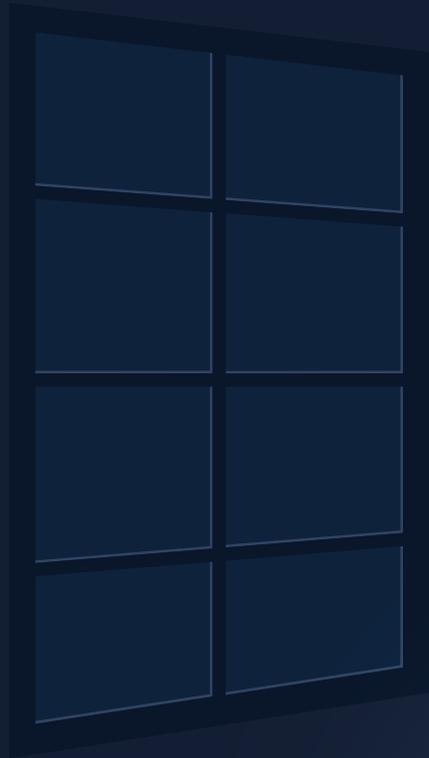


# COVID-19 AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: THE EVIDENCE BEHIND THE TALK

Insights from big data analysis in Asian countries



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For a list of any errors or omissions found subsequent to the launch, please visit our website: <https://data.unwomen.org/>

# BACKGROUND

The risk of violence against women and girls (VAWG) increases during crises (Fraser, 2020; Palermo and Peterman, 2011) and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Disruptions of support services for victims, living under mobility restrictions, increased unemployment rates, and economic insecurity resulting from the pandemic, all create heightened risks, especially if victims are confined at home with perpetrators. Additional vulnerabilities, such as those associated with migrant status, gender identity, caste and sexual orientation, may further limit access to services and financial resources. Women, and particularly the ones in those vulnerable groups, are thus believed to be experiencing higher exposure to VAWG since the onset of COVID-19, but little data has been available to demonstrate this to date.

Social distancing measures have posed challenges to collecting official statistics on the prevalence of VAWG, as many face-to-face surveys have been interrupted due to fear of infection. Remote (non face-to-face) surveys on this topic carry some methodological, ethical and safety challenges, and thus have not enabled the collection of data on prevalence since COVID-19 started. Considering these limitations, and with the goal of gathering proxy information on related trends, UN Women partnered with Quilt.AI and UNFPA to conduct analysis of big data in eight countries: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore. The analysis identified trends from discourse data generated across social media platforms and search engines. In particular, big data on people's search behaviour on VAWG-related topics (both before the onset of the pandemic and since) were considered.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Overall, the big-data analysis sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1. Are women and men talking about violence against women more often than before COVID-19 in their online posts?** Are they talking about violence against migrant women? Are searches more focused on a particular type of violence against women (physical, sexual, psychological, in the world of work, by intimate partners)?
- 2. Are women and men talking more about help-seeking – looking for information, services and support** in response to violence, to prevent violence or reduce their own use of violence? Are the types of services being searched for different since the pandemic began?
- 3. Are response organizations, such as shelters, helplines, police and other support organizations, promoting content about violence against women** and related response services more proactively? Are they doing it in different languages to ensure access to information by migrant women?

## METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Big data from online searches and public posts was analysed in the eight countries, to identify trends of violence-related searches, as well as help-seeking behaviour. While this analysis does not provide enough evidence to assess the exact magnitude of the changes in the prevalence of VAWG as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, it is useful in providing proxy information regarding general trends. To the extent possible, definitions used aligned with those from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response.<sup>1</sup> The reference period for search data ranged from October 2019 to September 2020 (except for Singapore, where the period considered was December 2019 to September 2020<sup>2</sup>), whereas for social media posts it ranged from September 2019 to November 2020 for all countries. Google mobility reports were utilized to identify peak periods of lockdown and mobility restrictions. In particular, the average daily and monthly mobilities were calculated for each country, and the periods of lowest mobility were considered as peaks for restrictions. As a result of this analysis, most countries showed the lowest mobility taking place in April, with the exception of Singapore, where this took place in May. Any month after April (and May in Singapore) is considered "post peak" for the purposes of this analysis.

A total of 20,551,620 unique searches across eight countries were considered for this analysis, along with 3,502 keywords on the topic of VAWG (see Annex I). For each country, keywords were determined by consulting the language used in questionnaires from demographic and household-level surveys that specifically looked at

1 See: [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2015-iasc-gender-based-violence-guidelines\\_lo-res.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2015-iasc-gender-based-violence-guidelines_lo-res.pdf)

2 In Singapore, mobility restrictions peaked one month later than in the rest of the countries considered, and thus the reference period was adjusted accordingly.

different acts of violence. This was followed by a brief literature review on the different types of VAWG in each country to account for harmful cultural practices such as early marriage. This resulted in an initial list that was circulated amongst relevant UN Women country offices to ensure that all local search terms and cultural context were captured. Afterwards, this list was run through a search analysis tool to determine which keywords had actual volume as well as historical search data. The final keyword list (Annex I) reflects how individuals are searching for these terms, and thus include local terms and common misspellings. Finally, historical search data for each term was extracted, allowing for pre- and post-peak comparisons. The keywords refer to general searches about different violence types, searches by survivors or someone who knows them, and help-seeking for services. The social media discourse analysis included a read of 2,000 social media posts across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Sharechat, to better understand the VAWG-related issues that women and men were discussing before and

since the onset of COVID-19. The Facebook pages and social media posts of 32 service organizations, 7,000 Facebook images and 10,001 tweets from these service organizations were also examined for this analysis.

A key limitation from this study lies in the different rates of internet penetration and use across countries, which result in different numbers of overall searches (see figure A1 in Annex III). These hamper comparability across countries in terms of total search volume. An additional limitation has to do with increases in internet usage since the onset of COVID-19. While some of the trends identified might be slightly affected by this and thus should be interpreted with caution, it is highly unlikely that the overall findings (e.g. increased VAWG-related searches, increased mentions of related topics) are fully attributed to increased internet use, as volumes typically decline when victims are constantly under supervision<sup>3</sup>, a behaviour likely exacerbated by COVID-19-related mobility restrictions.

# FINDINGS

## I. WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE PANDEMIC?

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS ROSE

Lockdown measures to control the spread of COVID-19 forced people to remain at home, in some cases with

abusive partners. Existing literature shows that across all eight countries,<sup>4</sup> reported domestic violence cases increased during or immediately after lockdown periods. Some countries initially saw drops in VAWG reports, but evidence suggests this might have been a result of inability to seek help and of victim control by abusers during the tightest mobility restrictions, as the number of reports increased eventually.

3 UN ESCAP, The COVID-19 Pandemic and Violence Against Women in Asia and the Pacific, 2020 ISSN: 2708-7387(online) [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/20201119\\_SDD\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_Covid-19.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/20201119_SDD_Policy_Paper_Covid-19.pdf)

4 Bangladesh: Ehsan, Shah Md Azimul & Jahan, Fairouz. Analyzing the Impact of Covid-19 on the Mothers of Bangladesh: Hearing the Unheard. Research Square. September 21, 2020. <https://assets.researchsquare.com/files/rs-79726/v1/e4c69405-3009-4edd-8ca3-1e945c2c3537.pdf>

India: Das et al. Examining the impact of lockdown (due to COVID-19) on Domestic Violence (DV): An evidences from India. Elsevier Public Health Emergency Collection. August 7, 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7413053/>

Indonesia: Jones, Balawyn. 'Home is not safe': domestic violence increases as Covid-19 pandemic takes hold. Indonesia at Melbourne. May 4, 2020. <https://indonesiatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/home-is-not-safe-domestic-violence-increases-as-covid-19-pandemic-takes-hold/>

Malaysia: Sukumaran, Tashny. In Malaysia, domestic violence spikes amid lockdown to slow coronavirus infections. South China Morning Post. April 11, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3079456/malaysia-domestic-violence-spikes-amid-lockdown-slow-coronavirus>

Nepal: Dahal et al. Mitigating violence against women and young girls during COVID-19 induced lockdown in Nepal: a wake-up call. Globalization and Health. September 21, 2020. <https://globalizationandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12992-020-00616-w>

Singapore: lau, Jean. Coronavirus: More cases of family violence during circuit breaker; police to proactively help victims. The Straits Times. May 15, 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/coronavirus-more-cases-of-family-violence-during-circuit-breaker-police-to>

Thailand: Langerak, Annelie. Thailand's Silent Pandemic: Domestic Violence during COVID-19. Heinrich Böll Stiftung: Southeast Asia. July 1, 2020. <https://th.boell.org/en/2020/07/01/covid-19-domestic-violence>

