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## The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Filipino Women in the Security Sector

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### INTRODUCTION

“Security sector” as defined by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, is composed of personnel, institutions, and structures responsible for security provisions, management, and oversight at the national and local levels.<sup>1</sup> Comprising the security sector are state security providers such as the police, the military, and the coast guard; and security management and oversight, such as the legislative, the media, and the civil society.<sup>2</sup>

With half of the overall global population consisting of women, they perform various roles in society ranging from bearing children to bearing arms.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing their role in peace and security, the United Nations (UN) in 2000 drew attention to the significance of women’s leadership and meaningful participation in the peace process and political solutions.<sup>4</sup> Though there is no exact definition of women in the security sector, the Philippine Magna Carta of Women provides a definition of “women in the military” as:

*[W]omen employed in the military, both in the major and technical services, who are performing combat and/or non-combat functions, providing security to the State, and protecting the people from various forms of threat. It also includes women trainees in all military training institutions.<sup>5</sup>*

Women, men, girls, and boys experience security situations differently. They have different access to resources. They perform different roles and responsibilities which may not be directly according to social norms. Women are part of the vulnerable sector. They are traditionally expected to perform daily domestic responsibilities while some simultaneously do professional duties. Given that

traditional norms limit women’s participation, they are at a disadvantage.<sup>6</sup>

As a global response, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, also known as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda recognized that attaining sustainable security is not possible without the involvement of women.<sup>7</sup> The UN WPS Agenda values the use of gender perspective in security operations.<sup>8</sup> However, the use of gender lens in security does not imply focusing exclusively on women. By integrating gender lens in security, the concept of security from traditional or state centric shifts to human security which considers the differing needs of men, women, boys, and girls.<sup>9</sup> It abides by universally accepted human rights principles. When both men and women are involved in decision-making, there are better outcomes. Integrating gender perspective increases operational effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

The use of gender lens in the security sector and in addressing a pandemic is essential for several reasons. The COVID-19 Pandemic has further exposed women to greater risks and vulnerabilities. They account for 70 percent of health and social service staff globally with most of them serving at the front line, exposing themselves to the pandemic’s contagion.<sup>11</sup> Government-imposed lockdowns and quarantines forced many employees to resort to work-from-home arrangements. Female professionals who are working at home had to balance their parental or domestic duties.<sup>12</sup> While women in the security sector serve crucial roles towards pandemic response and recovery efforts, they also face gender-based challenges, such as unequal opportunities for promotion and unequal treatment.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, policy actions based on gender perspectives can resolve women’s challenges while empowering them during a pandemic.

As an exploratory study, this paper intends to contribute to the literature in promoting the gender perspective in assessing security situations and in discussing the situation of women in the security sector during a pandemic. It attempts to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This paper aims to raise the following research questions: (1) What are the different gender issues present during a pandemic? (2) How does COVID-19 affect women in the AFP? (3) How do women in the AFP contribute during the COVID-19 pandemic? (4) How can the government strengthen its initiatives for women in the security sector particularly during a pandemic?

To generate primary data, this study utilized an online questionnaire in late June 2020. A total of 130 respondents from the AFP replied to open-ended questions. The respondents include officers and enlisted personnel with a large percentage coming from the Philippine Army (PA), followed by the Philippine Air Force (PAF), Philippine Navy (PN), and the Technical Administrative Service (TAS). In terms of household, 33 percent of the respondents were the head of the household; 60 percent of the overall respondents have around 3-5 members in their household while 37 percent have 6-10 members in their household. It is also worth noting that in the 61 percent of non-single respondents in terms of marital status, only 50 percent of which have an employed partner in the last three months.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE**

### **Gender Issues During a Pandemic**

The concept of “feminization of a pandemic” refers to how women can be at risk due to the political, economic, and socio-cultural implications of a pandemic, making them vulnerable and susceptible.

