



SMART, SUCCESSFUL, STRONG:

THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN
ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION
IN AID AND COVID-19 RESPONSE
AND RECOVERY



The charity for
girls' equality

GIRLS' FOREWORD

Education is the key to a level playing field for all. It provides us with knowledge about the world. It paves the way for a good career. It helps build our characters. And when girls' are educated, it can improve economic development, reduce inequality, and help build a more stable and resilient society so that all individuals have the opportunity to realize their potential.

But due to the impacts of COVID-19, girls are missing out.

During lockdown, we face a higher risk of violence and harmful practices. The economic impacts of the pandemic are causing us to put our education and our hopes and dreams on hold, to help ease the financial burden, and girls are dropping out and getting married early. Some of us may never have the opportunity to return to school.

Many of us lack internet access and devices, so we cannot study, even if online learning is an option. And if we do have internet access, we still struggle to keep up with school work because we often have to deal with the burden of housework too.

School closures has changed the way we socialize with our friends and learn, there's more pressure and it has affected our mental health.

It's likely that students will still be doing online classes for awhile, so solutions for the problems are needed to make it more effective and less of a burden.

We can't stand alone, we need help from others, and that's why this girls' education report is so important.

The report provides evidence of how COVID-19 has interrupted girl's path to education, and gives a voice to the young women who are facing these obstacles. Girls and young women often don't get to have a say in the decisions that affect our lives; this report is important because it gives us a chance to be heard.

The world needs to know what girls are facing to eliminate problems. No one knows what girls are dealing with better than themselves and that's why we need to listen to girls' voices and amplify them, to inform world leaders or power holders.

We will not be silenced. We are here to ask for our rights, and power holders need to actively listen to girls' voices when it comes to decision making. We need to make sure girls' education is not ignored or excluded during the process of building back a better normal after COVID-19, so that all girls are free to discover their potential.

Education doesn't just transform our lives, but it also transforms our families, our communities, our countries, and even the world. It's the key to a brighter future and better world.

Written by Difon, (17 years old, Indonesia), Vania (17 years old, Indonesia), Nhi (19 years old, Vietnam), Duong Phuong Anh (22 years old, Vietnam), Tebwebwe Terikaua (20 years old, Kiribati) and Taarawa Ukenio (25, Kiribati).

FOREWORD



Susanne Legena, CEO, Plan International Australia

Investing in girls' education is life changing.

It provides girls with opportunities to shape their futures and become the women they want to be, and the ripple effects it can have for entire communities and countries has the potential to truly transform our world.

But for many, returning to school post-pandemic will not be an option.

In this report, you'll hear from girls in Indonesia, Kiribati and Vietnam, about their experience during COVID-19. You'll discover the toll that school closures and remote learning has taken on girls, and the fears that they have about their futures. Returning to school is not just about a return to lessons. It's about returning to a sense of normality. To a community of peers, a support network, and opportunities to grow and develop themselves. Home is not always the safest place for children, and certainly not for girls.

When girls have the chance to be educated, the barriers they face to equality are much easier to break – both for themselves and for future generations. Educating girls is one of the most effective – and most overlooked – ways to mitigate climate change; it improves employment opportunities and outcomes, and can lift entire communities out of poverty; and it provides opportunities for girls to be heard and to lead.

We simply cannot afford to lose this generation of girls and the potential they hold, or the progress we have already made.

I was the first person in my family to complete university and even finish high school. My mum worked two jobs to ensure my three sisters and I were educated. I know I wouldn't be the woman I am today or have the influence I have in the world, if I didn't have my education. And because of that, I feel a deep responsibility to make sure girls everywhere have the same opportunities. Education is everything. It unlocks doors and dreams, and unleashes potential.

That's why this report inspires me to forge ahead. To continue putting pressure on governments to prioritise girls returning to school – and to

remove the barriers that continuously hold girls back. We must continue raising funds to build back a better, more equal world after COVID-19, so that all girls have choices for their futures and opportunities that can change their lives.



Sharon Kane, Director, Plan International, Vietnam

We know from overwhelming evidence, and from personal stories we have heard from adolescent girls, that completion of secondary education is not just a fundamental human right, but also truly transformational for girls, their families, communities and the greater society in which they live.

In August 2020, we launched *A Better Normal: Girls call for a revolutionary reset*, a report led and authored by 22 girls from Australia and Vietnam with engagement also from over 1300 girls across the globe. The report envisioned how the world could be reimagined and transformed as we rebuild after COVID-19. The report found that adolescent girls and young women see the #1 priority for a 'better normal' is equitable access to inclusive, quality secondary education.

