch her own newspaper in Pakistan, RSF said.

PAKISTAN: Teenage girls shot dead by relatives over online footage

Father of one victim and brother of the other arrested in connection with the murders.

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen

The Guardian (17.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bKqyOA> - Two female teenagers in Pakistan have been murdered by family members after a video emerged online of them associating with a man.

The pair, said to be aged 16 and 18, were shot dead by male relatives in their remote village in North Waziristan this week after footage was posted online of them in the company of a young man in a secluded area.

After they were shot, the pair were then buried in the village by their family members.

Local police confirmed they had arrested the father of one of the victims, and the brother of the other victim, in connection with arranging and carrying out the murders, and they were now being held in custody.

The police are searching for two other family members believed to have been involved in the killings.

The footage of the women, which is less than a minute long, was said to have been filmed last year but only appeared on social media a few weeks ago. The police said they were still searching for a third young woman who also featured in the video to ensure she did not suffer the same fate.

The tribal areas in North and South Waziristan, which borders Afghanistan, are known for the strict "honour code" imposed on women, whose movements are heavily restricted and who are often not allowed out of the house unaccompanied.

So called "honour" killings remain common in Pakistan's tribal areas, mainly against women who are believed to have brought shame on a family, and activists say up to 1,000 such killings are still carried out every year.

The issue was brought to the fore in Pakistan in September after three men were found guilty and sentenced to life behind bars for the killing of three women in Kohistan who had been caught on video singing and clapping at a wedding in 2011. The women's bodies were never found.

Though against the law, "honour" killing cases were previously difficult to convict owing to a loophole in the law that allowed perpetrators to walk free if they were given a pardon by the victim's family member.

However, the crimes now come with a mandated life sentence.

PAKISTAN: Several injured as conservatives throw stones at Women's Day March in Pakistan

RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal (08.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cJf9Aj> - Several people were reportedly injured as social and religious conservatives clashed with International Women's Day demonstrators in Islamabad on March 8.

RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal reported that participants in a conservative demonstration called Modesty Walk threw stones at demonstrators holding a march to mark International Women's Day.

Ismat Shahjahan, head of the Women's Democratic Front, which organized the march, said four participants suffered head injuries, while three others were less seriously hurt.

Police intervened to stop the violence.

About 1,000 people participated in the Islamabad Women's March.

The Women's March was being held under the slogan, "My body, my choice." Conservative groups, including the Jamaat-e-Islami political party, criticized the initiative as threatening traditional Muslim values.

Many women participating in the rival Modesty Walk wore burqas and chanted, "Our bodies, Allah's choice."

Women's March events were also held in Quetta, Lahore, Karachi, and other cities.

Much of Pakistani society is strictly patriarchal and dominated by strict codes of "honor" that control women's choices regarding marriage, reproduction, education, and other issues.

About 1,000 Pakistani women each year are murdered in so-called "honor" killings, often by their own relatives.

PAKISTAN: How blackmail, harassment forced Pakistani women from university

Many parents pull out their daughters from Balochistan University after CCTV footage was used to blackmail students.

By Iman Sultan

Al Jazeera (09.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/35AkoqX> - Rahila* had missed the deadline to submit her application for admission to Balochistan University, and feared she would now have to wait months before being able to apply again.

A teacher at the pharmacy department, however, offered to help her submit her forms and gain admission to the university, the main institute for higher education in the southwestern Pakistani province after which it is named.

After she filled out the forms, however, she alleges the same teacher began to harass her by sending her text messages, mostly at night, and threatened to cancel her admission when she did not reply to him.

"From his words, I could tell his intentions were not good," Rahila, 20, said. "I felt so strange about it. I used to call him 'sir' with so much respect to his face, and he turned out to be this creepy, inappropriate person. At that point, I lost confidence in myself."

Rahila's experience is just one of many cases of alleged sexual harassment at this government-run university, where allegations have been made that university officials used CCTV footage of male and female students mingling to extort and blackmail them.

Balochistan has a female literacy rate of 33.5 percent, and the danger of harassment is often cited by parents who refuse to send their daughters to school. Only 5.07 percent of Pakistan's roughly 102 million women ever complete university, according to the country's bureau of statistics.

In October last year, the Balochistan High Court directed the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to investigate the allegations against university officials, directing officials to submit a full report on the blackmail allegations.

News of the scandal led Javed Iqbal, the university's vice-chancellor, to step down, and many parents pulled their daughters out of the university.

"All the struggle people did for women's education has suffered a setback of 20 or 30 years because of this scandal," said Shain Taj Raisani, 26, an MPhil student at the university.

