

AFRICAN GIRLS IN THE  
**COVID-19**  
PANDEMIC



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# INTRODUCTION

As countries across Africa experience the impact of COVID-19 across health systems, economies and communities, progress made in the last decade in achieving the rights of adolescent girls' risk to be lost.

COVID-19, an unfolding global health crisis, is revealing a grim impact on millions of adolescent girls across Africa. Beneath rising infection rates across countries in the continent, the disease is compounding challenges to girls' agency, protection, learning and leadership. The African response to the pandemic will – if unchecked - draw back important gains made in ensuring African girls' access and enjoyment of human rights. COVID-19 is emerging as not only a health crisis but a significant protection crisis for adolescent girls across the continent.

Measures adopted by most African governments to curb the spread of COVID-19 in countries have included the closure of schools and other learning institutions, movement restrictions, curfews, lock downs, and widespread social restrictions. While these measures contributed to delaying an immediate health crisis and were aimed at protecting children and their communities from COVID-19 infections, they have interrupted an already precarious learning and protection context for millions of children. This is especially the case for girls, who have traditionally been disproportionately affected by crises impacting the continent.



Girls and young women, especially the most marginalized, are particularly affected by the secondary impacts of the outbreak, due to pre-existing harmful social and gender norms and multiple forms of discrimination based on their age, gender and other exclusion factors.<sup>i</sup> Of serious concern are the rising cases of violence girls and young women are facing as well as increasing exposure to harmful practices including Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) and Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM).<sup>ii</sup>

Plan International is warning that emerging evidence of rights violations from multiple African countries threatens a generation of girls and young women across the continent. The COVID-19 crisis presents a double jeopardy for girls and young women, as it will set back progress made in achieving gender equality. It is worsening multiple ongoing humanitarian emergencies, including complex protracted crises that have already gravely impacted girls' access to basic services, rights, and freedoms across the continent.<sup>iii</sup>

African governments must act in urgency to address this “invisible crisis” and protect the important gains made to protect, and empower girls over the last decade.

# ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PROTECTION DURING COVID-19



Adolescent girls are disproportionately impacted during crises and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. This is especially because they often are forced to assume adult roles and care responsibilities, are at a heightened risk of violence, discrimination, and exclusion, and are often overlooked from responses that do not address their unique vulnerabilities and the underlying causes of the discrimination they face.<sup>iv</sup>

Africa holds the highest number of acutely food insecure people – especially in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and Southern Africa.<sup>v</sup> In May 2020, the World Food Programme (WFP) warned that over 40 million people across West Africa are facing desperate food shortages in the coming months.<sup>vi</sup> In East Africa, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET) is warning that the number of people facing crisis level food insecurity or worse will be 25% to 30% higher than before the onset of COVID-19.<sup>vii</sup> Elsewhere in Southern Africa, measures aimed at containing COVID-19 are threatening food security in the region due to reduced agricultural production, with several countries still impacted by continued climatic shocks.

Active participation of women and girls in contributing to food security is increasingly being challenged by ongoing disruptions to food production and access as a result of COVID-19 containment measures, impeding their future socio-economic prospects. Food insecurity is also compounding adolescent girls' protection risks, especially those living in poor, high density, under served urban areas in the growing cities across Africa.

**“My fear with this virus in Liberia is that women will really suffer over food. Men will abuse us. If I do not have food and a boy has food, if I ask him for help he will ask me for sex”**

14-year-old Janet - Liberia.

Africa hosts the bulk of the world's forcibly displaced persons – both Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees. The majority of these are settled in camps or informal settlements where access to basic services was precarious prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Health and protection services in displacement settings are often overstretched, underfunded and inaccessible.<sup>viii</sup>

Adolescent girls in such settings in Africa are gravely impacted by both primary and secondary impacts of the pandemic.

**“When I thought I found comfort in the midst of friends and a decent meal at school, the worse occurred. Now I cannot even imagine what life would have been if Corona Virus found us in our home village, maybe we would have stayed protected and well fed, unlike in this crowded settlement”**

15-year-old Ngonga -Yei County, South Sudan.