In Vietnam, at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government acted in a timely manner which managed to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the community. However, girls and boys, particularly in remote areas of Vietnam were still directly impacted by school closures and the ongoing consequences of this will be far-reaching for years to come.

With this report, together with a series of programs developed by Plan International, we join Government partners in working together to end inequalities in the education system which have been exacerbated by the pandemic, so that girls across the region can attend and benefit from education. In collaboration with Plan International's offices in Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam, and with support from colleagues and partners across the Asia Pacific region, lessons can be learnt and applied to create a combined plan to ensure adolescent girls are supported in a 'better normal'.

We hope you will join us.

We won't stop until Girls Get Equal.



**Dini Widiastuti, Executive Director,
Yayasan Plan International
Indonesia**

The pandemic condition that has engulfed us over the last 12 months has impacted the lives of girls in various ways, including disruption to their learning process. The application of large-scale social restrictions and school closures as a response to the pandemic has created new challenges that exacerbate barriers to girls' accessing education in Indonesia.

In this report, we are very pleased to present the voices of adolescent girls from different places in Indonesia. They shared their experiences of learning during COVID-19 and they also call on governments to rebuild the education system to bring girls back to school in a more equal and inclusive system. Girls are part of the education system, so we really believe their voice must be heard by governments, and also by family and communities to ensure they can access their right to 12 years of education.

This study captures how the pandemic affects adolescent girls in South East Asia and the Pacific, including Indonesia, in accessing secondary

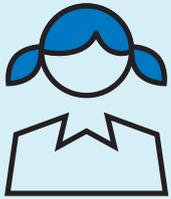
education exactly one year since the COVID-19 pandemic hit us. The research focuses on adolescent girls and secondary education because adolescence is a critical moment for girls in making decision about their lives. Girls tend to experience discriminatory gender norms that limits their opportunities to grow and choices for their life and future. Ensuring secondary education for girls is extremely crucial. Not being able to access education surely will lead to a bigger gap in accessing opportunities to grow and have a decent life for girls.

The challenges in education systems during COVID-19 provide a huge loss not only for girls but also the quality and competitiveness of human resources of young Indonesians in the future. Thus, this study is very much relevant for the Indonesian government, which is currently dealing with COVID-19 with an emphasis on economic recovery and vaccinations. The report shows that government needs to also give more attention to improving education systems to be more adaptive and inclusive to girls' needs as a response to the changed situation created by the pandemic.

ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

Put simply, we're the charity for girls' equality. We believe a better world is possible. An equal world; a world where all children can live happy and healthy lives, and where girls can take their rightful place as equals. This is the world you are helping us create. We are one of the oldest, largest and most experienced global development and humanitarian organisations in our field, working in 77 countries worldwide. We work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the injustices facing girls and the most marginalised children.

WHY GIRLS' EDUCATION MUST BE AT THE HEART OF COVID-19 RECOVERY



More than 1.2 million girls (pre-primary to upper secondary) could drop out of school due to the pandemic in East Asia and the Pacific, which is in addition to the 15 million girls that were not enrolled and able to gain an education before COVID-19.¹



20% of girls in the East Asia Pacific region – 40 million in total – were not reached by distance learning delivered online or through TV or radio, due to the lack of devices and/or policies geared towards their needs.²



2.5 million girls are at risk of child, early and forced marriage by 2025 because of the pandemic.³



The World Bank forecasts that as many as 38 million people living in South East Asia and the Pacific are likely to fall below the poverty line (an increase in poverty for the first time in 20 years in the region).⁴



The World Bank estimates that if girls were able to complete 12 years of high-quality education, their earnings could contribute between 15 to 30 trillion dollars in lifetime productivity and earnings.⁵



Women with more education report increased earning power and improved standards of living,⁶ as well as greater agency and decision-making.⁷



Girls who are educated are less likely to be married before they turn 18. Girls who remain in secondary education have fewer children and do so later in life.⁸



Educated mothers are better informed about specific diseases, so they can take measures to prevent them. They can recognise signs of illness early, seek advice and act on it.⁹



Education is one of the most powerful ways of improving children's health, nutrition and wellbeing.

KEY FINDINGS

Over the last twelve months, what are the barriers to education adolescent girls in South East Asia and the Pacific faced?

