

# COVID-19 likely to deepen the disadvantage of women living in poverty and with disability



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On 28 April 2020, UNFPA released projections of the **calamitous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's health**. Thirty-one million additional cases of gender-based violence are expected if lockdowns continue for another six months. Up to 13 million more child marriages over the next decade and increases in female genital mutilation are predicted. Moreover, in low- and middle-income countries it is estimated that access to family planning services will close down, with 46 million women no longer able to access modern forms of contraception, and seven million unintended pregnancies.<sup>1</sup>

These figures are projections, and it is difficult to predict whether the reality will be better or worse – but it is clear that women will suffer and progress towards gender equity will be dealt a severe blow. It is also likely that some groups – those who are most deeply deprived and are often invisible – will be especially vulnerable. Women living in poverty and with disability prior to COVID-19 faced a range of barriers to accessing services, including sexual and reproductive health services. In a context of pandemic, crisis, and lockdown those barriers have been intensified.

In 2018, a team from the Australian National University undertook a study of multidimensional poverty in Indonesia, using the Individual Deprivation Measure (IDM). The IDM is a tool for assessing poverty across fifteen dimensions, and is designed to be sensitive to gender and to those social groups that are most disadvantaged and most vulnerable. In one district, 2815 women and men aged sixteen years and above were surveyed. We used the Washington Group Short Set questions to identify those living with a disability. The findings reveal the intersection between gender and disability and the implications for multidimensional poverty. In the current context they provide disturbing insights into how COVID-19 is likely to play out for women who are already highly vulnerable and marginalised.

One dimension of the IDM is family planning. Survey respondents are asked whether they have a need for contraception, whether they use contraception, and if so, what form (modern or traditional). In Indonesia, access to modern contraception is reasonably good. However, the IDM study found that **almost half of respondents who reported being sexually active were not using modern, reliable forms contraception**.

The **responsibility for preventing pregnancy or spacing children falls heavily to women**, with over 45 percent of women reporting that they were personally using contraception (and not relying on their partner), compared with just under 20 percent of men. Amongst young people (aged between 16 and 24 years) the discrepancy was even more stark, with over 49 percent of young women using contraception, compared to 16 percent of young men.

We also found concerning gaps in knowledge about modern contraception, with almost 30 percent of young men and just over **16 percent of young women reporting that they did not know of any method of contraception**.

**All of this is concerning, particularly in a context of a pandemic when access to modern contraception is likely to be further reduced.**

**However, of greatest concern is the situation of women living with disabilities.**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unfpa.org/press/new-unfpa-projections-predict-calamitous-impact-womens-health-covid-19-pandemic-continues>

Our research found that both women and men with disabilities are less likely to use contraception – only 17.9 percent of people with a disability reported personally using contraception, compared to more than over 35 percent of those without. **Almost 75 percent of women living with disability reported not using contraception.**

Our analysis indicates that there are not significant knowledge gaps between women with disability and those without. Moreover, people living with disabilities were slightly more likely to report using modern forms of contraception than those without disabilities. Based on this study, the **barriers to contraception for women living with disability appear to be around access and availability** – and are likely to be exacerbated during the COVID-19 lockdown. These findings also suggest that as countries come out of lockdown, it cannot be assumed that access to contraception will be open to all women.

It is important to note that while women with disabilities were especially deprived in relation to contraception, they were also deprived in other dimensions. **Both women and men living with disabilities were more likely to report being worried about not having enough food and to report experiencing hunger.** They were also more likely to report experiencing health problems and feeling worried, nervous or anxious, with women most deprived in these areas. Almost one third of women living with a disability reported feeling nervous, worried or anxious on a daily basis (compared with just under 11 percent of men with a disability). While people living with a disability were more likely than those without to report having accessed health care services in the past 12 months, women with disabilities were less likely to have accessed services than men with disabilities.

**Our research also highlighted the significant paid and unpaid work contribution of women who live with disability.**

**Almost 23 percent reported working over 48 hours a week. Over 60 percent reported having unpaid caring roles (compared with 10 percent of men with disability).**

Combined, these findings reveal the multidimensional poverty of people living with disabilities, and the deep deprivation of women in particular. Women living with disability are not only deprived in relation to family planning, but experience multiple and compounding deprivations.

In light of UNFPA's recent projections, we need to be especially conscious of the ways in which the calamitous impact of COVID-19 will affect women with a disability. Responses need to be developed accordingly. If not, the deprivation of women living with disability will be further deepened and existing gaps widened – with devastating human consequences.

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Information at <https://www.individualdeprivationmeasure.org>

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