Political issues such as gender-based discrimination and violence and human rights curtailment can further exacerbate women’s vulnerability and raise potential violations of international human rights laws and standards during a pandemic.<sup>14</sup> During the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, more than 50 percent of women and men report discriminatory acts towards people living with HIV.<sup>15</sup> Potential human rights violations include: fear-driven responses such as mandatory and compulsory testing, quarantine measures, and travel restrictions; severe discrimination in their legal status and treatment; rejection and abandonment of family, friends, and neighborhood communities; and restrictive access to

healthcare and law enforcement services, education, and employment opportunities. Such acts can violate their rights and access to their property, privacy and information, employment, marital status, and economic and health security.<sup>16</sup> Another issue women faced was being “politically invisible” in international and national pandemic response mechanisms.<sup>17</sup> These mechanisms failed to adopt a transformative development agenda that would address women’s marginalization in society, data disaggregation in pandemic response mechanisms, maternal mortality during times of an outbreak, women’s assertion of sexual and reproductive health, and realizing their human rights.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, pandemics negatively impact women’s socio-economic roles, compound economic vulnerabilities, and disrupt their economic growth, livelihood, and opportunities.<sup>19</sup> During the Ebola pandemic in West Africa, more women were infected than men.<sup>20</sup> One of the facilitating factors was the socio-economic gendered roles placed on West African women which puts them at a particular exposure risk to the virus. Ninety percent (90%) of women work as caregivers in Africa. Lamentably, they have insufficient medical protective gear to protect themselves.<sup>21</sup> When the West African region suffered a drop in the economic growth rate due to the pandemic, women experienced a disproportionate impact to their livelihood.<sup>22</sup>

Socio-cultural challenges compounded women’s vulnerabilities during a pandemic. They experienced poverty, information scarcity, lack of socio-economic empowerment, and the complete absence of adolescent sexual and reproductive health services.<sup>23</sup> Young women and girls during the HIV/AIDS pandemic were vulnerable to socio-cultural issues such as stigmatization from family, friends, and neighbors, forced prostitution due to economic poverty, unprotected sexual practices from their partners, and domestic violence and sexual harassment.<sup>24</sup> Women in West Africa were vulnerable to Ebola infection due to their traditional domestic roles such as taking care of infected family members and resorted to alternative medical care, such as traditional healers and pharmacies instead of going to private and public healthcare facilities due to the fear of being infected and stigmatized as Ebola virus carriers.<sup>25</sup> Around 66 to 90 percent of women in some West African countries experienced gender-based violence and discrimination wherein they were subjected to domestic violence and female genital mutilation.<sup>26</sup> During and after a pandemic, both male

and female survivors can suffer from psychosocial and psychiatric problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep problems, and anxiety and depression.<sup>27</sup>

A feminization of the COVID-19 pandemic was also experienced by Filipino women.<sup>28</sup> While the pandemic has overburdened and disrupted protection and justice mechanisms, it triggered gender-based violent crimes towards Filipino women. A total of 391 gender-based violent cases and 42 reported rape cases were committed from 15 March to 2 April 2020.<sup>29</sup> Relatedly, over 3,600 cases of violence against women and children were reported as recorded by the Philippine National Police (PNP) from March to June 2020.<sup>30</sup> About 72 percent of Filipino women healthcare workers had experienced discriminatory acts against them ranging from refusal of basic services to verbal and physical harassment at COVID-19 checkpoints.<sup>31</sup> Six (6) million Filipino women working in the informal sector can lose their jobs during the pandemic with no social security nets or labor protections to catch them.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, women in the formal and informal economic sectors struggle to balance their professional responsibilities with household duties.<sup>33</sup>

Pandemics challenge gender-neutral responses because they further expose and strengthen the structured elements of political, economic, and socio-cultural inequalities against women. Gender norms, inequalities, and responses are crucial determinants in understanding different patterns of exposure between men and women during a pandemic. Applying gender-based approaches on governments' response and recovery efforts can minimize the feminization of a pandemic.<sup>34</sup>

### **Women in the AFP**

The armed forces is a sector predominantly occupied by men. It captures one of society's "most gendered realms".<sup>35</sup> With women joining the military, this shift resulted in changes in occupational and bureaucratic structures.<sup>36</sup> Women in the armed forces were limited to administrative roles. In the Philippines, the impact of transformations in the security sector governance and significant policy initiatives provided for comprehensive changes resulted in massive increase in the quantity and quality of involvement of women in the military.<sup>37</sup>

In 1963, 37 years after the establishment of the AFP,<sup>38</sup> women were initially granted to serve in the Women's Auxiliary Corps. They were eventually commissioned

in the Regular and Reserve Forces of the AFP. However, their duties thereto were only limited to non-combat and administrative functions. It was only in 1993, by virtue of Republic Act 7192, otherwise known as the "Women in Development and Nation Building Act", that women were granted the rights of being appointed and commissioned as combat soldiers in the military and being admitted to military schools such as the Philippine Military Academy (PMA). In the same year, the PMA welcomed 17 of its first female cadets. By 2018, 451 female cadets have graduated from the academy.<sup>39</sup>