Stressful home environments:

With children at home, job losses and other pressures, home environments were not always safe or supportive learning environments for adolescent girls. Girls felt unsupported in remote learning due to parents who were struggling to understand the technology, who themselves have low education levels or who were experiencing high levels of stress due to the pandemic and its consequences. This led to household conflict and a home environment not conducive to girls' learning.

Decline in mental and emotional well-being:

The pandemic has had significant impacts on the well-being of adolescent girls, which has made it difficult for girls to continue with their education. Girls said they struggled to learn due to the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic and the stress of learning from home. Girls spoke of the significant stress and pressure of preparing for exams despite the disrupted curriculum, their concerns about the future and their ability to finish schooling and find employment.

Quality and delivery of remote learning:

Remote learning has posed serious disruptions to adolescent girls' ability to access and complete secondary education. Adolescent girls found that learning was made particularly difficult due to changes to the curriculum, inconsistency in teaching styles and abilities, the difficulty to maintain concentration and motivation, and a lack of access to on site facilities.

Unequal access to technology and devices:

Girls struggled to access the internet for online classes due to unstable internet connections, low connectivity (particularly outside of cities) and the high costs of data. Girls also experienced a lack of devices (such as laptops) available in the family home or limited access to devices that were shared between family members or that were used only by male family members.

Increased risk of gender-based violence:

With learning shifting from schools to adolescent girls' homes and online over the last 12 months, girls expressed concerns regarding online and offline violence. The pandemic exposed the unique nature of online harassment and abuse that girls experience and the need to create safe spaces for them both online and offline to enable girls to learn without fear.

Adolescent girls' education is not a priority:

The disruptions of the last year have further entrenched the gendered norms and expectations that education is of limited value to girls. The research found that girls' families and communities did not place value on girls' education – instead considering marriage or work to be more financially viable options. In some instances, girls themselves felt this way.

Child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFM):

The research found that countries such as Indonesia are seeing an upward trend in CEFM both anecdotally and in some of the data, despite Indonesian law restricting marriage before the age of 19. As CEFM continues to increase in the region, it will pose serious barriers to girls being able to continue their education.

Economic impacts:

The research found that the loss of income as a result of the pandemic and the number of households that were predicted to drop below the poverty line in the Pacific, made the financial impact of COVID-19 one of the most significant risks to a girl's education.



Youth champions lobbying for girls education in the Solomon Islands

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

For this report, we asked girls who took part in our workshops in Indonesia, Vietnam and Kiribati to provide their recommendations for donors and decision-makers to create equal access to quality and inclusive secondary education for all girls.

Our vision: All adolescent girls must be able to complete their education, including being able to return to school if the pandemic has pushed them out of the classroom.

This was the message that the girls we spoke with issued, loud and clear. They want to see gender equality in education; they want schools to be able to 'build back equal'.

In particular they called on donors and decision-makers to invest in initiatives that:

1. Educate girls, families and communities about their right to complete 12 years of education, including an end to child, early and forced marriage/unions
2. Bridge the digital divide
3. Provide age and gender appropriate support for girls' mental health and emotional wellbeing
4. Create more opportunities that enable girls to be leaders
5. Provide girls living with a disability with the same opportunities to access and complete education as all learners
6. Rebuild the education system to promote values-based learning that encourages and teaches diversity and inclusion, respect and care for each other, so that schools are more welcoming environments for all and free from discrimination, gender-based violence and harassment
7. Remove financial barriers to accessing or completing education, and ensure all schools have access to the same level of resources
8. Ensure girls' voices and views are central to decision-making, with school systems and curriculums co-designed with young people and participatory policy making processes
9. Embed comprehensive sexuality education in formal and informal education settings and ensure it is accessible for all children, adolescents and young people
10. Ensure schools are more environmentally-friendly and teach climate change and action



Madi, 12, Papua New Guinea

INTRODUCTION

Education is extraordinary. It is the key that unlocks doors, unleashes potential and fulfils dreams.

When girls can access education – especially secondary education – it can act as a catalyst for adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 as they transition into adulthood. It provides them with choices and future opportunities that can not only change their lives, it can change the world.

Secondary education enables adolescent girls in all their diversities to learn and attain the skills they need to succeed in life and work. Every year of education completed has a number of powerful, positive and truly transformational benefits for adolescent girls, their families, communities and for the nation's prosperity and development.

Yet now, more than ever, secondary education is out-of-arms reach for millions of adolescent girls around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented disruption to learning with school closures across the globe over the last 12 months.

