



## April 2020

**In this issue:** COVID-19, Transportation Services for Women, Lotus Leadership Awards, Let's Read, Peace and Conflict, Pakistan, Rapid Response Fund, Nepal, and Myanmar

### [Addressing the COVID-19 Crisis](#)

As [COVID-19](#) continues to spread, The Asia Foundation is responding. The pandemic poses significant challenges for public health and safety, economic security, governance, and political stability across Asia, and the Foundation is refocusing its work to respond to these multiple threats. The challenges of COVID-19 are severely impacting the communities the Foundation serves, and we are pursuing creative responses to urgent needs—especially for women, the poor, and other vulnerable communities for whom COVID-19 poses exceptional risks.

Read [Coronavirus Dispatches](#) for updates from the field in Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan.

## Recent Events

**VIRTUAL EVENT – April 14 – [Making Transportation Services Work for Women: Mobility, Safety, Employment, and Leadership](#)** focused on the growing concerns and issues within and around the transportation sector, including the need to consider increased mobility challenges and risk of violence against women and girls due to COVID-19 and how we can advance the security, inclusion, and empowerment of women in the transportation sector. The Asia Foundation's Senior Program Officer for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, [Priya Dhanani](#), moderated the webinar which had more than 65 attendees. Expert panelists [Diya Nag](#), Associate Director of Programs for The Asia Foundation in [India](#) and [Karla Dominguez Gonzalez](#), a Gender and Transport Specialist at the World Bank, led a rich discussion regarding growing evidence of the different ways that women and men experience transportation services and gender and social inclusion issues that have long been overlooked. Learn more about the Foundation's [Women's Empowerment Program](#).



**VIRTUAL EVENT - March 11** — Embracing new ways to convene, The Asia Foundation virtually celebrated our annual Lotus Leadership Awards. Hosted by the [Lotus Circle](#), a community of philanthropists that invest in The Asia Foundation's work to strengthen economic, social, and political rights and opportunities for women and girls in Asia, [The 2020 Lotus Leadership Awards](#) honored Ziauddin Yousafzai for his activism of girls' rights to education as co-founder and board member of Malala Fund; Mastercard and CEO Ajay Manga for Mastercard's commitment to women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion; and [The Gender Lab](#) in India, for their engagement of boys as allies in the movement for gender equality.



The Foundation's first-ever virtual fundraiser raised funds for The Asia Foundation's [Rapid Response Fund](#), which provides crucial funding to address gender-related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across Asia.

## Technology and Development

### [Let's Read Keeps Kids and Their Families Reading During COVID-19](#)



Students reading from Let's Read digital library.

Across the globe, the [pandemic](#) has left 91% of all students (1.5 billion children) out of school for the foreseeable future. In response, The Asia Foundation's [Books for Asia](#) program quickly created and launched [Let's Read at Home](#), an online resource that supports families and children with collections of digital books and enrichment activities in 10 languages focused on health, STEM, critical thinking, and resilience. Twelve of the Foundation's country offices are implementing the initiative, using localized outreach strategies to share Let's Read resources with parents, partner organizations, governments, and social and traditional media. Country offices are also organizing [virtual translation sprints](#) to swiftly expand book collections with new titles. The Foundation's recently developed [COVIBOOK](#) is now

available in 22 languages and is currently the most popular book on Let's Read;

COVIBOOK has been read more than 40,000 times. The Foundation's Books for Asia program recently released [My Hero Is You: How Kids Can Fight COVID-19!](#) to engage older children.

## Notes from the Field

### [Peace and the Pandemic: The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict in Asia](#)



COVID-19 checkpoint in Mindanao, the Philippines.

As [COVID-19](#) spreads across conflict zones, the pandemic is already exposing fractures, prejudices, weaknesses, and existing inequalities among many marginal or conflict-affected populations. Major crisis such as COVID-19 can lead to more conflict as governments take advantage of emergency legislation and a distracted international media to suppress rivals. However, there is hope in the potential of sudden crises to break established patterns of behavior, sometimes generating shared interest in ending violence. Thailand has seen a minor breakthrough in its conflict between local armed cells and the Thai military; the rebel faction informally decided to postpone hostilities until the pandemic is brought under control. Development actors must draw on lessons

learned from decades of development work in conflict-affected areas to proactively combat disinformation, build common understanding, and ease tensions. It is also essential that interventions prioritize the specific needs of marginalized populations in their response; vulnerability is exaggerated by the combination of crisis and conflict. [Displaced and refugee](#) populations are often the target of disparaging rumors, further stigmatization, and violence. Similarly, the indirect impact of the pandemic in conflict zones is likely to disproportionately affect women and [aggravate gender-based violence](#). While the Covid-19 pandemic makes existing conflicts and surrounding dynamic in Asia less predictable, change often follows disruption; the next decade will be a time of both risk and opportunity for peacebuilding in Asia. Learn more about the Asia Foundation's work on [conflict and fragile conditions](#).