Currently, women in the AFP comprise approximately 5% or 8,000 out of the 140,000 military personnel.<sup>40</sup> The number of female officers in the armed forces has significantly increased. In 2018, there are 1,718 (14%) female officers compared to 10,369 male officers in the AFP.<sup>41</sup> A breakdown of this number shows that in the Philippine Army (PA), women comprise 8% or 551 of the total 6,208 military officers; in the Philippine Navy (PN), 14% out of the 2,530 officers are women; in the Philippine Air Force (PAF), women occupy 20% of the 2,123 officers; and in the Technical and Administrative Services (TAS), 71% of its 1,256 officers are women. Positions and specialization in the fields of intelligence, infantry, artillery, civil military operations, and weapons warfare, among others, were also assumed by female officers in the AFP.

### **MAJOR CASE ISSUES**

#### **Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic to Women in the AFP**

Response to the survey shows women in the AFP are greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Women are affected in varied ways as they wear many hats from being military personnel, frontliners, head of the household, and mothers. In terms of political impact, respondents said they are highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to their line of work. More than a third (30.8%) of the respondents said they were deployed as frontliners. As frontliners, they are vulnerable to the devastating impact of the COVID-19 virus as they are exposed in a humanitarian and fragile setting.<sup>42</sup> Some respondents indicated that due to the virus, their commission, promotion, retirement application, and even academic opportunities were delayed. Interestingly, this is a pre-existing gender-based issue. Women entering the security sector usually experience similar challenges when they join an organization originally designed for men.<sup>43</sup>

In terms of economic factors, respondents said they were not directly affected. Respondents did not experience any disruption in the release of their salary and benefits. Some respondents, however, indicated that the COVID-19 posed constraints on how they can support themselves and their families, especially for female-headed households.<sup>44</sup> One-third (33%) of the respondents are head of the household, with the number of household members ranging from 2-9 persons. Some respondents indicated that their spouses/partners were unemployed in the last three (3) months.

Respondents pointed out two factors affecting their capacity to perform their work and accomplish their missions due to COVID-19 pandemic: first, constrained movement due to limited access to resources; and second, another layer of workload that hampers the accomplishment of routine tasks.

Women in the AFP deployed as frontliners reported having limited capability to perform their domestic responsibilities such as childcare, and home management. A pre-existing gender-based issue tilts the balance between women and men's role on domestic responsibilities.<sup>45</sup> Traditionally, women are expected to perform family-rearing roles. The gendered social norm that women spend more time in "meeting the expectations of their domestic roles"<sup>46</sup> than men highlights the unpaid care work that most women, not only those in the AFP, are experiencing.

Relatedly, due to the movements limited by quarantine protocols, respondents lamented that they were constrained from providing the basic needs for their families. Additionally, some respondents chose to isolate themselves from their families for fear of possibly transmitting the virus.

Most respondents pointed to the psychological impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women. Mental health concerns include anxiety and depression. The deadly threat of the virus and the limited movement disrupted the normal routine and daily activities of people resulting in abrupt change and anxiety. Studies show that women are more prone to mental health challenges as a pandemic exaggerates and worsen the already existing inequalities.<sup>47</sup> The Centre for Women's Health in the University of Manchester explains that mental distress in women are widened and affected by the response of the government to the pandemic.<sup>48</sup>

### **Contribution of the AFP Women Against the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Survey results showed that the women in the AFP performed crucial roles towards pandemic recovery and response efforts.

In terms of political contribution, respondents were employed in various roles. Some women were involved in policymaking i.e. planning and implementing the COVID-19 National Action Plan, developing policies on international engagements with foreign militaries and external partners, and executing public health and safety protocols in different military units. Others were employed in leading pandemic response efforts such as overseeing the deployment of volunteer reservists, assisting quarantine control and community protocols, participating in disaster response teams, and developing civilian-military operations and programs.