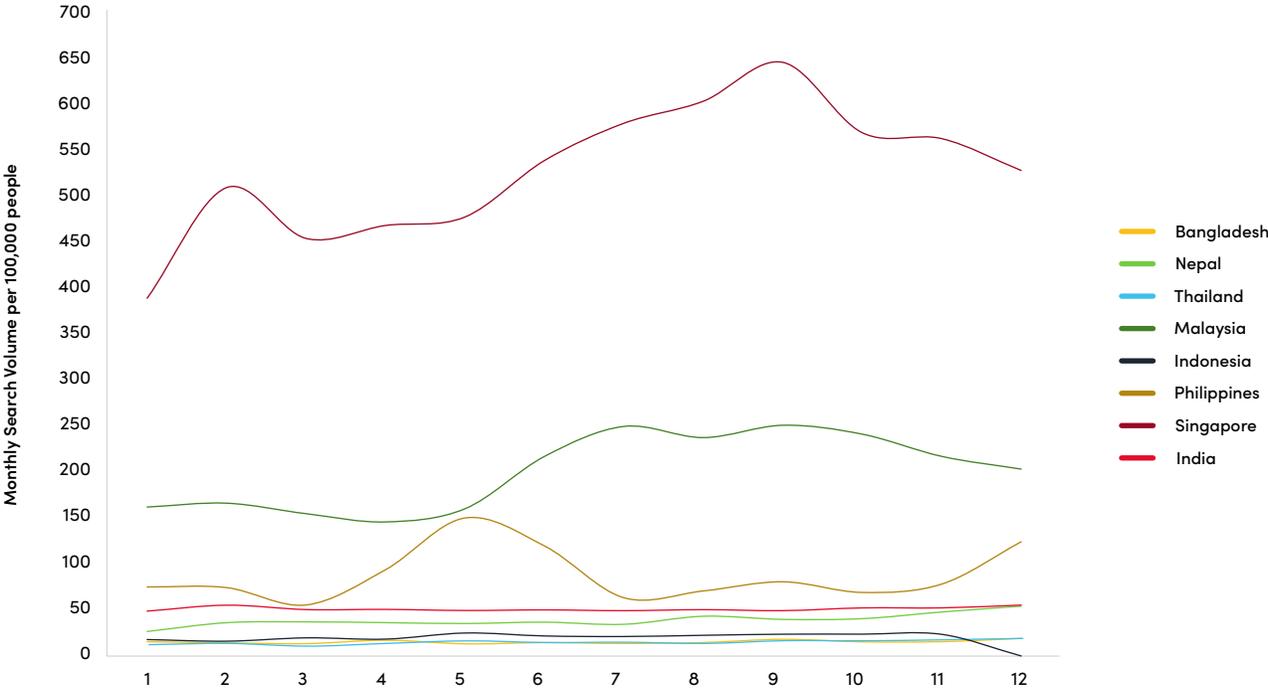
The Philippines: Calleja, Joseph Peter. Domestic violence all the rage in Philippine lockdown. Union of Catholic Asian News. October 9, 2020. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/domestic-violence-all-the-rage-in-philippine-lockdown/89821#>

Literature indicates that domestic violence cases rose in India,<sup>5</sup> Bangladesh,<sup>6</sup> and Malaysia.<sup>7</sup> This strongly manifested online, as search queries related to VAWG, including physical, sexual and psychological violence, all rose during the same period. For example, searches related to physical violence (which include keywords such as “physical abuse signs”, “violent relationships”, “cover bruises on face”) in Malaysia, Philippines, and Nepal, grew by 47 percent, 63 percent, and 55 percent, respectively, between October 2019 and September 2020. These search queries included specific references to “men hitting women,” “spouse abuse,” “boyfriend hit me,” and “controlling men” or “controlling husband”.

Each country’s search history highlighted slightly different VAWG trends. In India, the top 10 search queries centred on “helplines” and “signs of domestic abuse.” In Bangladesh, the top search queries were linked to the “definition of

domestic violence”, and other types of abuse such as “emotional”, “mental,” and “abuse in relationships.” In Nepal, search queries include “sexual assault,” “rape victim,” “definition of domestic violence,” “solutions for domestic violence,” “verbal abuse,” “wife beating,” and “abusive relationship.” In Thailand, some of the top searches include “wife beating,” “sexual harassment in schools,” “one-stop crisis centre,” “sexually abused,” “abusive men,” “abusive spouse,” and “abusive relationships.” In the Philippines, search volume between April and September 2020 grew for some of the following search queries: “how to stop domestic violence,” “being raped,” “sexual assault,” “OWWA [Overseas Workers Welfare Administration] helpline,” “whipped with belt,” and “emotionally abusive husband.” Please see Annex 1 for the top VAWG search queries with the highest growth in search volume between April and September 2020, broken down by country.

**Figure 1:**  
**Monthly search volume for VAWG-related searches per 100,000 people, October 2019 to September 2020.**



Note: Because of different rates of internet penetration and use across countries, higher numbers of monthly searches do not necessarily imply that the prevalence of VAWG is higher in a particular country as compared to others. In other words, the findings should not be compared across countries.

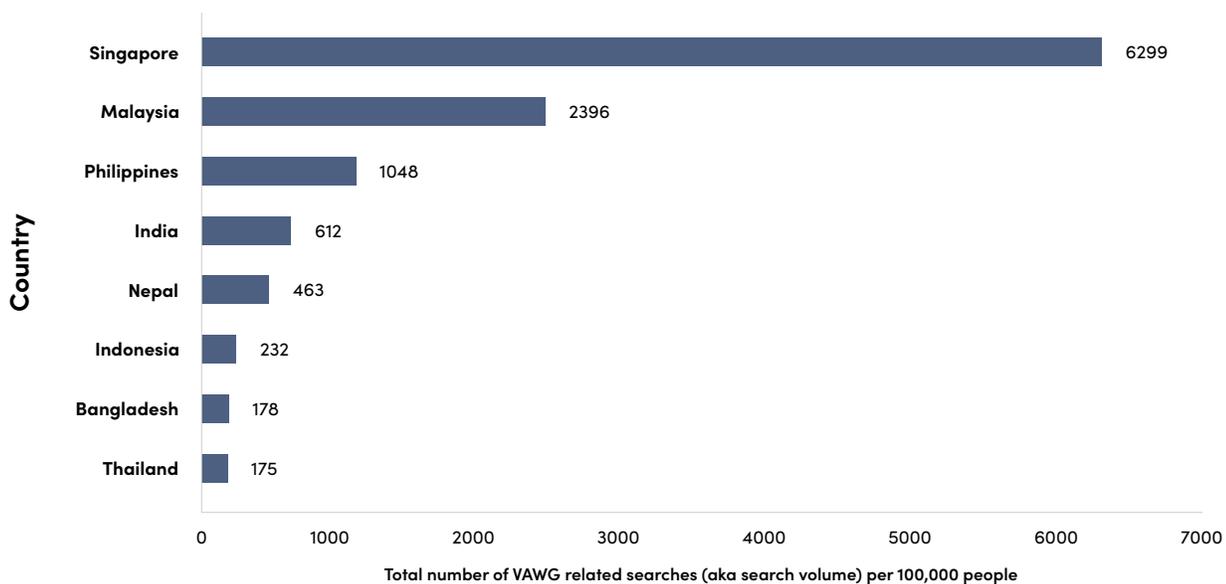
5 Kumar, Anant. COVID-19 and Domestic Violence: A Possible Public Health Crisis. *Journal of Health Management*. August 11, 2020. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0972063420932765>

6 Hamadani et al. Immediate impact of stay-at-home orders to control COVID-19 transmission on socioeconomic conditions, food insecurity, mental health, and intimate partner violence in Bangladeshi women and their families: an interrupted time series. *The Lancet Global Health*. November 1, 2020. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30366-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30366-1/fulltext)

7 Women’s Aid Organization. Government Public Service Announcement is working, WAO urges strong, consistent messaging on avenues for help for domestic violence survivors. April 2020. <https://wao.org.my/government-public-service-announcement-is-working-wao-urges-strong-consistent-messaging-on-avenues-for-help-for-domestic-violence-survivors/>

**Figure 2:**

**Total number of VAWG related searches per 100,000 people, October 2019 to September 2020.**



Note: The reference period is slightly different for Singapore, where it ranges from December 2019 to September 2020, as mobility restrictions peaked one month later in the country.