Though the spread of COVID-19 has been limited in the Pacific and has varied in its severity in South East Asia – lockdowns, school closures and the disruption to economies, labour markets as well as the social and economic fabric of families and communities in the region, will reverberate for decades to come.

The World Bank forecasts that the number of people living in poverty in South East Asia and the Pacific is likely to rise for the first time in 20 years and as many as 38 million¹⁰ people in the region will fall below the poverty line. The regions' adolescent girls will be one

of the groups that will be the hardest hit as families make decisions about girls' futures – whether they stay in school, or marry, take on low paid work to support their families or care for siblings or elderly relatives. Though there are few official statistics, there is growing evidence in the region that girls are not returning to school 12 months on from the pandemic.¹¹

In order to avoid the dire economic consequences of COVID-19 there is a clear case for getting adolescent girls back into secondary education. We know that 12 years of girls' education could provide the economic benefits that help power the much-needed economic recovery in the region. The World Bank estimates that if girls were able to complete 12 years of high-quality education, their earnings could contribute between 15 to 30 trillion dollars in lifetime productivity and earnings.¹² We know that girls' education can boost a country's GDP and women are more likely to invest their earnings into their families (90% of their income is invested back into their families) compared to men (35% of their earnings are invested back into their families).¹³

With the 12 month anniversary of the first lockdowns in March, there is an urgent need to understand how the pandemic has disrupted adolescent girls' learning. Now is a critical time for donors and decision-makers in our region to prioritise girls' education to stop the loss of decades of progress. If action is not taken, an entire generation of girls will miss out on fulfilling their dreams and their fundamental right to complete twelve years of education.

The existing inequalities in the education system have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and for girls who face challenges that are unique to their intersecting experiences of gender and age, sexual and gender identity¹⁴, ethnicity and religion, their economic and social circumstances and their experiences of displacement and migration – the barriers to education are almost insurmountable.

Plan International (PI) has long advocated for an inclusive and quality education for girls, working around the world with Education Ministries, provincial authorities and schools to improve access to education. Since the COVID-19 crisis, PI has advocated for a range of gender-transformative measures for girls to engage in and continue their learning and education including [Building Back Equal: Girls Back to School Guide](#).

In August 2020, we launched [A Better Normal: Girls call for a revolutionary reset](#), a report authored by 22 girls from Australia and Vietnam and engagement from over 1300 girls across the globe. The report envisioned how the world could be reimagined and transformed as we rebuild after COVID-19. The report found that **secondary education is adolescent girls' and young women's number one priority for a better normal.**

This report builds on this recommendation, honouring and giving voice to adolescent girls' and young women's views to keep secondary education at the very forefront of aid and development and COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report shines a light on the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent girls in South East Asia and the Pacific and their experiences of accessing secondary education over the last twelve months. The report is a collaboration between Plan International's offices in Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam with support from colleagues and partners across the Asia Pacific region.

The report is not an exhaustive list of the barriers to girls' education, instead it amplifies girls' voices and their experiences across the region over the last twelve months. We have drawn on past surveys of girls in the region and conducted workshops with adolescent girls and young women in Vietnam, Indonesia and Kiribati. The most up-to-date data and girls' views paint a picture of some of the key factors that have stopped adolescent girls from fulfilling their right to education over the last 12 months.

The report also sets out girls' views on how to rebuild after COVID-19. Adolescent girls in the report call on donors and governments to create strategies and invest in pathways that will support girls to rebuild their lives and to transform education systems.

This report is intended to be a rallying cry to all donors and governments to act now, not only to stop the unravelling of decades of progress in education, but to create an equal world; one where all children can live happy and healthy lives and where girls can take their rightful place as equals. A world where girls are supported by their families, their communities and their governments to fulfil their right to 12 years of education.



Rahina (17) and Kurshida (14), Bangladesh

WHY FOCUS ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS?

It is now widely recognised that adolescence is a crucial time in the transition from childhood to adulthood. The expectations, opportunities, risks and needs for girls and boys diverge considerably during adolescence.

Where adolescent boys are offered opportunities to continue their education with the expectation of employment and income, the opportunities for adolescent girls to progress through secondary education (especially upper secondary school) rapidly diminishes, denying future economic opportunities and financial independence.

Where the burden of household chores eases for boys as they get older, it only increases for adolescent girls as they take on adult roles of domestic work and caring for family. Where adolescent boys are assuming leadership roles in their families and communities, adolescent girls' freedoms are being curtailed and decisions that determine the course of their lives (such as whether they marry, work or continue their education) are made by their families.