"Girls who were coming into the education field with their opinions now feel threatened."

Education a key battleground

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest but least populated province, is rich in mineral resources and is home to a port at the heart of China's \$60bn China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project that runs through the country.

The province is, however, one of the least developed parts of the country, with its vast, rugged terrain only sparsely populated by small towns and villages.

Education is a key battleground. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, less than 12 percent women in Balochistan made it past primary school.

Many say the recent scandal has led to even more parents pulling their daughters out of higher education.

"A [university] hostel is like a home [...] if your daughter isn't safe at school, then her parents won't let her study at the university," Mahrang Baloch, 25, a student at Bolan Medical College located in the provincial capital Quetta, added.

Security on campus

Home to about 10,000 students, Balochistan University is not your typical university campus. Located on Sariab Road in the southern quarter of Quetta, the area has often been the site of suicide bombings or targeted attacks against security forces or, on occasion, university officials.

"Many professors have fallen victim to this terrorism in the past 12 years," said a senior FIA official investigating the video scandal case. "Both professors and students have been martyred. We've lost too many people," the officer, who wished to remain anonymous, told Al Jazeera.

CCTV cameras have been installed all over the campus to safeguard students and faculty against that threat, and both police and paramilitary soldiers are stationed across the university.

Students, however, fear that the pervasive security on campus had undermined their learning experience. Others say it has contributed to the atmosphere of harassment at the university.

"When I was at university, [the paramilitary Frontier Corps] had made its checkpoints everywhere. They would harass and throw their numbers [written on pieces of paper] at women," Yassir Baloch, 27, who graduated from the university in 2017, said.

"And they'd sexually harass and blackmail young men, who had just come from college and were 20 or 21 years old. Sometimes, [security and university officials] would catch couples too. They'd tell them we'll show this video to your parents. If you give us Rs 50,000 [roughly \$320], we'll delete the video."

Wali Rehman, the registrar of the university, however, said paramilitary soldiers don't interfere in the "academic blocks", but pass through "university-regulated areas, grounds, sports area and colony".

"Frontier Corps isn't there to tell students what to do or not to do. They only come if there's danger," he told Al Jazeera.

In November, security forces agreed to vacate the university after a parliamentary committee recommended universities reevaluate the deployment of security forces amid public pressure in the wake of the CCTV scandal.

The misuse of cameras

The university currently has 56 CCTV cameras in operation, down from 94 cameras, three of which did not work. According to the registrar, the university disconnected "unnecessary" cameras, referring to the installation of CCTV in "unauthorised" places.

"At the direction of the court, we disconnected 37 cameras. Cameras that were in places where they were not needed were uninstalled," Rehman, the registrar, told Al Jazeera.

During the investigation into the video scandal, the FIA obtained university and security officials' laptops and mobile phones, and Saifullah Langove, the head of the security control room, was removed from his post.

The senior FIA official investigating the case said there was no standard operating procedure for how the data collected on them would be used.

"Cameras wouldn't have been misused if the protocol was defined," he said.

The university said it is now developing a new policy for how the cameras will be used and who controls them.

There is, however, scepticism among digital rights activists on the effectiveness of such surveillance systems, and their effects.

"Technology will enable universities to see their students on all corners and regulate them. When you feel you are being watched, you'll start to behave how authority wants you to," said Shmyla Khan, a project manager for Digital Rights Foundation.

Meanwhile, a sexual harassment committee has been set up in the university, headed by Sobiah Ramzan of the Institute of Management Sciences. The local provincial committee is also investigating the affair.

An ongoing investigation

Women who have faced harassment at the university may be too scared to come forward because of the shame associated with sexual assault in a tribal society.

"If something happened to me, even if I wanted to come forward, I wouldn't be able to confess because we live in a tribal society," Sadia Baloch, a 19-year-old student at the university's law college, said. "On account of our families, we can't even talk about it."

The FIA officer said that he had been investigating the case for months, and the media had, in fact, frightened away victims, who may have otherwise come forward to assist with the investigation.

"We live in a very conservative society [in Balochistan]. If there are victims, they don't want to come forward anymore," he said.

Students who claim to be in contact with sexual harassment victims confirmed to Al Jazeera that many "girls are scared" and do not trust that their privacy would be protected through the investigation process.

"Who can guarantee if a girl comes forward, her information won't be leaked?" Mahrang Baloch told Al Jazeera.

SOUTH-KOREA: Seoul court orders Japan to compensate 12 Korean sex slaves

By Hyung-Jin Kim

AP News (08.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2XANrzB> - A South Korean court on Friday ordered Japan to financially compensate 12 South Korean women forced to work as sex slaves for Japanese troops during World War II, a landmark ruling that's set to rekindle animosities between the Asian neighbors.