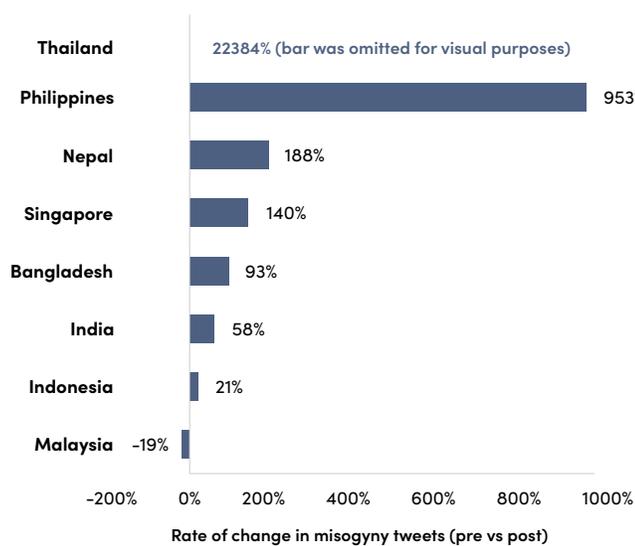
## **ONLINE MISOGYNY ROSE, BUT SO DID ONLINE SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS.**

During lockdown, internet usage grew<sup>8</sup> (see Figure A1 in the appendix in addition). In all countries, online platforms saw more online misogyny, such as instances of trolling, using images without consent or sexual harassment. For example, in Thailand, people took to Twitter to blame victims in cases of sexual violence. In Bangladesh, misogynistic comments under girls' posts or articles about VAWG appeared more frequently since the onset of COVID-19.

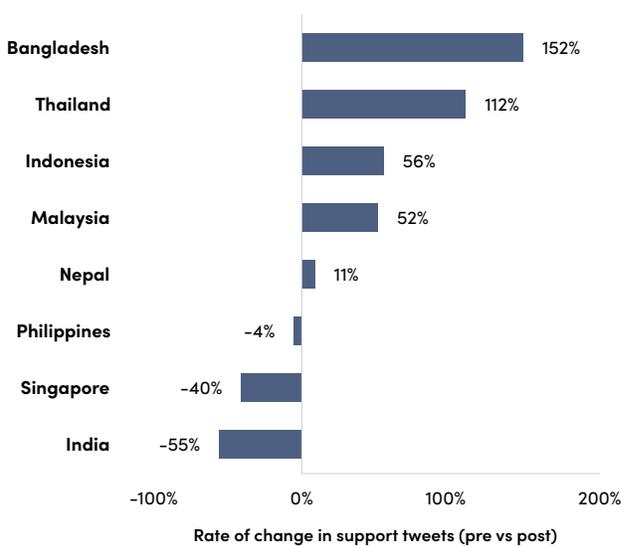
However, online support for survivors through Facebook groups, carousel posts on Instagram and campaigns by service providers, also increased. In India, young, urban populations used carousel posts, which combine several images or videos to tell a story, to shed light on the unique issues faced by women who face caste-based violence - such as Dalit women. In Singapore, since the onset of COVID-19, more people expressed their disgust about VAWG across social media platforms, raising awareness on its impact and raising funds for shelters.

8 Internet Usage Around the World as Countries Grapple with COVID. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/02/8-charts-on-internet-use-around-the-world-as-countries-grapple-with-covid-19/>

**Figure 3:**  
Percentage change in number of tweets with misogynistic language between October 2019 and October 2020.



**Figure 4:**  
Percentage change in tweets with references to support for victims of violence, between October 2019 and October 2020.



**Table 1:**  
Proportion of social media posts that referenced each of the topics considered, September 2019 to November 2020 (percentage).

	Misogyny, victim blaming and misconceptions <sup>9</sup>	Religion, tradition and caste <sup>10</sup>	Justice, law and regulations <sup>11</sup>	Community support <sup>12</sup>	NGO support <sup>13</sup>	Mainstream and social media roles in VAW <sup>14</sup>
India	25%	28%	15%	17%	10%	5%
Bangladesh	28%	33%	10%	18%	8%	3%
Nepal	18%	27%	12%	15%	18%	10%
Thailand	22%	12%	29%	13%	4%	20%
Singapore	16%	4%	18%	26%	24%	12%
Malaysia	19%	23%	15%	20%	18%	5%
Indonesia	23%	3%	33%	28%	8%	5%
Philippines	26%	1%	38%	12%	22%	1%

Note: The percentages displayed have been calculated based on an overall sample size of 2,000 social media posts.

- 9 Posts that display or discuss misogynistic beliefs and attitudes, blaming of survivors/victims for their own assaults, or posts involving popular misconceptions.
- 10 Posts where people give opinions on VAWG linked to religious beliefs, harmful cultural practices, or discrimination against certain castes. For example, posts that debate the relationship between VAWG and Islam in countries such as Malaysia. In India, there were posts about harmful cultural practices such as child marriage. In India, there was also discourse on caste and the sexual violence faced by Dalit women.
- 11 Posts that criticize treatment of victims/survivors of domestic violence by the justice system, calls for the passing of legislation that support victims/survivors of violence as well as vulnerable groups.
- 12 Posts that display support for victims/survivors of violence and vulnerable groups.
- 13 Posts from NGOs, mostly related to campaigns or help-seeking services for victims/survivors of violence as well as vulnerable groups.
- 14 Posts that discuss the roles and effects of social media in perpetuating or combatting violence against women.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST VULNERABLE GROUPS DREW ATTENTION, BUT NOT ENOUGH

In India and Nepal, cases of sexual violence against Dalit women and girls made national headlines and fuelled “Dalit Lives Matter” movements. In the Philippines, there was increased discourse in news, media and discussion forums on the rise in the abuse that Filipina overseas domestic workers faced during lockdown.

In other countries, attention to vulnerable groups, such as migrants and LGBTQI individuals, remains low in the online discourse. However, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are used as tools to demand justice, mobilize protests, start petitions and fundraise for survivors<sup>15</sup>. More than 65 percent of people using these platforms for such advocacy are female from urban areas and aged 18 to 34<sup>16</sup>.

### Figure 5:

### Examples of social media posts pertaining to violence and discrimination against vulnerable groups.

#### MALAYSIA

Went to Jaya Grocer The Gardens earlier this evening and overheard a guy at the cashier told his domestic helper while pointing at their full trolley, “This’s worth more than your salary.”

We eat the roti canai that migrant workers made at mamak restaurants everyday. We live and work in buildings that they built. We got them to clean our streets, and many of us were even raised by non-Malaysian maids.

Tapi bila mereka nak naik bas percuma pula kita berkira.

#### SINGAPORE

Foreign workers did not cause the CB you dimwits. In fact, they literally caused you to have a roof over your head now you ungrateful CBKs.

It’s a **#shame** on some people to be calling our foreign workers “cheap” labor. As a **#communicator** who’s also in the **#construction** sector, I’ll tell you to weigh your constructive contributions to the society against theirs.

#### PHILIPPINES

This is like asking “why do we need Magna Carta for **Women** (RA 9710) if we already have Bill of Rights in our constitution?”. It’s because **violence** against **women** exists.

Don’t be a bigot. Let the LGBTQ+ have protection from SOGIE-based discrimination and **violence**.

It still boggles my mind how people can be against SOGIE bill, like, if it has nothing to do with you, why be against it?

15 This is a qualitative read based on the posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The frequency of these posts increased on these platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

16 Estimated using data from Google API and Facebook Audience Insights.

## INDONESIA

Not even non procedural or unofficial... The official one is like being ignored... If you see the handling of migrant workers / migrant workers by the embassy / hongkong and Taiwanese embassy that responds to PMI... It's like it's compared to the handling of the Embassy of KL..... Yes...????? What's going on...????

If people take the illegal route, it's usually because the legal one is much more complicated. Especially like now, people are taking illegal routes because the legal ones never open. Meanwhile, the needs of the kitchen must remain available ..

## INDIA

Hypocrisy and Casteism  
feat. Kangana Ranaut,  
the 'Savarna Feminist'

### Why **Feminism** Needs To Be **Intersectional**



YOUTH KI AWAAZ

## BANGLADESH

All human are Right to have equality. Don't block our right base on [#religions](#) [#colours](#) [#disable](#)  
[#Right](#) for Rohingya  
[#Right](#) for Refugees  
[#Equal](#) Right for the minorities

## NEPAL

".... **Nepal** also failed to take steps to properly protect the rights of women and **girls**, particularly those from minority Dalit or indigenous communities, who remained at risk of sexual **violence**, early marriage, and other abuses...."

## HELP-SEEKING SEARCHES INCREASED

Evidence shows help-seeking searches increased in all countries except for India and Indonesia. That is, victims of VAWG or those close to victims are actively searching for information on what to do when they face abuse from their partners or other perpetrators and/or want to help

victims of VAWG. The magnitude varies across countries. From October 2019 to September 2020, Malaysia had the highest increase (70%) followed by Nepal (47%), Thailand (29%) and Singapore (29%). Different degrees of controlling behaviors by abusers may be affecting women’s ability to seek help on-line.

**Table 2:**  
Average search volume for help-seeking keywords<sup>17</sup> pre-COVID-19, since COVID-19, and the rate of change.