### [The Asia Foundation Donates Supplies to Fight COVID-19 in Pakistan](#)



The Asia Foundation donation in Pakistan.

The Asia Foundation's [Pakistan](#) Office has joined hands with the Government of Pakistan in its comprehensive, multi-pronged response to [COVID-19](#). To support the response of the District Administration of Rawalpindi, the Foundation partnered with the Deputy Commissioner's Office (DCO) to disseminate critical public health information and distribute personal protective equipment and sanitation products, including facemasks, soap, and disinfectants for 3,000 individuals severely affected by COVID-19. In addition, the Foundation provided two infra-red thermometers to the DCO.

### [The Asia Foundation Launches Rapid Response Fund to Address the Gendered Impacts of COVID-19](#)

Women and girls are acutely affected by [COVID-19](#); they are particularly vulnerable to the dramatic rise in [gender-based violence](#) amidst quarantines and lockdowns, loss of economic security, increased caregiving demands that fall largely on women, and increased risks of illness as women comprise the vast majority of frontline health and community workers. In response, The Asia Foundation launched the [Lotus Circle](#) Rapid Response Fund and is working to identify urgent needs and deploy resources where they are needed most. This includes expanding domestic violence hotlines in Indonesia and Cambodia, constructing handwashing stations outside essential services in Timor-Leste, supporting remote learning for young women studying STEM in Laos and Cambodia, helping women entrepreneurs in Malaysia transition their businesses online, and supporting food security for women with disabilities, caregivers, and elderly people in Indonesia. A number of activities are in the pipeline; The Foundation will use these funds to raise community awareness on domestic violence and support key response services in Myanmar and Cambodia, build the evidence base on the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls in China, and support women entrepreneurs in Mongolia and Cambodia to adapt business models and scale up online operations.



Handwashing station in Timor-Leste.

## Program Highlight

### [Still Recovering from the Earthquake, Nepal Faces COVID-19](#)

Just over five years ago [Nepal](#) experienced a massive earthquake that claimed over 9,000 lives and badly damaged over half a million houses. The Asia Foundation launched a social-impacts monitoring project during reconstruction to develop an accurate picture of long-term disaster effects, recovery patterns, and evolving needs. While reconstruction was slow in the years immediately following the earthquake, the project found that by late 2019, three quarters of affected households reported living in repaired, rebuilt, or different houses. However, government reconstruction programs focused mainly on rural areas with high levels of destruction and did not address the needs of urban or less-affected areas. For those that were eligible for such programs, access to finance has been extremely limited. Widespread indebtedness has caused many households to sell land and other assets; the impact of this on long-term resilience is unclear. Government initiatives have also failed to provide additional support to vulnerable households; recovery has been significantly more difficult for marginalized groups. Poor coordination between central and local levels of government has also been a barrier to recovery. As the [COVID-19](#) pandemic is introducing new and serious uncertainties into an already fragile landscape, it is essential that evidence on long-term impacts and factors that shape recovery informs interventions. Social-impacts monitoring provides planners with robust evidence that is vital for short-term [disaster response](#), long-term recovery, and future preparedness.



Aitamaya B.K., a single Dalit woman in front of her temporary shelter (photo: Prabhat R. Jha / The Asia Foundation)

## Publications of Interest

### [COVID-19 in Myanmar: Reorienting the Budget](#)



Plans, priorities and public finances must be revised to ensure the [COVID-19](#) virus is contained and the negative impacts of the virus are minimized. The Government of [Myanmar](#) is responding but the impacts of the pandemic and containment measures are far reaching. Funding for response efforts may be found in cancelled government activities and additional borrowing. Government officials will need to use the full flexibility allowed by the financial management framework to respond quickly. The scale of changes to the budget will likely require an additional supplementary budget. How the government delivers support to people will determine the success or failure of containment measures. The government's commitment to ensuring access to food and medicine should be applauded—though cash may be more efficient. Learn more about The Asia Foundation's work to [strengthen governance](#).

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Informed by six decades of experience and deep local expertise, our work across the region addresses five overarching goals—strengthen governance, empower women, expand economic opportunity, increase environmental resilience, and promote regional cooperation.