

A young girl with her hair in a bun, wearing a white t-shirt, is focused on filling a clear plastic bottle with water from a tap. She is holding a bar of light blue soap in her other hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery.

COVID-19 THE IMPACT ON **GIRLS**

The COVID-19 outbreak will deeply affect the environment in which children and young people grow and develop, from the earliest years to late adolescence. Girls, especially the most marginalised, will be particularly affected by the secondary impacts of the outbreak due to harmful social norms and double discrimination based on age and gender.

To meet the needs of girls and to protect them globally our response will be equitable, gender-transformative and protective of human rights.

The reality facing girls

“I am a student, but the school is closed... This is an emotional shock. COVID-19 is terrorising us and the impact on employment is alarming.” – Linguere, 20, Senegal



**Baifeun, 14,
is learning at
home during the
lockdown in Laos**

Today the world is home to some 1.2 billion girls, of whom 600 million are adolescents – they will suffer particular disadvantages due their gender and age, which is compounded by poverty and other discriminatory factors, such as disability or ethnicity. Often, they enter adulthood already at a severe disadvantage as a result of violence, early pregnancy, child marriage and limited opportunities for education and employment.

COVID-19 shutdowns will disrupt early learning, formal education and livelihoods. The lives of girls, their families and communities face extreme stress from health and economic burdens, crowding and isolation. Measures to curb the disease have worsened existing inequalities, forcing girls out of school and placing them at heightened risk of violence in their home. With school and university closures affecting [nearly 91% of the world's student population](#), over 1.5 billion learners have had their education disrupted, including 743 million girls. Nor can girls equally access online learning. Boys are [1.5 times more likely to own a phone](#) than girls in low and middle-income countries and are 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone that can access the internet.

When girls are out of school they struggle to access social support structures and essential services such as sexual and reproductive health services. We have seen a global increase in domestic violence that is being described as the '[second pandemic](#)'. Economic downturns, job losses and school closures will increase sexual violence, exploitation, trafficking, child labour and harmful practices. Girls face an unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work, which will increase as they are kept at home.

Plan International knows from past crises the long-term indirect impacts facing vulnerable children and young people. Girls living in the least developed countries, or fragile, conflict or disaster affected contexts, where healthcare systems are usually weak and will quickly become overwhelmed, are acutely vulnerable to a diversion of resources away from other key medical services.

GENDER INEQUALITY EXACERBATES COVID-19 RISKS FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN



Greater exposure to infection

Globally, women undertake more than three quarters of unpaid care. In rural communities and low-income countries, women spend up to 14 hours a day on care work.

Lower access to lifesaving information

Girls, women and other marginalised groups are least likely to have access to technology. In low-and middle-income countries, 433 million women do not own mobile phones and 165 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone.



IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN



743 million girls out of school due to closures, including 111 million in the world's least developed countries.

Rates of domestic violence have risen across the world as a result of COVID-19 related movement restrictions.

- A threefold increase in calls to women's shelters in China at the height of the quarantine
- A nationwide spike of 30% in domestic violence in France.



Child marriage and teenage pregnancy are likely to go up. In villages highly disrupted by Ebola in Sierra Leone, adolescent pregnancy increased by 65%.

Plan International's COVID-19 response is focused on protecting the most vulnerable children and placing the needs and rights of girls and young women at the centre as the crisis unfolds. Through efforts that will reach more than 50,000 communities across 50 countries, Plan International aims to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 amongst the world's most vulnerable communities, particularly in refugee camps and displaced settings, and reduce the disease's negative social impact on girls and their families who are disproportionately affected by the crisis. We are working with communities, national governments and partners to tackle the spread of COVID-19, and to ensure that the impacts of the crisis on the rights and well-being of children, particularly girls and young women, are fully understood and taken into account in national response efforts and international cooperation. We are also working to ensure that girls have a seat at the decision-making table through all stages of the response. As the longer-term impacts of the crisis unfold, we will continue to work closely with girls and women to amplify their voices and ensure that they are an active part of the process of rebuilding.

Plan International's recommendations

We urgently recommend the following actions to power-holders to mitigate the impacts on girls and protect their rights, safety and well-being:

- ▶ Governments must **support global and regional institutions and mechanisms and the international humanitarian system** to spearhead a coherent and effective global response. This includes working closely and openly with civil society organisations to ensure the inclusive and equitable nature of global policies, guidance and measures.
- ▶ Authorities must **recognise that COVID-19 affects girls and boys, women and men differently** and ensure that policies and interventions to prepare for and respond to the outbreak are equitable, gender-transformative and protective of human rights.
- ▶ **Promote and ensure the engagement of communities**, including local leaders, families and caregivers, and particularly girls and women, in all stages of the overall response. **Strengthen the leadership and meaningful participation of girls and young women** in all decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and needs are met, and create space for the role of youth and girl-led organisations in initiatives and coordinating bodies.
- ▶ **Prioritise learning continuity in the period of school closures** and ensure that adolescent girls' needs and lived realities are considered. This includes accessible and inclusive distance learning that will reach the most marginalised and limit inequalities in the education system.
- ▶ **Consider the gender digital divide** and address gender disparities in access digital

learning. This includes working to provide free or low-cost mobile internet access. Where digital solutions to distance learning and internet are accessible, ensure that girls are trained with the necessary digital skills, including ways to stay safe online.

- ▶ **Rigorous protection and safeguarding of all children, and of girls and women from gender-based violence** must be prioritised in all policies, information and guidance throughout the response. Child protection and welfare services must be fully funded and adapted where needed.
- ▶ **Gendered data should be made available, analysed and actionable:** all data related to the outbreak and the implementation of the response should be disaggregated by sex, age and disability, and include other gender equality indicators. Monitoring should be stepped up for those children, particularly girls, most vulnerable to exploitation, violence and neglect.
- ▶ **Sexual and reproductive health and rights must be prioritised**, funded and recognised as life-saving, along with essential health services for young children's survival and growth.
- ▶ Responses to the outbreak must ensure that **targeted measures are taken to protect and support young women's economic empowerment**, including social protection and paying attention to the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work during this time.



Woman reads leaflet on preventing the spread of COVID-19 produced by Plan International, Indonesia