Adolescence is a time of rapid and life-changing physical and emotional development that has its own unique challenges for adolescent girls. Puberty and evolving sexual maturity places girls at heightened risk of sexual and physical violence in the home, in their relationships and at school.

The challenges associated with menstruation – the taboos, lack of sanitary products and toilets at schools – can limit girls' freedoms and access to education. Gendered social and cultural norms and behaviours begin to play a significant role in shaping their experiences and can result in child marriage, intimate partner violence and early pregnancy. It can also limit adolescent girls' access to sexual and reproductive health information and services necessary to maintain good health and avoid unintended pregnancies. When adolescent girls experience pregnancy, they are at high risk of maternal and birth related complications – much more so than women over the age of 18.

But with these challenges come enormous opportunities. Investing in education for adolescent girls is life-changing for girls themselves – and the ripple effects it can have on families, communities and economies – at a time when millions of families face poverty in the region – cannot be underestimated. Evidence has also shown that educating girls can strengthen families and communities' climate change resilience – another challenge to our planet that requires our urgent attention.

If we, as individuals, donors and governments can create the conditions for adolescent girls to be educated, those barriers to equality are much easier to break – both for themselves and for future generations.

WHY SECONDARY EDUCATION?

Education is a fundamental right of all children and globally there has been important progress made in increasing girls' enrolment in, and completion of, primary education. While improving the quality of basic education remains crucial we know that primary education is not enough; completing 13 years of schooling is critical to harness education's full power and benefits. Adolescent girls are all too often blocked from completing these 13 years of education.

Global statistics reflect a troubling trend of adolescent girls not continuing with their higher secondary education.¹⁵ It's a startling reminder that as girls move into late adolescence (from ages 15 to 19), the pressure of child marriage, early pregnancy, gender expectations, the preferential treatment of boys' education, the burden of domestic chores, gender-based violence in the home, school, and community, and the lack of access to quality, safe and inclusive education pushes girls out of the school system.

Women with more education report increased earning power and improved standards of living,¹⁶ as well as greater agency and decision-making.¹⁷ Girls who are educated are less likely to be married before they turn 18. Girls who remain in secondary education have fewer children and do so later in life.¹⁸ Education is one of the most powerful ways of improving children's health, nutrition and wellbeing. Educated mothers are better informed about specific diseases, so they can take measures to prevent them. They can recognise signs of illness early, seek advice and act on it.¹⁹

Limited educational opportunities for girls and barriers to completing 12 years of education cost countries **\$15–30 trillion dollars** in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.²⁰

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence that secondary education is truly transformational for girls, adolescent girls are being excluded from secondary education at alarming rates.