In the Gambella region of Ethiopia that hosts over 300,000 refugees – 91% of whom are women and children,<sup>ix</sup> a recent assessment by Plan International on the experiences of girls in crises found that child marriage was most prevalent in 16 and 17-year-old adolescent girls. Of concern, up to 40% of refugee adolescent girls were married. No adolescent boys of that age were married.<sup>x</sup>

“When you’re forced to leave where you’ve always lived, it’s hard. Since we arrived in Bamako, my husband has been trying to find a job, but he hasn’t succeeded. We live on donations and there are days when we have nothing to eat. With the COVID-19, it’s even more complicated.”

22-year-old Mariam - Mali.

In March 2020, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) warned that as a result of COVID-19 containment measures, women and girls were at a greater risk of experiencing Gender Based Violence, and the threat of harmful practices including FGM/C and CEFM.<sup>xi</sup> Five months since the onset of the pandemic, adolescent girls across Africa are living this reality, with increasing reports of multiple forms of violence. If adequate and effective measures are not urgently put in place, the full scale of the secondary impacts of COVID-19 as well as the unfolding protection crisis will only be fully evident when it is already too late to act.

## **(i) COVID-19, FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING AND CHILD EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE.**

In July 2020, Sudan became the latest country in Africa to legally ban Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), a widely acclaimed move following years of activism by women and child rights groups.<sup>xii</sup> To date, 25 countries in Africa have banned FGM/C by law<sup>xiii</sup> these are however currently not adequately protecting young girls as due to COVID-19, governments fighting the pandemic are giving little attention to FGM/C laws’ enforcement.

The challenge in many countries with legal restrictions to FGM/C continues to be limited resources allocated to their implementation and enforcement - especially in rural areas - weak penalties for perpetrators, cultural and religious opposition as well as limited knowledge and acceptance of these laws.<sup>xiv</sup> According to UNFPA, disruptions in efforts to combat FGM/C will set back progress towards ending the practice by 2030 by one third.<sup>xv</sup>

“Under the pretext of being vaccinated against COVID-19, three young girls in Egypt were in June 2020 subjected, by their father, to the outlawed practice of FGM/C.”<sup>xvi</sup>

An increase in FGM/C has been reported in Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali.<sup>xvii</sup> Aside from parents and guardians taking advantage of the lockdown and school closures to subject young girls to FGM/C, the economic downturn associated with COVID-19 measures in countries like Somalia has resulted in an upsurge in cases, as those that perform FGM/C (cutters) revert to the practice in order to earn income.<sup>xviii</sup>

“They are knocking door to door to cut girls”

Sadia Allin, Plan International - Head of Mission in Somalia.

The disruption of preventive programming combined with severe economic and food crises as well as the ongoing closure of schools are and will continue to catalyze an increase in Child Early and Forced Marriages (CEFM) and early pregnancies across Africa.<sup>xix</sup>

While gender inequality and unintended adolescent pregnancy are root causes of CEFM, in this time of crisis, many families are considering child marriage as a strategy to cope with economic hardship, to reduce the number of household dependents and to shield girls from violence or the perceived stigma associated with pregnancy outside of marriage.<sup>xx</sup>



**“Things have become very uncomfortable for me since the state of emergency began. Being at home all day with my family is dreadful, because they are rushing me to get married.”**

17-year-old Angelina - Mozambique.

Early and often unintended pregnancies were already prevalent across Sub-Saharan Africa, where adolescent pregnancy is 101 births per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19, compared with the global average of 44 per 1000 girls of the same age<sup>xxi</sup> Ongoing school closures and limited access to age-responsive Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services and information are contributing to an increase in incidents of adolescent pregnancies. This has been reported across many countries including Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Nigeria.

## **(II) COVID-19 AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)**

**“For too many women and children, home can be a place of fear and abuse. That situation worsens considerably in cases of isolation such as the lockdowns imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.”**

UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.

