

Migrant sexual violence survivors face global COVID-19 threat

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Forced migrant survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) face increasingly serious problems—some life-threatening—as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions, a new study reveals.

Researchers found COVID-19's impact on these people—largely women—and organisations supporting them in the UK, Turkey, Tunisia, Sweden and Australia creates difficulties in [daily life](#) that also increase their vulnerability to further abuse and exploitation.

And they are now calling on governments and service providers to take immediate action that ensures forced migrant survivors of SGBV stay as safe as possible during the immediate crisis and beyond.

Experts at the University of Birmingham's Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS) - working with Refugee Women Connect—have published their findings in a new report, noting that:

- Some SGBV survivors are locked down with perpetrators with no access to shelters or advice organisations—enduring abuse and targeted by traffickers or pressured to agree to child marriage.
- Without distractions while in [social isolation](#), women are reliving abuse episodes—increasing anxiety levels, sleep problems and generating thoughts of committing suicide.
- Without the means to access online support services, women who were moving forward with their lives now feel themselves slipping backwards—with some destitute and relying on the generosity of neighbours themselves struggling.
- Having insufficient funds to buy foods and hygiene products as prices rose but [social welfare](#) and other forms of support remained static or even ceased.

Jenny Phillimore, Professor of Migration and Superdiversity, commented: "We need [urgent action](#) to meet the needs of some of the world's most vulnerable people, so that they can survive the coronavirus crisis and move on with their lives when it has passed without encountering further harm.

"Access to free medical services without the risk of detention is obvious, but survivors also need cash to cover food and hygiene costs, access to digital devices to enable them to reach online services and remotely school their children and safe shelter away from perpetrators."

Additionally, undocumented migrant survivors feared seeking medical help—scared of being detained and/or deported. Living in shelters and overcrowded shared accommodation left some unable to self-isolate—creating [health risks](#) and anxiety about contracting the virus.

Some individuals went hungry struggling to receive support due to pandemic restrictions. Work previously available in the informal economy disappeared leading to a loss of income generation opportunities and destitution sometimes couple with the threat of eviction.

IRiS experts set out a number of recommendations for action during social distancing measures, calling on governments to ensure:

- Social protection and basic safety nets for all forced migrant populations regardless of legal status.
- Access to universal health for all; revoke all medical charges.
- Availability of emergency accommodation and safe shelter for all survivors of violence.

As countries begin to ease pandemic restrictions and move toward recovery, they recommend longer term measures to governments and service providers, such as:

- Including a gender perspective in response, recovery and preparedness plans and include specific measures for forced migrant SGBV survivors.
- Expanding women's economic empowerment programmes to

support survivors to become self-reliant, and decrease dependency on aid.

- Designing interventions that support survivors' coping and recovery mechanisms through consultation with survivors and those who work with them.

More information: The report is available online:

[www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents ... 20/sgbv-covid-19.pdf](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents...20/sgbv-covid-19.pdf)

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