Country	Pre-COVID-19: Average search volume for help-seeking keywords	Since COVID-19: Average search volume for help-seeking keywords	Rate of change
Malaysia	1642	2793	70%
Nepal	360	530	47%
Thailand	1272	1640	29%
Singapore	444	572	29%
Bangladesh	480	533	11%
Philippines	1573	1735	10%
Indonesia	2780	2760	-1%
India	94306	81413	-14%

## II. BREAKING DOWN THE INCREASE IN VAWG-RELATED SEARCHES

The evidence is clear: VAWG-related searches have increased since the onset of COVID-19, which points towards rises in abusive behaviour against women and girls. Data analysis, however, shows numerous other nuances. Figure 5 depicts specific search keywords within each individual country. Search queries were categorized as *emerging* if they had low volume but high growth, or *dominant* if they had both high volume and high growth. Growth, for this analysis, was measured with relation to the average count of monthly search queries within a specific country. Searches were conducted in both the local language as well as English. Key takeaways from this *emerging* vs. *dominant* analysis include:

1. **Abuse from husbands/partners is an increasing concern:** Apart from Nepal, queries related to the topic “violent husband” or “violent partner” made up the bulk of VAWG-related searches between October 2019 and October 2020. Keyword phrases under this cluster included “beating wife” and “my boyfriend hits me”.
2. **Sexual abuse may be rising:** Queries related to sexual abuse have also dominated in half the countries, with an average 25-percent growth. In India, the *dominant* topic cluster in this regard is “sexually abusive relationship”, while in South-East Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, the dominating cluster is “rape, sexual assault and abuse”.
3. **Perpetrators of sexual abuse are likely to be husbands or partners:** In the four countries where sexual-abuse topic clusters are significantly *dominant* (India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore), “Violent husband/partner” are similarly dominant. This suggests a correlation between sexual abuse and the violence perpetrated by women’s partners.

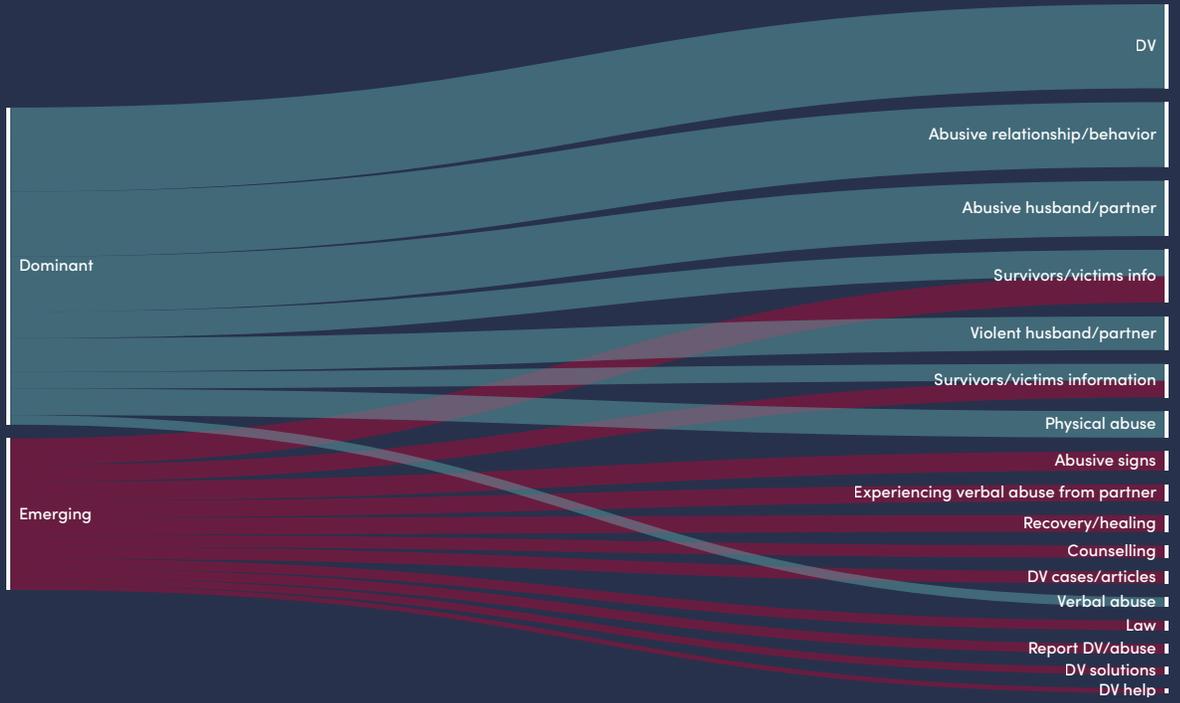
<sup>17</sup> Examples of help-seeking keywords include “domestic violence hotline”, “sexual assault lawyer,” or “sexual abuse counselling”.

4. **Searches related to various forms of violence are emerging since the onset of COVID-19:** Across all countries, topic clusters related to intimate partner violence, such as “Domestic violence signs” and “experiencing sexual violence”, have experienced a sharp increase in searches between pre-COVID and since COVID-19. Only in Singapore has the “financial abuse” cluster risen sharply, with keywords like “husband controls finances” (up 100%) and “husband controls all the money” (up 100%).
5. **Women in different countries want different help:** Although help-seeking searches are rapidly rising across the board, the specific kind of help women are looking for differs by country.<sup>18</sup>
  - In India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia, women are seeking domestic violence help. India’s *emerging* topic clusters are “Domestic violence helpline” and “Report domestic violence/abuse”; Bangladesh’s is “Domestic violence help”; Thailand’s is “Domestic violence help”; and Malaysia’s are “Domestic Violence solutions” and “Report Domestic Violence/abuse”.
- Women in Nepal and the Philippines are more generic in their search for help. Nepal’s (and, to an extent Thailand’s) *emerging* topic cluster is “Abuse help”, with keywords such as “abuse helpline” and “abused help”. The Philippines’ is “women’s helpline”, where most keywords don’t specify what kind of help, e.g. “women helpline number”, “women’s help center”.
- Women in Singapore are looking to “Report harassment” (e.g. “ladies harassment complaint number”), while those in Indonesia are seeking to “Report emotional abuse” (e.g. “how to report mental abuse”).
6. **There is a lack of trust in the law:** Despite the rising searches around abuse and help, only Bangladesh and Nepal have “Law” as an *emerging* topic cluster. Examples of keywords are “marital rape law” and “sexual assault lawyer”. This suggests that in most countries, turning to the law for help is not seen as a viable option for women.

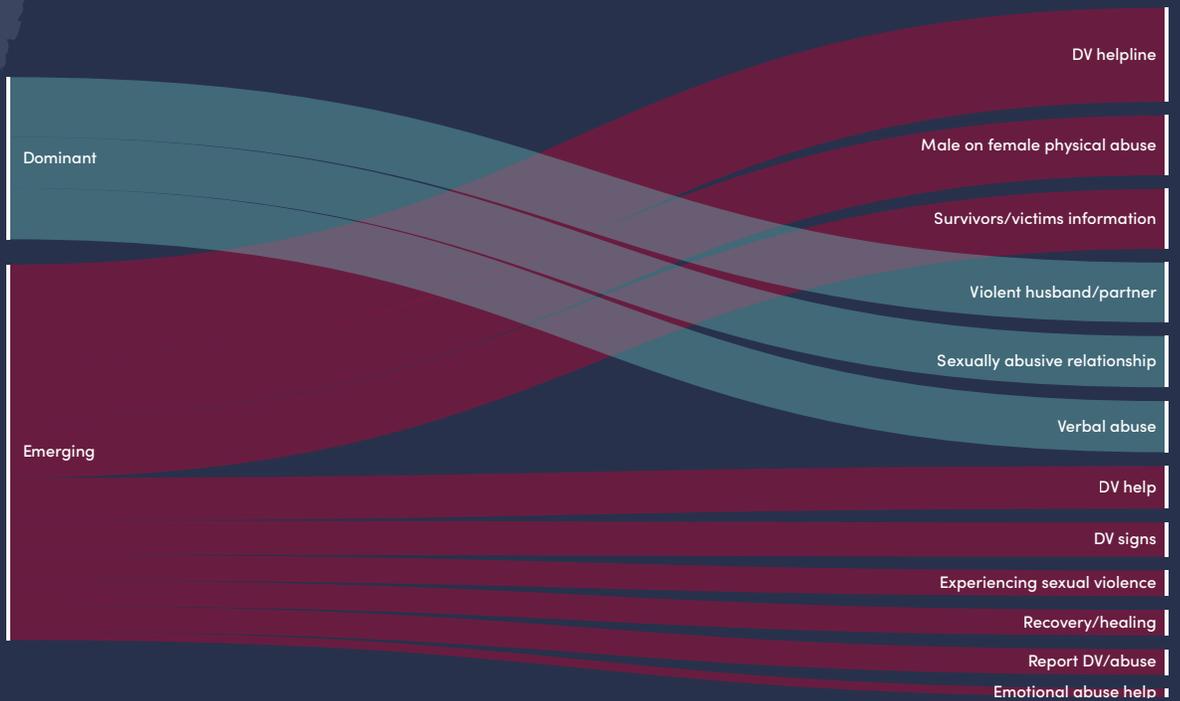
18 As evidenced by analysis of the rapidly growing topic clusters only.