Movement restrictions enforced to contain the COVID-19 pandemic across Africa are trapping young girls and children in their homes, homes that have become settings for increasing violence during the pandemic. Several countries in Africa have reported a spike in Gender Based Violence (GBV) in the months succeeding lockdown measures. In Kenya, a third of all crimes reported since the start of COVID-19 are related to sexual violence.<sup>xxii</sup> Reported incidents of GBV in Niamey - Niger more than doubled between January and April 2020.<sup>xxiii</sup> South Africa reported a 37% increase in reported cases of GBV during the first week of its national lockdown.<sup>xxiv</sup> Other countries reporting a spike in reported cases including South Sudan, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The increase in GBV may be attributed to confinement, financial concerns, and insecurity.<sup>xxv</sup> Mandatory lock downs, quarantine, and self- isolation can have harmful effects on those in already violent situations, as children and young girls are trapped with their abuser(s) with no physical and emotional respite.<sup>xxvi</sup>

For contexts that have traditionally had low levels of reporting of GBV cases prior to the pandemic, these numbers are worryingly much higher. Further, the closure of schools has deemed inaccessible the most widely used avenue for reporting of child abuse cases as it has become extremely difficult to identify children who may be experiencing violence in the home and to seek appropriate intervention.<sup>xxvii</sup>



“Every day comes with its challenge. With the school’s closure, I help my grandmother in her bar. When I am serving, some men touch my buttocks, breast and my thighs and tell me I look very beautiful. One day, one man told me if I sleep with him, he will take me to Accra and will make me happy. I don’t like the way the men touch me, but every time I contest, they threaten to go to another bar to buy drinks. I do not want to be counted as a victim of sexual violence so I will keep fighting them.”

14-year-old Abigail - Ghana.

“Those experiencing or at risk of violence may have trouble accessing relevant protection services, due to social isolation measures. The diversion or withdrawal of necessary funding and resources, including those for sexual and reproductive health, mental health and psychosocial support can make the situation extremely dangerous for girls and women,”

George Otim - Country Director, Plan International South Sudan.

To compound this, access to crucial life-saving protective spaces and services (including health, psychosocial support etc) for GBV survivors is increasingly constrained as a result of the diversion or withdrawal of key resources that are necessary for GBV and SRH services to operate, towards immediate public health measures.<sup>xxviii</sup> Imposed quarantine and travel restrictions in many areas have made it difficult for women and girls to access traditional points of justice and service provision including hospitals, schools, police stations, religious places, and community centers. Further, as countries mobilize their resources to address COVID-19, extremely limited services are being made available to life-saving care and support to GBV survivors, including services for clinical management of rape and mental health and psycho-social support.<sup>xxix</sup>

Police, prosecution services, the judiciary and other parts of the criminal justice system are challenged during the pandemic. Such challenges include the diversion of resources from the criminal justice system; the suspension of judicial proceedings in several countries and the scale down of services including hotlines, crisis centers and shelters.<sup>xxx</sup>

Restrictions on civic space and freedoms as part of COVID-19 response have affected the ability of young people, particularly girls and young women, to make their voices heard and fulfill their right to participate in decision-making spaces. Girl activists and youth-led movements across the continent have stepped up efforts to advocate for increased protection for young girls during the pandemic. For the majority however, they are locked up, unable to gather evidence or provide critical support as they are classified as non-essential.<sup>xxxi</sup> They are further limited in resources to respond and advocate, save for online platforms which while inaccessible for many, expose them to digital abuse and harassment.<sup>xxxii</sup>

“In the quarantine we are doing our work from home. We are three lawyers giving support in the online consultation and through our feminist app, but we don’t have internet in our houses so we have to buy it ourselves. However, we are still offering these options in emergency times where girls and young women can be at home with their offenders.”

Plan International CSO partner





# ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION DURING COVID-19



Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 52 million girls were out of school across Africa, while four million were estimated to have never stepped into a classroom compared to two million boys.<sup>xxxiii</sup> At the pandemic's peak, over 1.5 billion children globally, including 767 million girls, had their education disrupted.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Across Africa, 120 million girls are now affected by school closures.<sup>xxxv</sup> This has exposed them to higher risks of unintended adolescent pregnancies, CEFM and other forms of GBV<sup>xxxvi</sup>, and limited their learning – risking their long-term life chances.