Women in the AFP were also deployed as frontliners wherein they play different socio-economic roles. Respondents were involved in the distribution of Social Amelioration Program (SAP) funds. Some extended assistance to vulnerable sectors and communities, and helped ensure an efficient supply chain of basic goods and services.<sup>49</sup> Others were deployed in the construction, repair and renovation of buildings, warehouses and wards into quarantine facilities and isolation areas; involved as aerial and land transport drivers for relief, medical equipment and supplies deliveries, or in the transport of COVID-19 specimens for confirmation in different authorized testing facilities; and positioned in the government's repatriation efforts of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW).<sup>50</sup>

Socio-cultural efforts were also performed by women in the AFP. Aside from personally following health protocols such as handwashing, physical distancing, wearing face masks, they made sure to enforce it to all military personnel and units. Some respondents undertook information dissemination activities about COVID-19 virus by conducting public awareness campaigns such as through loudspeaker operations, developing publication materials, and social media.<sup>51</sup>

### **STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN IN THE SECURITY SECTOR DURING A PANDEMIC**

Along with the global response on the protection and empowerment of women during a pandemic, this paper puts forward policy considerations to strengthen government initiatives for women in the security sector.

***First, women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in leadership and decision-making roles in the Philippines' COVID-19 response mechanisms*** such as the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) and the National Task Force on COVID-19 (NTF) must be considered, recognized, and encouraged. Both the survey results and current literature underscored the crucial roles women in the security sector served during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from policymaking and leadership roles to conducting pandemic response efforts.<sup>52</sup>

Their leadership and participation would ensure that: (1) Pandemic response efforts driven are gender-sensitive, protect women's rights, and proportionate to humanitarian standards.<sup>53</sup> (2) The plans and strategies of the IATF and NTF are guided by gender-based analysis and data disaggregated by sex, age, and disability. (3) Women can lead inclusive and resilient recovery efforts including developing civilian-military programs, countering misinformation and gender-based violence and discrimination, and supporting vulnerable communities affected by the pandemic.<sup>54</sup>

***Second, it is imperative that the Gender and Development (GAD) mainstreaming programs in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) be continuously implemented and strengthened.*** The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the disproportionate effects of disease outbreaks on gender.<sup>55</sup> As such, the pandemic's impact and the vulnerability of women and their needs may be well considered in the formulation of policies and interventions. The National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAPWPS) acknowledges the vulnerability of women from frontline agencies<sup>56</sup> one of which is the AFP. Action Point 14 provides for the integration of natural disaster and complex emergency plans into the NAPWPS framework.<sup>57</sup> However, the experiences of women during the COVID-19 pandemic based on this preliminary study show that the programs in this framework are still lacking. Measures could include assessing and ensuring women's physical and mental well-being during the pandemic. Help desks, workshops, and support groups may be put in place.

Furthermore, it is crucial for the AFP to conduct a gender data analysis on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to assess and understand the effects of pandemic to establish appropriate and effective policies and programs. This analysis would serve as a basis in responding to the needs of women for future

global health emergencies, and to improve existing programs and services.

***Finally, there is a need to strengthen the policy implementation of the Republic Act 11036 also known as the Mental Health Act for women in the security sector.*** While women officers serve important roles during recovery and response efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic further compounded their mental health. Recent studies enumerate these mental health issues such as the inability to professionally function due to the situation, being imbalanced with both their professional and domestic responsibilities, and experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder when deployed at the frontlines.

Though the Mental Health Act was enacted in 2018, the country is constrained by limited access to mental treatment and service. Aside from the lack of mental health workers, the government has yet to pursue stringent measures to establish infrastructures and other capabilities for the efficient provision of mental health services.<sup>58</sup>

The mental health facilities and programs are deemed insufficient and unprepared for handling the surge of cases during a pandemic. Therefore, there is a need to develop and improve the mental health facilities and capabilities for the women in the security sector during a pandemic in support of the performance of their missions and their mental well-being.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only considered as a health issue but rather, a national security issue. Despite facing challenges such as the disruption of their daily routines and performance of their missions, domestic responsibilities, and serious concerns on their mental health and well-being, women in the security sector remained professional and true to their duty in serving the nation as frontliners during the pandemic. While women's leadership and involvement in battling the pandemic is palpable, they still face challenges as women members of the security sector.

Therefore, this paper draws policy recommendations for consideration that does not only address the current issue but also promotes a long-term outcome that would ensure the protection, promotion, and empowerment of women and gender equality for women in the security sector. These recommendations also apply to other sectors of the

society with the same aim to protect and empower women.

The concept of women leadership and participation is vital in attaining sustainable peace and development in the country. As women make up half of the total population, it is vital to involve women in planning, management, and even leadership as the nation, and the world, grapple to flatten the curve and live in an evolving “new normal”.