Figure 6: Emerging and dominant<sup>19</sup> search clusters since the onset of COVID-19, by country.

## BANGLADESH

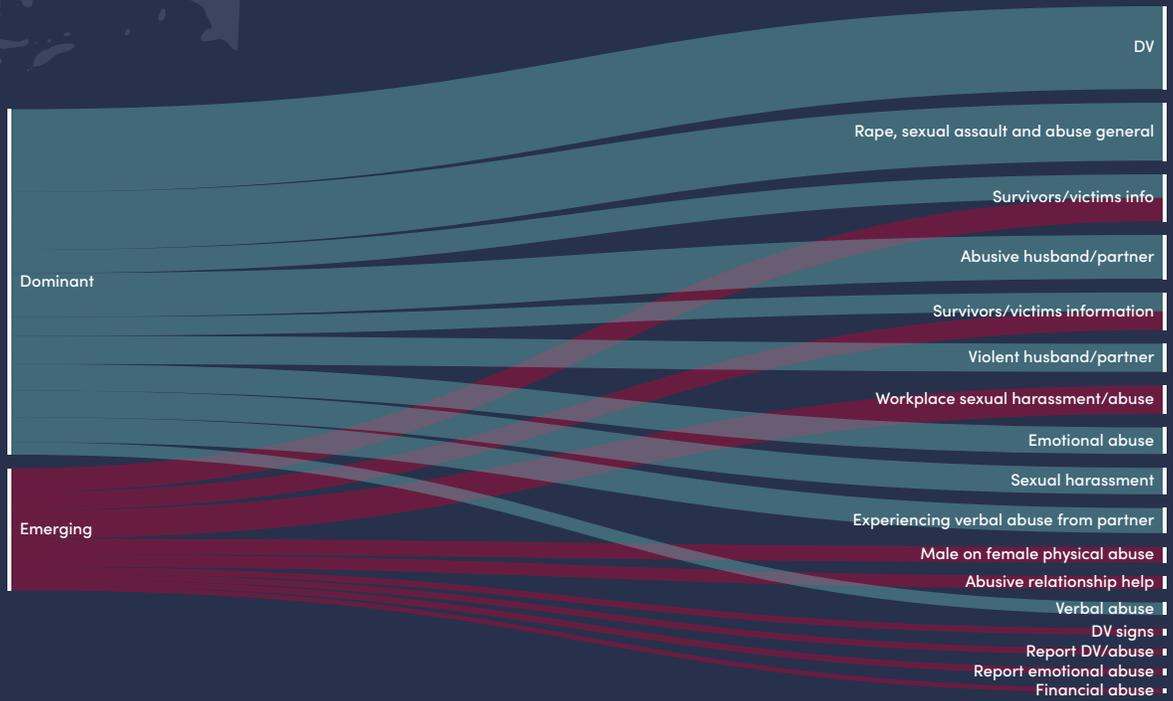


## INDIA

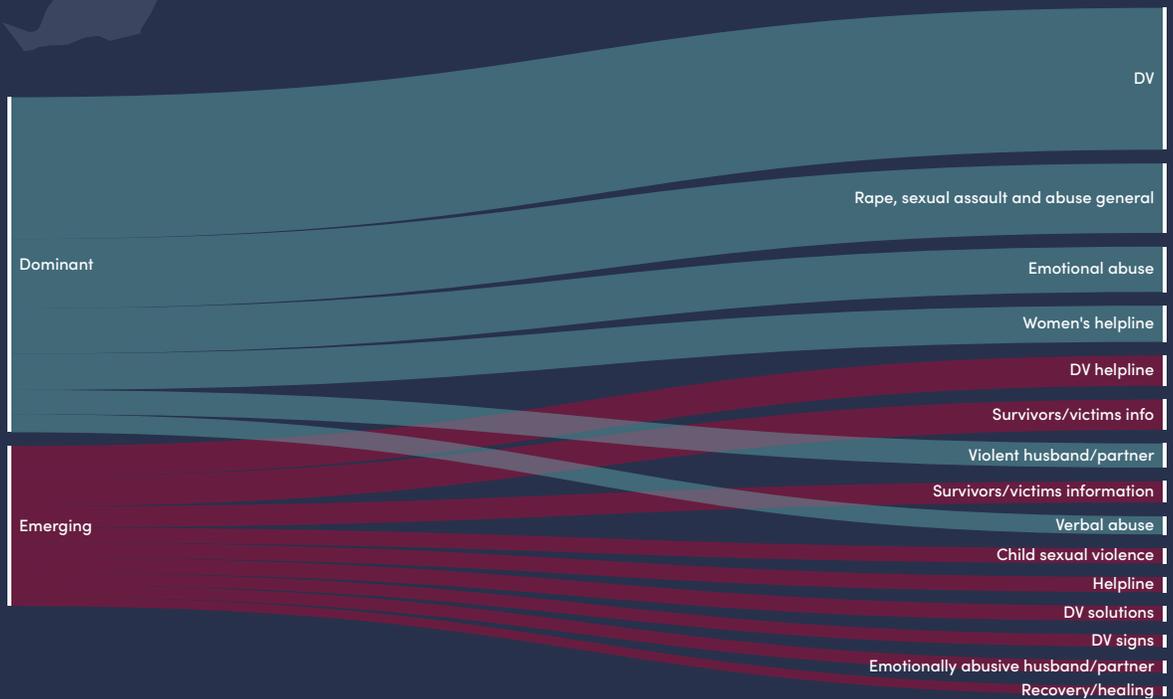


<sup>19</sup> Emerging refers to low volume of searches with high growth in the reference period. Dominant refers to high volume of searches with high growth during the reference period.