Japan immediately protested the ruling, maintaining that all wartime compensation issues were resolved under a 1965 treaty that restored their diplomatic ties.

The Seoul Central District Court ruled the Japanese government must give 100 million won (\$91,360) each to the 12 aging women who filed the lawsuits in 2013 for their wartime sexual slavery.

The court said Japan's mobilization of these women as sexual slaves was "a crime against humanity." It said it happened when Japan "illegally occupied" the Korean Peninsula from 1910-45, and its sovereign immunity cannot shield it from lawsuits in South Korea.

The court said the women were the victims of "harsh sexual activities" by Japanese soldiers who caused them bodily harm, venereal diseases and unwanted pregnancies and left "big mental scars" in the women's lives.

The proceedings in the case had been delayed as Japan refused to receive legal documents. Seven of the 12 women died while waiting for the ruling.

Another 20 women, some already diseased and represented by their surviving relatives, filed a separate suit against Japan, and that ruling is expected next week.

The women were among tens of thousands across occupied Asia and the Pacific who were sent to front-line Japanese military brothels. About 240 South Korean women came forward and registered with the government as victims of sexual slavery, but only 16 of them, all in their 80s and 90s, are still alive.

Observers say it's unlikely for Japan to abide by the South Korean court ruling. A support group for women forced to work as sex slaves said it may take legal steps to seize Japanese government assets in South Korea if Japan refuses to compensate victims.

Japan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Akiba had summoned South Korean Ambassador Nam Gwan-pyo to register Tokyo's protest of the ruling.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato also called the ruling "extremely regrettable," saying "the Japanese government cannot accept this by any means."

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said later Friday it respects the ruling and will strive to restore the dignity of the women. It said it will examine the verdict's possible effects on ties with Japan and make efforts to maintain "future-oriented" cooperation with Tokyo.

Seoul and Tokyo, both key U.S. allies, are closely linked to each other economically and culturally. But their historical and territorial disputes stemming from Japan's colonial occupation have often complicated Washington's efforts to strengthen trilateral cooperation to deal with North Korea's nuclear threat and China's growing influence in the region.

Their relations plunged to one of their lowest levels in decades after South Korea's Supreme Court in 2018 ordered Japanese companies to offer reparations to some elderly South Korean plaintiffs for their wartime forced labor. The spat escalated into a trade war that saw both countries downgrade the other's trade status, and then spilled over to military matters when Seoul threatened to end a trilateral 2016 military intelligence-sharing agreement involving the U.S.

In 2015, South Korea's previous government reached a deal with Japan to resolve the sexual slavery dispute.

Under the deal, Japan offered a fresh apology and agreed to fund a foundation to support victims in return for South Korea stopping to criticize Japan over the issue on the world stage. But South Korea's current government, led by President Moon Jae-in, took steps to dissolve the foundation, saying the 2015 deal lacked legitimacy because officials failed to properly communicate with victims before reaching it.

SOUTH-KOREA: Single women in South Korea have rights to a family too

TV star's parenthood choice highlights barriers to reproductive rights.

By Susanné Bergsten

HRW (23.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2HArjAW> - Recent news of a celebrity in South Korea giving birth after in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment in Japan sparked debate in a country where single parents, especially unwed mothers, are often ostracized. Sayuri Fujita, a Japanese-born television star, seemed aware of this as she posted a joyful photo of herself and her newborn on social media, writing, "Becoming a single mother was not an easy decision, but it is also not a shameful decision. I want to thank my son for making me a proud mother."

Giving birth outside of marriage is often stigmatized due to the country's Confucian culture and patriarchal family structures in which women are seen as less valued.

An estimated 20,761 single-parent households are headed by unmarried mothers in South Korea. The actual number may be significantly higher, as stigma leads some to conceal their unmarried status. Lack of social acceptance for unwed mothers and their children means they are more likely to be living in poverty and be socially isolated.

Although South Korea's birth rate is among the lowest in the world, and the government is concerned about the country's aging population, artificial insemination and IVF treatments are not an option for unmarried women. Sperm banks set their own criteria for accepting patients and will not provide services to unmarried women.

But public attitudes towards single parenthood are changing; a recent survey found 31 percent of South Koreans accept having children without getting married.

South Korean women and girls have long faced violations of their reproductive rights as the government pursued policies seeking at different times to reduce and then increase the birth rate. Stigma against unmarried mothers—and severe restrictions on abortion--helped drive high rates of international adoption from South Korea. Women have long fought for access to abortion, and the country's Constitutional Court recently ordered the government to reverse its abortion ban.