A key lesson from past epidemics within countries in Africa, is that adolescent girls are at a greater risk of dropping out of school as a result of financial barriers, families' preference for boys returning to school, as well as increased care-giving and domestic labor responsibilities.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy are also among key factors that prevent the return of adolescent girls to schools often due to discriminatory policies that prevent them from re-entering school and finishing their education or inflexible learning options. For instance, a rapid gender analysis conducted by Plan International Mali during COVID-19 shows that there is a high risk of school drop-out due to child marriage.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

**"I am in the third year of secondary school; I am really missing classes. I prefer to be in school a thousand times more than being at home. Sometimes I try to study at home but the house chores are too many and I do not get time to revise my notes"**

16-year-old Halima - Niger

Unequal access to various forms of remote learning alternatives –including digital learning platforms - has placed adolescent girls at risk of being further left behind in their education. Plan International's evidence shows that during the Ebola crisis in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, girls were less likely to home study than boys.<sup>xxxix</sup> This is partly because girls have less time to spend studying from home due to domestic chores. Further, girls across Africa are severely impacted by the growing digital gender gap. Where there is access, they face increased vulnerability to cyber violence.<sup>xl</sup>

**"Learning from home is not easy for many of us living in the informal settlements. The government introduced an online platform where lessons are being aired via television, smart phones, radios and on the internet. This is a big joke for me and other girls living here. Let alone the television, many of us don't even have radios in our homes and this has brought about an imbalance and unfairness in the education sector."**

18-year-old Glorian - Kenya

The inequitable division of household labor means girls face an added burden of unpaid care and domestic work, which increases during crises. A recent Gender Needs Assessment conducted by Plan International in Mozambique revealed that the closure of schools had a direct negative impact on girls'



learning as they lacked sufficient time to study due to increased domestic tasks.<sup>xli</sup>

**“I don’t like not being at school. At home I am always working, either doing domestic chores such as cooking for my parents and siblings, collecting water or brewing alcohol with my grandmother who is staying with us.”**

15-year-old Zillian - Uganda.

In conflict and displacement contexts that host up to 75 million school-aged children, learners are already marginalized and often have their rights to education unfulfilled and violated.<sup>xlii</sup> Within several crises affected countries in Africa, COVID-19 is an additional

barrier to girls’ access to education amid conflicts and climate-related disasters. For example, prior to the COVID-19, 2500 schools in Burkina Faso were closed and 1,100 schools made non-functional in Mali due to insecurity.<sup>xliii</sup>

Girls’ access to quality primary and secondary education is key to achieving gender equality in Africa. It has been shown to improve the lives of girls and their families and communities, as well as enhance their decision making and agency within communities, improve their earnings and standards of living and contribute to their positive political and social engagement. Access to quality education significantly contributes to adolescent girls protection in Africa. The risk of girls not resuming school due to COVID-19 further threatens any gains made in achieving gender parity and/or equality in Africa.





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## RECOMMENDATIONS



Plan International is calling on all the actors involved in the COVID-19 response in Africa, including governments, regional bodies, development organizations, health institutions and the humanitarian community to:

### **Protect adolescent girls from violence and harmful practices.**

- Set up, implement, and fund measures to prevent and address GBV and harmful practices as part of COVID-19 response and recovery plans.
- Adapt and ensure accessibility to GBV prevention and response, and child protection services during the pandemic. Such may include community protection mechanisms and accessible case or incident reporting structures.
- Ensure that youth responsive sexual and reproductive health services remain prioritized and funded across all contexts.
- Ensure the implementation of existing legal statutes put in place to protect children - especially girls during the pandemic.

### **Ensure continued education for adolescent girls during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.**

- Collaboratively develop a comprehensive, timely and evidence-based plan for re-opening schools. Such plans should be gender responsive and address the key barriers to girls' access to education, ensuring their safe return to school.
- Implement inclusive digital and non-digital solutions to distance learning, and consider the digital divide, especially among girls in rural areas. This includes putting in place measures to ease internet access and to facilitate learning through non-digital tools.

### **Meaningfully include adolescent girls in designing, planning, and implementing efforts to combat COVID-19 in Africa.**

- Ensure that all measures being taken in efforts to combat the pandemic and its consequences are informed by gender, age, and inclusion analysis to understand how the outbreak affects population groups differently – especially adolescent girls.
- Support and include Youth-led movements, networks, and associations (formal and informal) in COVID-19 responses. These should continue to enjoy freedom to organize and speak out.

## ENDNOTES



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## ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the

root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