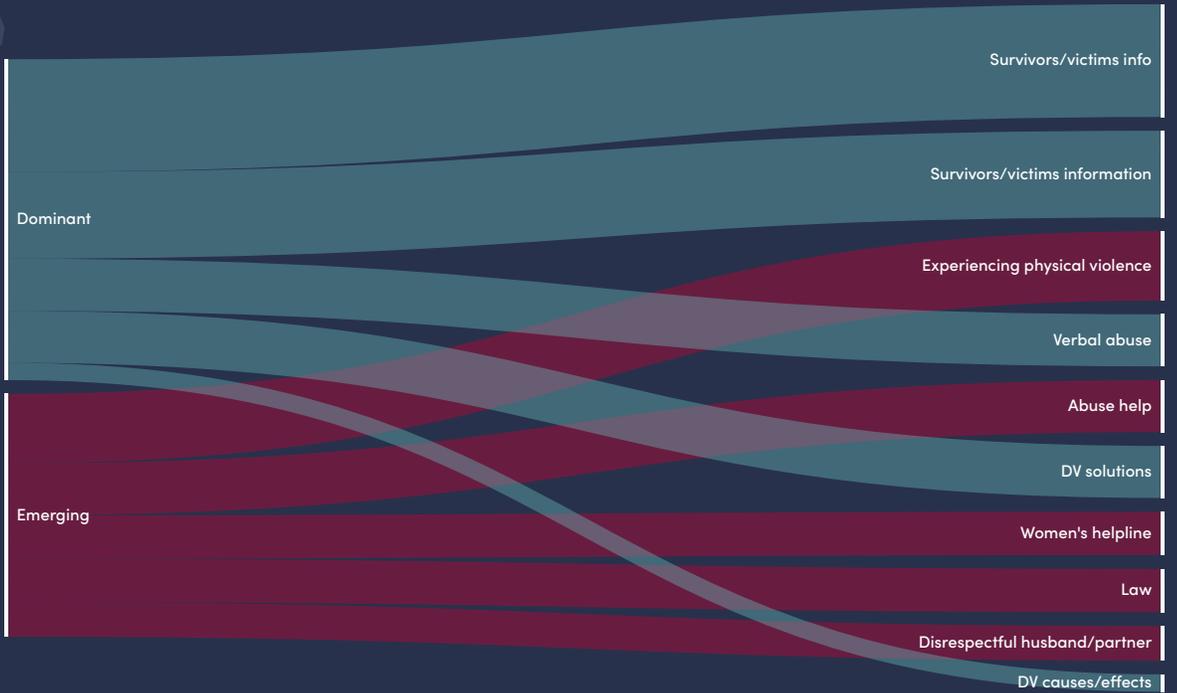
# INDONESIA



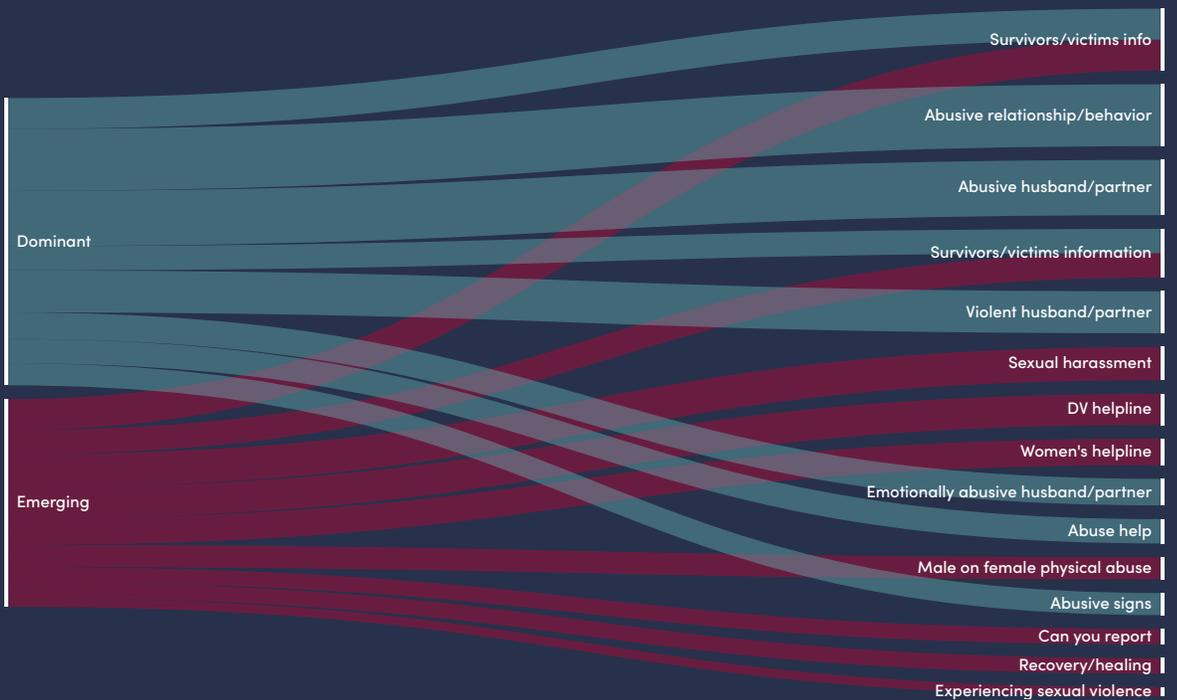
# MALAYSIA



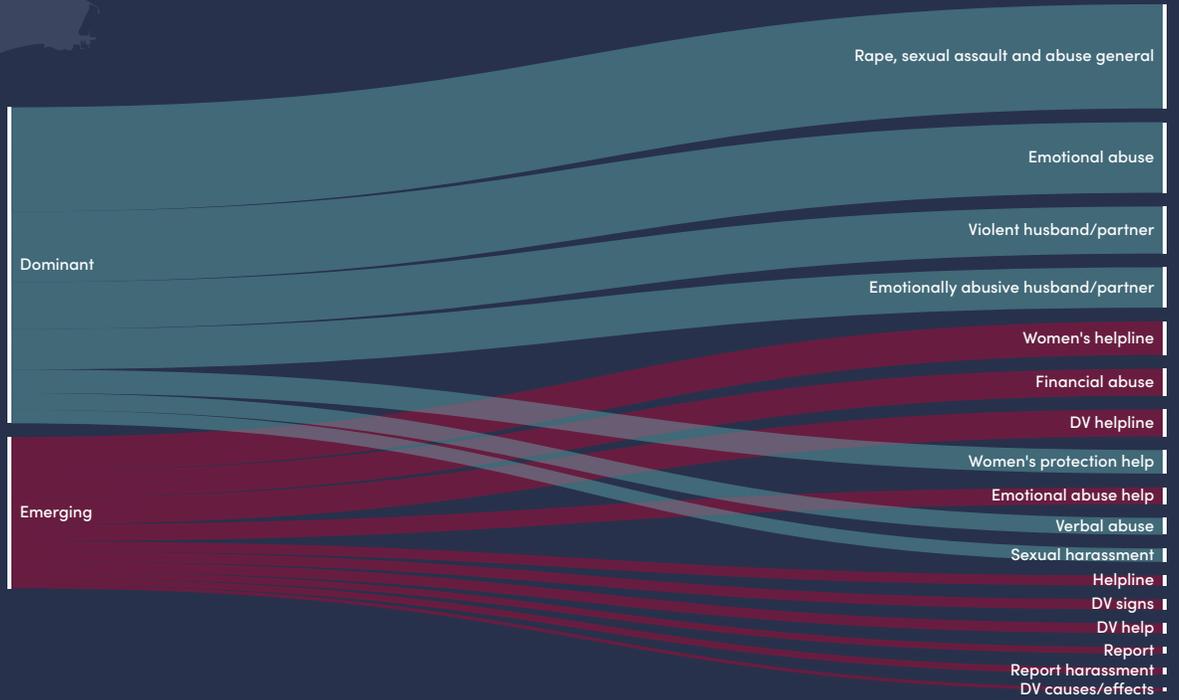
# NEPAL



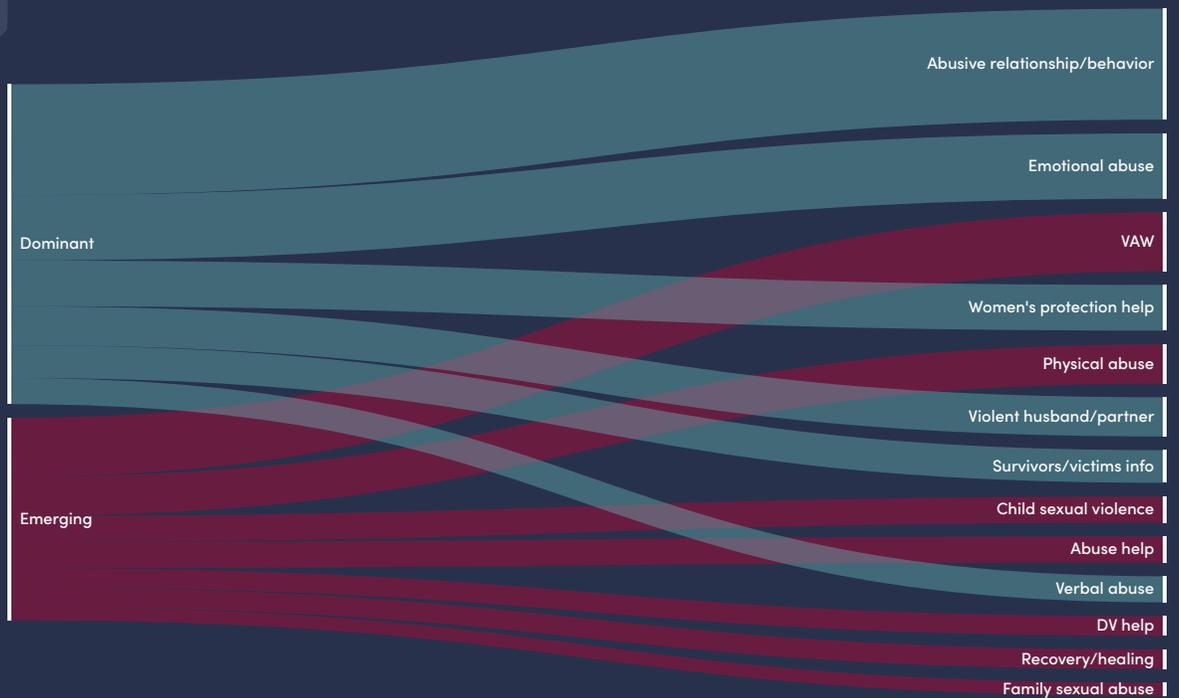
# PHILIPPINES



# SINGAPORE



# THAILAND



### III. KEY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN COUNTRIES

The following patterns were identified across all countries considered, highlighting key concerns for victims and gender advocates during the pandemic:

- 1. General frustration towards lack of government action:** Conversations on social media depict widespread frustration with the weak stance that most governments took to address VAWG in the context of COVID-19. Roughly 20 percent of the posts analysed showed frustration in this regard.
- 2. Low trust in national security and justice institutions:** In most countries, users of social media agreed with the idea that using informal justice/parallel settlements in cases of VAWG was a better option than trying to take the legal route. For example, in Indonesia young women living in urban areas were seen creating “disclosure accounts” on Twitter to share screenshots of their experiences with online harassment and sexual violence. In Bangladesh, distrust of authority was seen in the form of abundant conversations about self-defence classes, with almost no discourse around the reporting of violence to authorities.
- 3. Victim shaming:** Across all social media platforms there was discourse around condemning victim-shaming and often instances of such shaming itself. For example, in Bangladesh many (primarily men)
- 4. Rise in domestic violence during COVID-19:** In all countries the number of related searches increased during peak times of mobility restrictions.
- 5. The issue of marginalized groups is largely missing:** The conversation around violence against individuals of the LGBTQI+ community was largely missing online. There was limited conversation around caste-based VAWG, and usually seen in response to a particular case of violence.
- 6. Rise in online support:** There has been a rise in online support for victims of VAWG, especially via online campaigns, sharing personal stories, and creating support groups. The bulk of VAWG advocates are female and live in urban areas (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Sex distribution of users engaged with online campaigns, advocacy for justice, support groups or other support messaging, September 2019 to November 2020.<sup>20</sup>

Country	Male	Female	Urban/Rural
Malaysia	30%	70%	Urban concentration
Nepal	45%	55%	Urban concentration
Thailand	35%	65%	Urban concentration
Singapore	35%	65%	Urban concentration
Bangladesh	35%	65%	Urban concentration
Philippines	30%	70%	Urban concentration
Indonesia	15%	85%	Urban concentration
India	25%	75%	Urban concentration

<sup>20</sup> Estimated using data from Google API and Facebook Audience Insights. User engagement is defined by likes, comments and shares.