It is high time for South Korea to fully respect reproductive rights. The government should eliminate barriers to accessing abortion and make assisted reproductive services available for everyone, no matter their marital status, sexual orientation, or family configuration. It should also act to eradicate all forms of discrimination and stigma against single parents, particularly unwed mothers. Everyone has a right to decide for themselves if they want a family or not.

SOUTH-KOREA: Lee Hyo-jae, champion of women's rights in South Korea, dies at 95

Ms. Lee was a prominent activist and a founder of women's studies programs. She also stood up to the country's dictators.

By Michael Astor

The New York Times (14.11.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/3f86edt> - When Lee Hyo-jae learned of a university colleague's research into the Korean "comfort women" taken by the Japanese military for use as sex slaves during World War II, she came to view the government-sanctioned enslavement as one of history's most brutal war crimes.

She spent the next two decades fighting to bring attention to the issue and to secure redress from Japan. But that was only one of many causes taken up by Ms. Lee, one of South Korea's foremost activists on behalf of women's rights and democracy.

She helped abolish South Korea's patriarchal naming system, allowing people to use two surnames to reflect their heritage from both parents. She helped establish a quota requiring that half of a party's candidates running for the National Assembly be women. She pushed for equal pay for equal work.

Ms. Lee died on Oct. 4, 2020, at a hospital in Changwon, in the country's southeast. She was 95. The cause was sepsis, her nephew Lynn Rowe said.

“In the dark times when the stars were brighter, she was one of the most brilliant,” President Moon Jae-in said in a statement after her death. He posthumously awarded her a national medal, an honor she declined in 1996 because the same medal was being given to someone she believed to be a government agent planted within the women’s movement.

Along with her work on behalf of women, Ms. Lee was also active in the struggle for democracy when South Korea was under dictatorial rule, and was a forceful advocate for the reunification of the two Koreas.

She was among a group of 30 female activists, including Gloria Steinem and the Nobel Peace laureates Leymah Gbowee and Mairead Corrigan-Maguire, who received international attention for making a rare trip in 2015 across the Demilitarized Zone separating the North and South to promote disarmament and peace between the two countries, which are technically still at war.

Ms. Lee was a professor emeritus of sociology at the prestigious Ewha Womans University, where she inspired generations of young women. Many became leading feminists and rose to key positions in liberal governments. Ms. Lee turned down a number of offers to enter politics, preferring her roles as professor and activist.

In her later years, Ms. Lee helped found the Miracle Library, a national network of libraries aimed at children and teens in rural areas.

Lee Hyo-jae was born on Nov. 4, 1924, in Masan, a precinct of Changwon in Gyeongsang Province, during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Her father, Lee Yak-shin, was a Presbyterian minister and leader in the church and her mother, Lee Oak-kyung, founded and ran an orphanage.

When she was a young woman, her parents brought her to Seoul for an arranged marriage but Ms. Lee ran away, believing it would interfere with her ambitions, Mr. Rowe said. She never married.

A few years later her father met Jobe Couch, an American serviceman attached to the U.S. Embassy in Korea. Mr. Couch, who was married but had no children, became impressed by Ms. Lee’s younger sister Hyo-suk and offered to take her back with him to the United States to gain a college education. The sister, however, refused to go without Ms. Lee and so he brought them both in 1945.

It wasn’t easy. Mr. Couch had to enlist the help of an Alabama congressman, Carl Elliott, to obtain visas and he had to lobby the University of Alabama to accept the sisters on full scholarships even though they did not speak English.

Ms. Lee earned a bachelor’s degree at Alabama and went on to earn a master’s in sociology from Columbia University before returning to South Korea in 1957.

She founded the sociology department at Ewha the following year. She began teaching the school’s first course in women’s studies in 1977, which led to the development of South Korea’s first graduate level women’s studies program.

“She was the most distinguished woman leader at that time,” Jung Byung-joon, a history professor at Ewha, said in an email, and she became an advocate for human rights and democratization. “It was very challenging and dangerous choice for her to join the anti-regime movement.”

She was fired from Ewha in 1980 for her opposition to the military regime in power at the time, but was reinstated in 1986 as the country was returning to democracy.

Ms. Lee is survived by her daughter Hee-kyung and her sister, who now goes by Hyo Suk Rowe, and two other sisters, Sung Suk Gaber and Unwha Shin.

She was especially passionate about the cause of the "comfort women." As many as 200,000 women from Korea and other Asian countries were conscripted as sex slaves for Japanese troops beginning in the 1930s.

