

COVID-19 and a coup: blockage of internet and social media access further exacerbate gender-based violence risks for women in Myanmar

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On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military seized control of the country and detained State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, citing unsubstantiated allegations of electoral irregularities in the November 2020 election.¹ Following this, medical staff at Myanmar's public hospitals started the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), expressing their intention to stop working under the military regime.² As a result of the CDM, many public hospitals across the country have ceased to operate and treat patients. In addition, civil employees from other ministries have joined the movement; protests across the country now number in the hundreds of thousands.³ In an attempt to quell the growing CDM, the military regime has used escalating force and implemented numerous restrictions. This has included increasingly shutting down internet access and banning access to social media platforms such as Facebook, which have been used to coordinate CDM activities.⁴ While many individuals used virtual private networks to access social media, intermittent and nightly internet blockages have been increased to a near total internet shutdown as of 2 April 2021. Besides limiting CDM coordination efforts, restricting access to the internet and social media platforms will have serious effects, especially for women, in the midst of a public health crisis when access to accurate and trustworthy information and connection to social support networks is crucial.

Facebook is synonymous with the internet in Myanmar and used by over half of the country's 54 million people.⁴ It is also the primary source of information and news for many people, with even government authorities disseminating vital information via this platform.⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook has played a critical role in circulating information and guidance on essential COVID-19 prevention measures.⁶ Many organisations, including

Summary box

- ▶ The military regime in Myanmar that seized control of the country has used escalating force to quell protests by the Civil Disobedience Movement, resulting in over 700 civilian deaths thus far and disproportionate violence towards women amid the protests.
- ▶ This has been coupled with other restrictions, including increasingly severe internet and social media blockages in a context where these channels have been critical in circulating information and guidance on essential COVID-19 prevention measures.
- ▶ These prohibitions will directly harm people's health, diminish efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic and further exacerbate gender-based violence risks for women and their access to life-saving services.
- ▶ They will also impede communication channels that are needed for social cohesion and ensuring safety and for documenting and broadcasting the human rights abuses taking place.
- ▶ Internet blockages are becoming increasingly common globally, and constitute a violation of international law. Urgent action must be taken to ensure safe and reliable access to life-saving information and services in Myanmar.

government entities, have used Facebook to share key information to increase awareness and dispel misconceptions about COVID-19 and to address important issues, including intimate partner violence (IPV) risks.⁷

As in many other countries, COVID-19 prevention measures such as stay-at-home orders implemented to reduce the spread of the virus have also been linked to an increased risk of IPV. For example, UNICEF reported a 32% increase in the number of reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV) in Myanmar in comparison to pre-COVID-19; the majority of these were perpetrated by an intimate partner.⁸ The coup has likely further exacerbated IPV risks due to increased levels of violence (over 700 civilian deaths since the protests began) and insecurity across the country resulting in

further limited freedom of movement, psychological and economic stress, decreased access to services and further fragmentation of social support networks.⁹ Women have also been in the frontlines of the CDM, and have faced disproportionate violence amid the protests.¹⁰

At the same time, access to necessary support services such as healthcare, social protection and legal services was already limited due to the lockdown measures during the pandemic.¹¹ Some service providers had pivoted to remote GBV service delivery via phone or internet, and organised awareness campaigns on Facebook providing up-to-date information about where survivors can access much needed support.^{7,12} These information channels and online support services have been a crucial lifeline for many GBV survivors. Similar efforts have been reported in other contexts.¹² However, internet blockages imperil these remote service interventions and referral to life-saving assistance. The coup and the subsequent CDM have further diminished access to in-person services, and protective legal mechanisms are effectively on hold. Other options such as private services or humanitarian assistance are likewise disrupted.

Globally, internet blockages are becoming increasingly common; in 2019, 33 countries, including India, Bangladesh and Ethiopia, implemented 213 internet shutdowns.¹³ Yet, there is limited empirical research on the impacts of such shutdowns on health outcomes.¹⁴ Myanmar has a history of internet disruptions and the country's 2013 Telecommunications Law permits the government to cut off telecommunications during a national emergency. Prior to the coup, for example, 1 million people in Myanmar's conflict-affected Rakhine and Chin States already faced months of internet and telecommunications shutdowns, impacting civilians' access to information and impeding humanitarian aid.¹³ Now, the entire country is facing similar restrictions. These prohibitions will directly harm people's health, diminish efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic and further exacerbate GBV and IPV risks for women and their access to often life-saving services. They will also impede communication channels that are needed for social cohesion and ensuring safety and for documenting and broadcasting the human rights abuses taking place. Highlighting the consequences of telecommunications shutdowns in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their violation of international law, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has urged all governments globally to immediately end blanket internet and telecommunications shutdowns.¹⁵ This will be necessary to effectively address the GBV 'shadow pandemic'.¹⁶ In Myanmar—with a coup on the backdrop of a dual pandemic of COVID-19 and GBV—it is more urgent than ever to ensure safe and reliable access to life-saving information and services.

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