## IV. KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COUNTRIES

The following findings were identified for some countries only, highlighting national specificities in online VAWG-related discourse and searches:

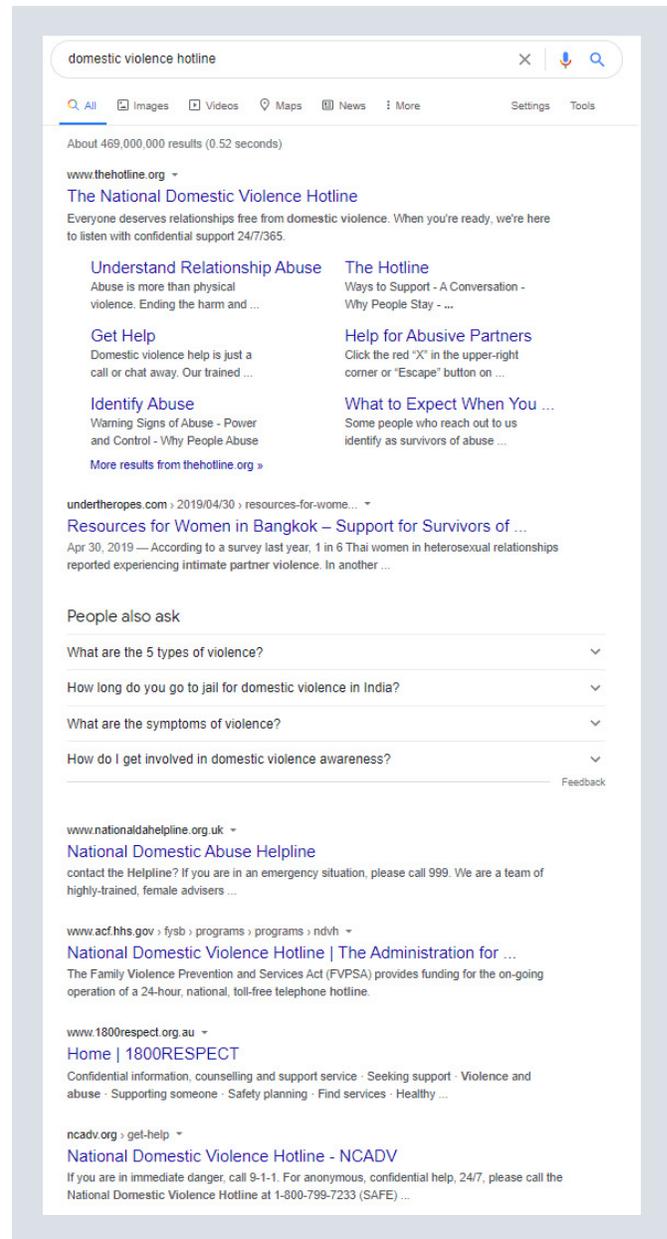
- 1. Different VAWG issues spark the most outrage:** For example, in Nepal and India acid attacks and caste-based VAWG garnered substantial attention while in the Philippines misogynistic comments by high-level government officials were a concern. Understanding these nuances can help determine how to leverage certain issues in each country for advocacy and response purposes.
- 2. Local support services do not always come up in searches:** Top search-engine results (when searching for services) vary by country. In some countries, top search results lead to relevant local services and information, while in others, the top results are foreign. For example, in the Philippines the most common help-seeking searches yield local hotlines by the government and other local organizations. In Bangladesh, it is a mix of Indian and Western sites with only a few local sites. In Indonesia, the majority of sites are foreign resources that would not be helpful to Indonesian women.
- 3. Response to migrant workers changes in each country:** Migrant workers are facing similar challenges across the countries considered, but government and public responses are different. In some places such as Indonesia, Nepal, Malaysia and Singapore, migrant workers have had more visibility during the pandemic, while in other countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, people show less concern in online discourse.

## V. HOW DID PEOPLE ASK FOR HELP?

Despite clear evidence showing increases in online searches about VAWG during peak times of mobility restrictions, help-seeking searches did not increase proportionately, and there were substantial differences across countries. While in Malaysia, Nepal, Thailand and Singapore there was an increase in help-seeking searches<sup>21</sup>, in Bangladesh, India and Indonesia this was not obvious.<sup>22</sup> In the case of

sexual violence, however, help-seeking searches increased for all countries except for Indonesia and the Philippines. Across all countries, searching for “domestic violence hotline” led to foreign websites from the United Kingdom or United States in the top five results. This suggests a need for redirection to relevant local sites.

**Figure 7:**  
**Search results for “domestic violence hotline” in Thailand.**



21 Help-seeking searches refer to queries specifically asking for help or looking for help related to VAW response services. Query examples include “helpline,” “women’s helpline number,” or “crisis shelter.”

22 As the levels of mobility restrictions may differ across countries, however, comparisons of help-seeking behaviour are discouraged between the countries considered in this analysis.

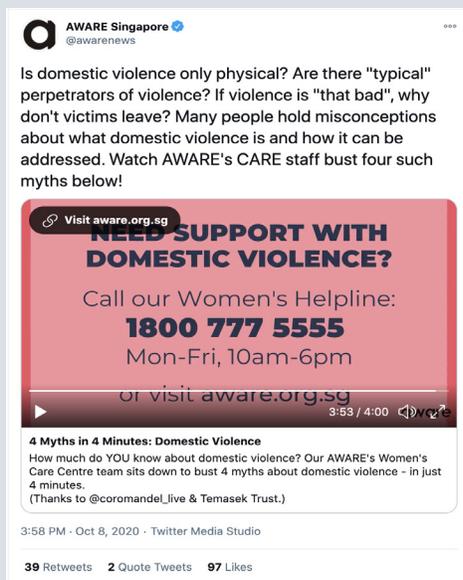
## VI. HOW DO SERVICE PROVIDERS ENGAGE?

The analysis classified service providers into high- and low-engaging providers based on user engagement in response to their posts. High-engaging service providers

are organizations that posted regular content that their audience interacted with. They were more likely to use text over images to share impactful messages, statistics, and calls to action. Their images are positive and convey a sense of community and affiliation.

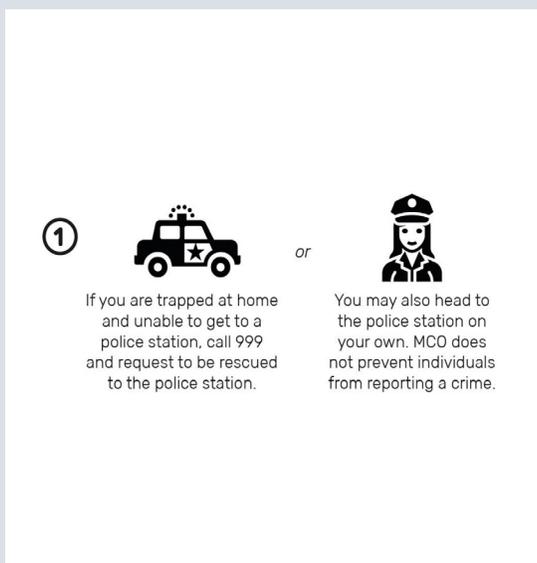
**Figure 8:**

**Example of a post from a high-engaging service provider, posted by AWARE on Twitter on October 8, 2020.**



**Figure 9:**

**Example of post from high-engaging service provider, posted by Women's Aid Organization in Malaysia on Facebook on November 17, 2020.**



