



World Health
Organization

Western Pacific
Philippines

UN agencies launch joint programme to support vulnerable women and young people amid COVID-19

With support from the Australian Government, WHO, UNICEF, and UNFPA kickstart two-year initiative on mental health and gender-based violence

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5 November 2021, Manila – As the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly swept across the world, pushing health systems to their limits dealing with an unknown disease, a silent pandemic of mental health conditions has intensified, especially among vulnerable groups including women and young people.

In the Philippines, a two-year joint programme called Project BRAVE (Building COVID-safe Responses And Voices for Equity) was launched today by the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Supported by the Australian Government, Project BRAVE will take practical action to assist vulnerable women, children, and adolescents with mental health and psychosocial services and protection from gender-based violence (GBV) during the response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Australia is providing the Philippines AUD 3.2 million grant (around PHP 120.5 million) through the UN agencies to improve multi-sectoral capacity to mitigate the key risks that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to the physical and mental well-being of vulnerable women, children, and adolescents. This will be implemented in collaboration with the Department of Health.

“The launching of the Project BRAVE is a great opportunity to underscore the importance of a holistic, whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach in addressing the mental health concerns of the Filipino people,” said Department of Health Secretary Francisco T. Duque III. “This supports the Special Initiatives for Mental Health (SIMH) and potential investments as recommended by the Philippine Mental Health Investment Case Report. With these initiatives, we are slowly building a more resilient and responsive health system that caters to the needs of the population and the vulnerable groups.”

Focusing on key sites in NCR, Central Luzon, CAR, Region IV-A, BARMM, and some parts of Visayas and Mindanao, the joint programme will involve key stakeholders to ensure that mental health and psychosocial support is embedded in health and social services up to the community level to make them more accessible.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic negative impact on the mental health, safety, and security of women, children, and other vulnerable groups,” said Dr. Rabindra Abeyasinghe, WHO Representative to the Philippines. “It is important to address the gaps in delivering mental health and psychosocial support – whether it is in the quantity or capacity of mental health professionals or in bringing these lifesaving services closer to people – to ensure genuine recovery in individuals and communities at present and beyond this health crisis.”

Project BRAVE also aims to strengthen child protection and GBV systems to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and harmful practices.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns about the mental health of a generation of children. But the pandemic may represent only the tip of the mental health iceberg – an iceberg we have ignored for far too long. Mental health conditions – and the lack of care and support – cause significant suffering for children and young people,” said UNICEF Philippines Deputy Representative Behzad Noubary. “Through Project BRAVE, we can contribute to breaking the silence surrounding mental health, addressing stigmas, improving mental health literacy, and giving children and young people a voice.”

Another major component of Project BRAVE is to institutionalize GBV interventions at the national level, create standards for implementation, and ensure their resiliency and sustainability.

“This initiative is another great step towards addressing what is considered ‘the other pandemic,’ that of increased gender-based violence and the toll this has taken on women and girls’ mental health,” said UNFPA Country Representative Dr. Leila Saiji Joudane. “Together, we can chart a course for equity, ensuring that gender-responsive strategies are in place to guarantee that no one, especially GBV survivors, is left behind during this pandemic and benefits from a safe and secure environment and equal access to services.”

The Australian Government, a key ally in the Philippines’ COVID-19 response and post-COVID-19 recovery, has provided AUD 159 million in development assistance since 2020 to help the Philippines achieve development objectives, including strengthening health systems, fostering inclusivity, and supporting economic growth. Project BRAVE is a part of the Australian Government’s expansive and flexible assistance to the country.

Australian Ambassador Steven J. Robinson AO said, “The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the lives and livelihoods of Filipinos, which can contribute to mental stresses, and can create unsafe environments. Australia is supporting the Philippine government through our UN partners to invest in practical solutions, drawing on the best expertise available to address the mental health and wellness of the most vulnerable Filipinos. Project BRAVE is an excellent example of government and development partners uniting to address an emerging need of the community. This is our mateship and bayanihan in action.”

Watch the Launch Ceremony at: <https://bit.ly/ProjectBRAVEph>