After decades of denial, the Japanese government in 1992 acknowledged its involvement. South Korea and Japan reached a settlement in 2015 that involved an apology from the Japanese government and \$8.3 million to provide care for the surviving women, who numbered around 45 at the time.

"Japan's crime against the women is unprecedented, even among the brutal war histories of humankind, because this enslavement of Korean women was carried out systematically as an official policy of the Japanese government," Ms. Lee told the Los Angeles Times in 1994, when a memorial library was dedicated in Koreatown. "It's ironic that the first memorial to the women should be in America."

SOUTH-KOREA: Shocked public wants Telegram trafficker identified

By Ser Myo-Ja

Korea Joongang Daily (23.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3adU5Ap> - Following the arrest of a 26-year-old who allegedly kept dozens of women, including underage girls, in sexual slavery and offered chats showing videos of violent sex through an instant messaging app, public demands rose for the release of his full name and those of his clients.

President Moon Jae-in ordered the police Monday to expand its investigation into his clients.

On March 16, the National Police Agency arrested the 26-year-old man surnamed Cho, who they had been investigating since September.

The man was accused of sex trafficking dozens of women, producing illegal pornographic materials and distributing them for profit through the Telegram instant messaging app, where he was known as "Baksa," meaning doctor or guru in Korean. He has not been formally charged.

So far, at least 74 victims, including 16 children and teenagers, were confirmed. The police also tracked down 13 possible co-conspirators of Cho and arrested four of them. Investigations are ongoing into the rest.

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency said Monday it is going after subscribers of Cho's bizarrely violent and gruesome video service.

"We are well aware of the public furor and that the people who joined Baksa's group chat rooms to watch videos are not simple bystanders but active accomplices in organized sex

crimes," a police official said. "We will conduct investigations to punish them based on concerned laws."

The police estimated that Cho's chat rooms had about 10,000 subscribers.

For months, the police investigated the creation and distribution of illegal sex crime videos through Telegram, an encrypted instant messaging service that has been used by protesters to avoid government surveillance in places like Hong Kong, but also by criminals, white supremacists and terrorists. According to the police, 124 suspects were charged with crimes including Cho.

According to police, Cho was a vicious sexual predator. He allegedly recruited women by offering part-time jobs and made them sex slaves by threatening to distribute their naked photos. He allegedly carved his nickname Baksa into the skin of some victims to claim them as his property, the police said.

According to the police, Cho also threatened to blackmail customers. He also ordered some of his customers to rape underage girls, police claim.

Cho's service offered free previews and a range of raunchy chats that got more expensive as they got more extreme. He was paid in cryptocurrencies.

He allegedly hired employees to rape victims and launder money. He communicated with them through Telegram messages and never met his employees, the police said.

Following Cho's arrest, the Blue House's public petition board received several demands for his full identity. One petition demanding full disclosure of his identity was signed by over 2.3 million people as of 5 p.m. Monday. Another petition, demanding the identities of accomplices and customers to be publicly released, was signed by over 1.6 million people.

If a Blue House petition gets more than 200,000 signatures within 30 days, the Blue House is supposed to formally respond.

"President Moon offered sincere words of consolation to the victims including the 16 children and teens," Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok said Monday. "He said he agrees with the people's rightful rage."

Moon said the government will do its best to delete the digital videos and offer legal, medical and psychological support to the victims.

Noting that he takes seriously three million people signing petitions within a short period of time, Moon ordered the police to thoroughly investigate this heinous crime, Kang said.

Moon ordered the police to investigate not only the chat room operators, but all users, urging the police to create a special investigation team to do so.

The police said Monday it will decide Tuesday whether to disclose the full identity of Cho.

Meanwhile, the police are still investigating a separate but related Telegram sex crime case. The police are tracing a user nicknamed "GodGod," who is believed to be the pioneer of such sexual chat rooms in Korea.

He reportedly operated eight Telegram chat rooms from February through September last year and distributed hundreds of illegal sex videos.

According to women's rights groups, about 60 Telegram chat rooms exist to share sex videos that involve underage people or violence. In total, they have about 260,000 subscribers.

Korea has relatively mild punishments for cyberspace sex crimes. Clause 2 of Article 14 of the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes said a person who creates or distributes photographs or videos against the will of a person photographed is punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 30 million won (\$23,700).

Clause 5 of Article 11 of the Act on the Protection of Children and Youth against Sex Offenses says, "Any person who possesses child or youth pornography knowing that it is child or youth pornography shall be punished by imprisonment with labor for not more than one year or by a fine not exceeding 20 million won."
