



## Covid-19 and Civic and Democratic Space

### NEPAL

In late March 2020, the Nepali government imposed a nationwide lockdown, banned domestic and international flights and closed land borders in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The government started easing restrictions in July 2020; by December 2020, many Covid-19 measures had been lifted.

The impact of the pandemic on Nepal's economy, which relies heavily on tourism and remittances from migrant workers, was considerable. Mass job losses and non-payment or underpayment of wages caused significant hardship and deprivation across Nepal. Returning migrant workers, internal migrants and those who rely on daily earnings were particularly impacted. Economic and social rights violations have increased because of the pandemic.

## FACTS AND FIGURES



Covid-19 cases (as of 6 May 2021):

**359,610<sup>1</sup>**



In the first 54 days of the nationwide

lockdown, **502**

women and children reported experiencing violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>2</sup>

**Caption: People protest for access to PCR testing and medical supplies. Photo Credit: Barsha Shah**



# HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT OF COVID-19 MEASURES

## Freedom of Expression

Security forces detained people, including journalists and social media users, who were critical of the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, undermining the right to freedom of expression. Journalists were arrested while covering Covid-related news and faced threats, including online, and physical attacks for their journalistic work.<sup>6</sup>

The economic crisis prompted by the pandemic heavily affected the media sector, leading to the closures of media outlets. Journalists reported delayed or non-payment of their salaries, salary cuts, dismissals and requests to take unpaid leave. The Federation of Nepali Journalists estimates that 100 journalists have been forced to resign or voluntarily quit their jobs since the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown.<sup>7</sup>

## Women and Girls

Incidents of gender-based violence increased as women and girls were forced to stay at home and unable to access support.<sup>8</sup> Nepal's Supreme Court acknowledged this increase in cases and ordered the government to take targeted measures to support women during the pandemic, including allowing gender-based violence cases to be registered and heard online.<sup>9</sup> Women faced violence, including sexual violence, in Covid-19 quarantine facilities.<sup>10</sup> The closure of schools and economic crisis contributed to a rise in child marriages.<sup>11</sup>

## Freedom of Movement and Migrant Workers

Police used excessive force when implementing Covid-19 lockdown orders.<sup>12</sup> On 15 April 2020, police beat three doctors who were returning home after work, accusing them of violating the lockdown.<sup>13</sup> In its first week, 8,500 people were detained after being found outside during the lockdown.<sup>14</sup>



At least **1,684** women faced violence and abuse in Covid-19 quarantine facilities.<sup>3</sup>



Three of every five workers in micro, small and medium enterprises in Nepal lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>



Around **800** media outlets were forced to close due to the economic crisis prompted by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

**Caption: Youth are demanding accountability of government in Kathmandu.**

**Photo Credit: Barsha Shah**

**Caption: This family's breadwinner sadly disappeared after leaving the home to search for food during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. Photo Credit: Bhola Pasawan**



Nepali migrant workers returned to Nepal in large numbers since March 2020. Although some were repatriated on flights chartered by the government, many migrant workers were left stranded when borders were suddenly closed to incoming people.<sup>15</sup> Thousands of migrants, including within Nepal, were forced to walk for days to reach home after losing their jobs. Migrant workers returning to Nepal were placed in quarantine facilities which failed to provide an adequate standard of living. Some migrant workers were denied their wages and other entitlements when they returned to Nepal.<sup>16</sup>

The lack of government support and domestic job opportunities meant that migrant workers were forced to again pursue work abroad, leading to long queues at border crossings to enter India despite the risk of Covid-19 infection.<sup>17</sup>

### **Freedom of Assembly**

In June 2020, hundreds of young people protested the government's handling of the pandemic, calling for better quarantine facilities, better testing and more transparency regarding Covid-19 related spending, among other demands. Security forces responded by using excessive force against the protestors and arresting ten people on 13 June 2020. The authorities warned protestors that they could face six months in jail for violating the Covid-19 lockdown.<sup>18</sup>

### **Economic and Social Rights**

The authorities failed to protect public health during the Covid-19 pandemic. Healthcare facilities lacked the staff, medicines, personal protective equipment and other equipment necessary to deal with the spread of the virus.<sup>19</sup> Healthcare workers protested the lack of adequate measures to protect them from contracting the virus.<sup>20</sup> Several people, including pregnant women, reported being turned away from hospitals or having their treatment delayed on the grounds of prioritisation of Covid-19 patients.<sup>21</sup> The number of births in healthcare facilities decreased by around half during the Covid-19 lockdown, resulting in an increase in infant mortality and deaths of women during childbirth.<sup>22</sup>

Educational institutions were shut in mid-March 2020 with many remaining closed until mid-January 2021. Some schools and colleges moved to online learning, but lack of internet access and the high cost of data meant that students from low-income families and those living in semi-urban or rural communities could not continue their education.<sup>23</sup>

The severe economic crisis resulting from the pandemic exacerbated poverty and hunger in Nepal. Restrictions on travel and public transport meant that farmers could not transport their produce and food prices increased.<sup>24</sup> One in five households reported struggling to provide sufficient food for daily meals and deaths from starvation were recorded.<sup>25</sup> Some people facing destitution after losing their jobs committed suicide; 1,647 suicides were recorded by the police in the first three months of the nationwide lockdown.<sup>26</sup> Relief packages were insufficient and ineffectively distributed, failing to reach marginalised communities. For example, in some districts, only those with citizenship cards were eligible for relief.<sup>27</sup>



**Caption: Unable to access his fields due to lockdown restrictions, this cabbage farmer lost his crop. Photo Credit: Upendra Lamichane**

## NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nepali government should:

- ensure fair and effective distribution of relief and provide financial support to people who have lost their livelihoods during the pandemic, including migrant workers;
- ensure that media workers can carry out their functions without threats, harassment, violence or intimidation, and are not prosecuted for their legitimate journalistic work;
- protect women and girls from the increased risk of domestic and gender-based violence during the Covid-19 pandemic; and
- ensure any restrictions on rights for public health reasons are lawful, necessary, and proportionate. They must be based on scientific evidence, neither arbitrary nor discriminatory in application, of limited duration and formulated narrowly and precisely.

## Endnotes

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