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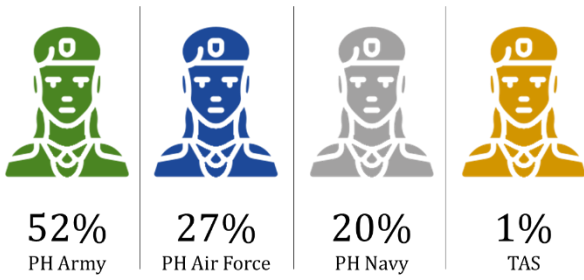
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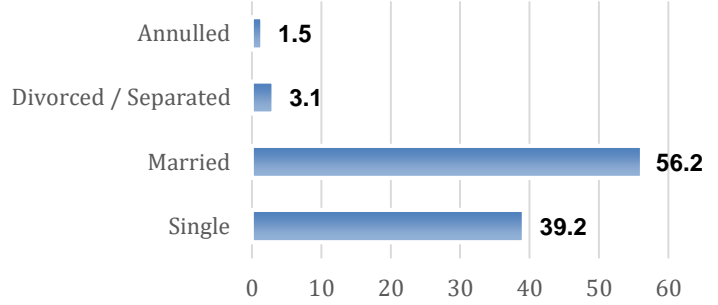
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## ANNEX: SURVEY RESULTS

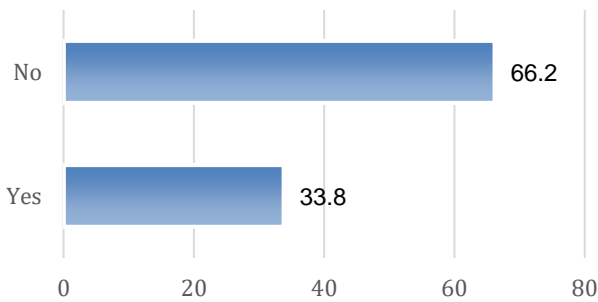
**Figure 1: Major Services of Respondents**



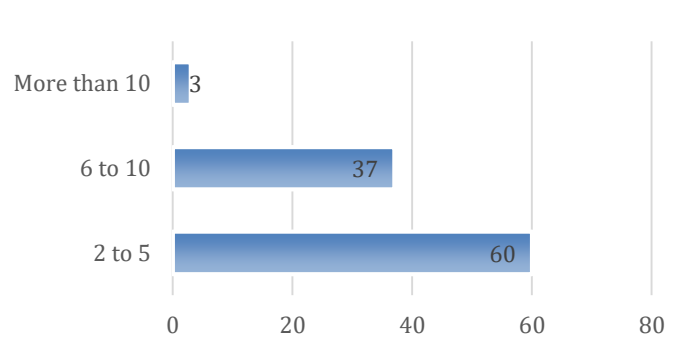
**Figure 2: Marital Status**



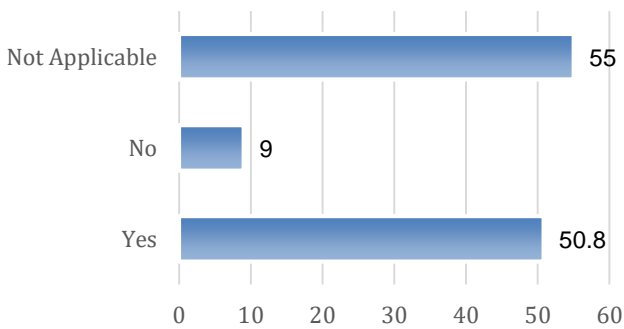
**Figure 3: Head of Household**



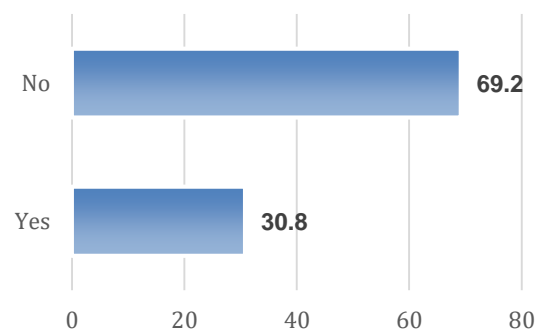
**Figure 4: Number of Household Members**



**Figure 5: Employment of Partner in the last 3 Months**



**Figure 6: Deployment as Frontliner**



**Figure 7: Living Situation in the for the Past 3 Months**