**Figure 10:**

**Example of a post from a high-engaging service provider, posted by Sayfty in India on Twitter on November 24, 2020.**

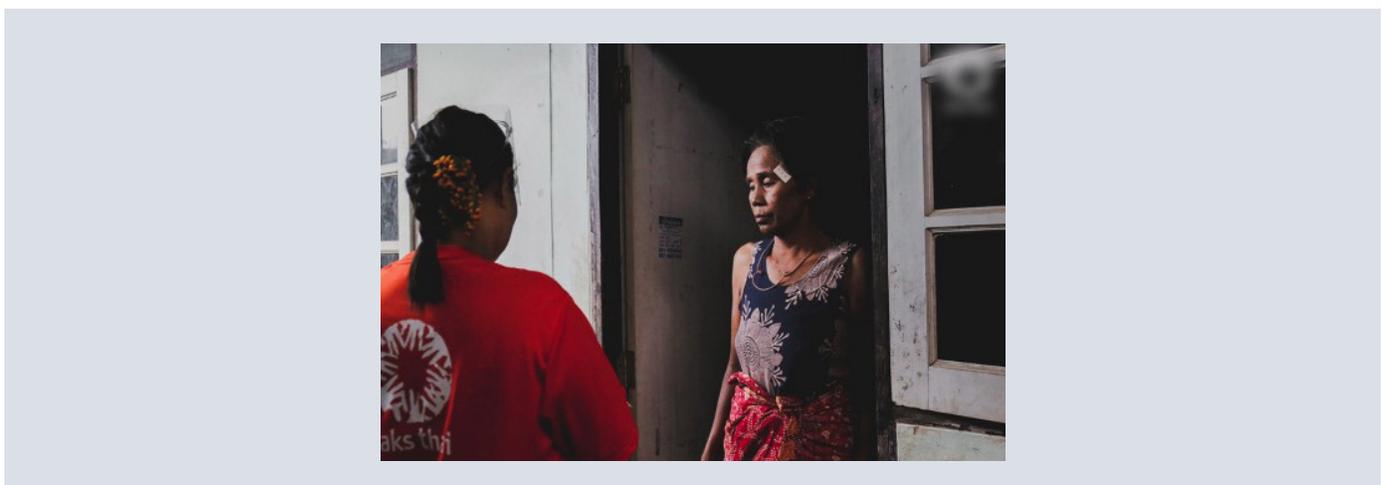


High-engaging providers were more likely to be affiliated with the government or organizations focused on violence against their own female citizens. Organizations like AWARE (Singapore), Women Aid Organization (Malaysia) and Sayfty (India) are examples of high-engaging organizations. They provide resources upfront on their website and social media channels, options in various languages, and the ability to filter by location and other domains. The organizations also aligned their messaging to mention “domestic violence” based on the increase during lockdown.

Low-engaging service providers, on the other hand, are more likely to showcase their work behind the scenes (e.g. events, trainings) rather than their public-facing services. They use images that convey more of a sense of solitude and fear. They are more likely than their high-engaging counterparts to target their services to migrant populations. Low-engaging service providers typically fail to make resources and information readily accessible on their websites and social media, an added barrier for survivors/victims. For instance, their resources are not listed on all their social media channels, they only provide advice on preventing VAWG but do not explicitly offer solutions or services, and they lack language and filtering options for service searches.

**Figure 11:**

**Example of a photo from a low-engaging service provider in Thailand, posted on Facebook in November 2020, where AI machine picked up emotions of solitude and fear.**



**Figure 12:**

**Website screenshot from a low-engaging service provider in Nepal, showcasing work behind the scenes (training), and where more can be done to list resources for survivors/victims of VAWG upfront.**



## VII. HOW DID VULNERABLE GROUPS, SUCH AS MIGRANTS, FARE?

Online discourse, in the form of social media posts, on migrant issues (especially migrant women), is relatively low in each of the countries studied (an estimated 5% percent of

all VAWG-related searches touched on migrants). However, online news, media and discussion forums, combined with search behaviour on migrant related topics, reveal the following insights during the pandemic:

**In India**, search behaviour shows that concerns around migrant jobs and help in other areas such as shelter and food provision rose tremendously.

**Table 4:**

**Percentage increase in searches regarding migrant workers in India, October 2019 to September 2020.**

Keyword	Growth
Migrant worker jobs	1,129%
Migrant helpline	786%
Help for migrants	771%
Migrant help number	771%

**In Malaysia**, online discourse on the abuse of Indonesian migrant workers, in the form of verbal and physical abuse and payroll deductions, emerged in news and discussion forums. Other increases in search behaviour

during the pandemic included queries on “refugee rights,” (+ 275%) “migrant care,” (+ 210%) “rape” [in Bengali] (+ 95%) and “worker exploitation” (+ 35%) increased during the pandemic.

**In Singapore**, news and media reports spoke of two issues: (1) the increased abuse faced by female domestic workers during lockdown due to salary deduction, overtime and verbal abuse; and (2) poor treatment of male construction workers in dormitories facing an increase in mental health issues and discrimination. Search behaviour shows that growth for the following search queries increased during the pandemic: “rape” [in Bengali] (+ 175%); “worker exploitation” (+155%); “migrant worker jobs” (+ 83%) and “domestic worker rights” (+ 20%).

**In the Philippines**, news and media reports highlighted increased abuse of overseas foreign domestic workers during the pandemic. These victims/survivors often report being overworked, underpaid and subjected to physical and verbal abuse. In migrant destination countries such as Singapore, Filipina maids were viewed as carriers of disease after a spike in cases in the Philippines in August, and some even had their employment terminated before

they could fly back to work.<sup>23</sup> Search behaviour indicates that overseas foreign domestic workers are seeking more help during the pandemic. Select search queries that grew include “OWWA hotline,” (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) (+ 201%) and “OFW help” (overseas Filipino worker) (+ 100%).

**In Indonesia**, former Indonesian migrant workers (*Pekerja Migran Indonesia*, or PMIs) as well as aspiring PMIs have faced obstacles such as: 1) a dearth of employment options locally; 2) lack of financial support from the government; 3) accumulating debt from paying exorbitant placement fees (or a lack of finances for placement fees); 4) cancellation of formal placement services for returning or aspiring overseas workers; and 5) the Omnibus law.<sup>24</sup> These concerns are voiced on Facebook groups by PMIs (current, former and aspiring). Due to high job losses during the pandemic, the top search queries for PMIs are related to finding work abroad.

**Table 5:**  
**Top migrant-related search queries in Indonesia, October 2019 to September 2020.**

Keyword	Translation	Growth
Pekerjaan mudah gaji tinggi	High-paying job easier	189%
Lowongan kerja taiwan bnp2tki	Taiwan job BNP2TKI	96%
Pekerjaan gaji tinggi	High-salary jobs	91%
Lowongan kerja luar negeri depnaker	Department of Labour job opportunities abroad	77%
Gaji kerja di korea	Salary working in Korea	75%
Melamar pekerjaan di luar negeri	Applying for a job abroad	75%
Tkw indonesia di hongkong	Indonesian maids in Hong Kong	58%
Gaji pembantu rumah tangga	Housekeeper salary	52%

23 See for instance: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/maids-employers-in-conflict-over-rest-days-home-leave-amid-covid-19>

24 On 2 November 2020, Indonesia’s President officially enacted the job creation law – commonly known as the “Omnibus Law”. Its goal is to attract investment, create new jobs, and stimulate the economy by simplifying the licensing process and making policy decisions faster for the central government.

# CONCLUSION

This study was useful in providing proxy information to shed light on whether VAWG increased since the onset of COVID-19. Big data analysis showed that indeed related searches increased substantially in peak periods of mobility restrictions and immediately afterwards. Analysis also shows that some service providers have increased their online activities to better reach victims. However, not all providers are being successful in gaining engagement and directing attention to their services. Further analysis of this data, to be published in a follow-up brief, will examine if differences exist based on geographical location of internet users within countries, and will try to determine whether select population groups are underserved in terms of availability of services compared with increases in demand.

In view of the existing findings, a few recommendations emerge in connection with online behaviour and how to leverage related opportunities:

1. The crisis has highlighted the potential of online technologies to both compile and search for information, as well as to seek and provide support, at a time when face-to-face interactions must be limited. In light of this, it will be important to continue leveraging big data and online technologies to gather additional details on internet behaviour, smartphone usage and online help-seeking behaviour among vulnerable groups at a greater scale, during both crisis and non-crisis periods.
2. In connection with the increased use of online tools, it is important to provide digital-literacy skills to disadvantaged populations.
3. Service providers should increase their online engagement across social media platforms, especially in times of crisis. Providing resources upfront on their websites and social media channels, options in various languages, and the ability to filter by location and other domains increases the likelihood of engagement and thus of reaching those in need for services. Targeting online posts to changing needs and prevalent online discourse also help enhance engagement.
4. In this research, service organizations targeting migrant populations had lower online engagement. Besides changing advocacy strategies to achieve higher online engagement, migrant oriented service organizations should first understand internet and smartphone usage among these populations to better target their campaigns.
5. Service providers, including government services, should implement specific steps online to increase their reach among survivors/victims, including adding contact numbers to profile information, and increase search engine optimization to ensure that local and relevant information for survivors/victims is displayed on the first page of search results.
6. Governments and internet providers should work towards redirecting search-engine results to legitimate information on safe service provision for top searches related to VAWG (as is seen in Singapore, when typing “domestic violence” into google).