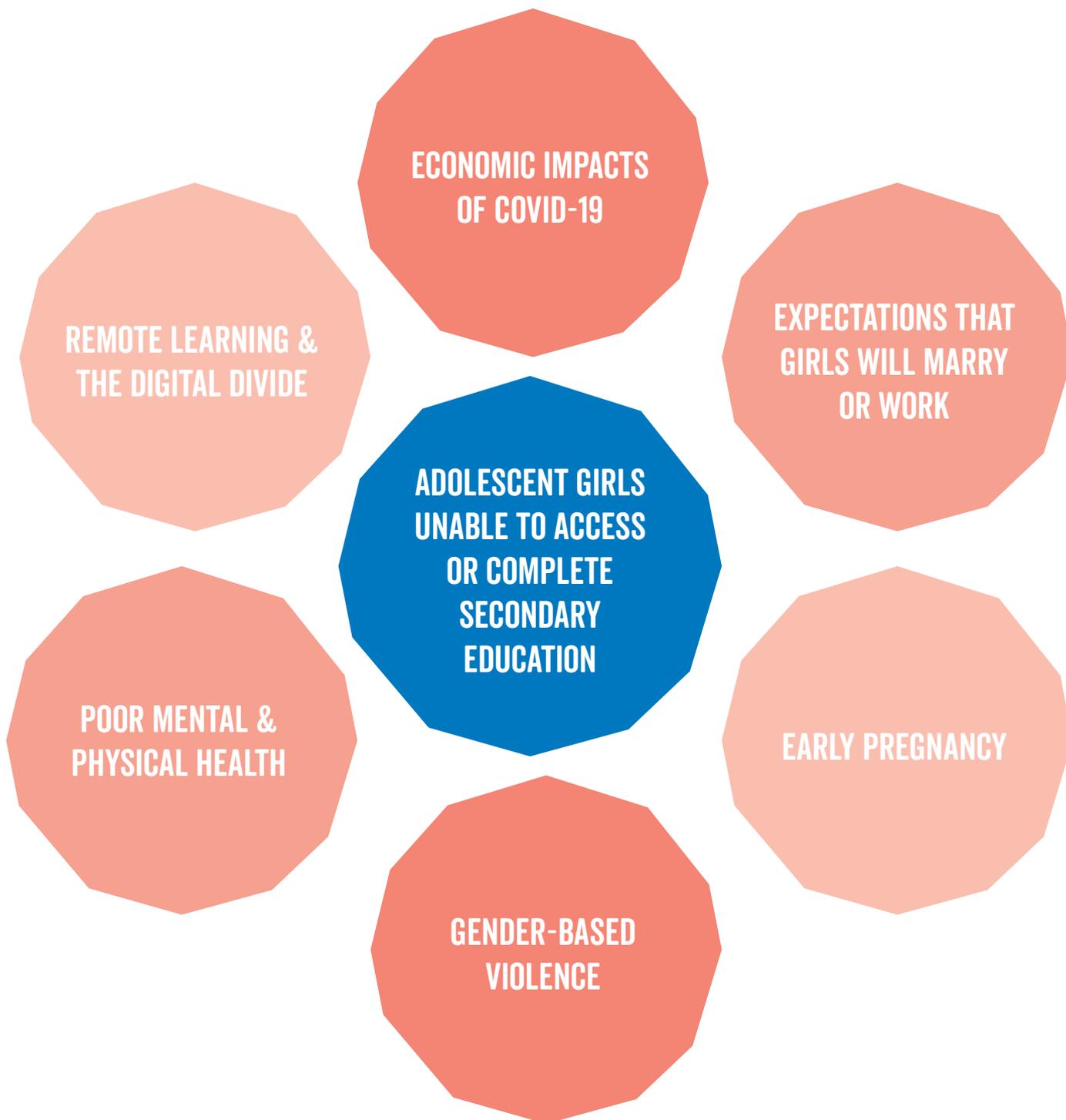
SECONDARY EDUCATION IS A HUMAN RIGHT

The catch cry of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is 'leave no one behind', which makes it all the more important that nations prioritise helping the most marginalised and excluded. The SDGs are a tool to hold governments to account, ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable, such as adolescent girls, are front and centre in government policies and investments. Girls have the right to an education that is **inclusive** and **equitable** in accordance with SDG Four.

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) sets a clear agenda for the achievement of gender equality and non-discrimination for all women and girls. The Convention promotes equal access to education and vocational training at all levels, and the reproductive and health rights of women and girls. CEDAW is a road map for achieving gender equality for adolescent girls.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognises that people under the age of 18 years old need special care and protection that adults do not. It recognises education as a basic right for all, including that all children should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level they can.

Diagram: The barriers to adolescent girls' access to secondary education during COVID-19





THE BARRIERS TO ADOLESCENT GIRLS ACCESSING SECONDARY EDUCATION DURING COVID-19

Maria and Maria studying with new radio in East Nusa Tenggara province in Indonesia

THE IMPACT ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS' MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

“ WE NEED PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT BECAUSE DURING THIS TIME, GIRLS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE UNDERAGE, TEND TO FEEL ANXIOUS OR AFRAID. IT IS COMMON FOR US, TEENAGERS, TO DEVELOP DEPRESSION, PANIC ATTACKS, AND ANXIETY.”

—
N, 16, Rizal, Philippines²¹

Emerging evidence from the region has revealed the deep and widespread emotional and mental health impacts the pandemic and its consequences have had on adolescents. For adolescent girls, the inability to continue schooling and the disconnection from social support networks have detrimentally impacted their emotional and mental well-being. The gendered expectations of families, such as the pressure to discontinue their education and marry, or the exposure to gender-based violence can uniquely impact on girls' psychosocial well-being. Conversely, the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic on girls have made it more difficult for girls to continue with their education remotely or to return to school as schools reopen.

The girls we spoke to in both urban and rural parts of Indonesia told us that the decline in their emotional and mental well-being made it significantly more difficult to engage in learning. Girls spoke of the stress and pressure of learning from home with limited internet and poor learning materials as well as the

pressure of preparing for exams with a disrupted curriculum. They also spoke of the sense of isolation that came with not being able to see their friends and socialise at school, and their difficulties in completing assignments without friends to bounce ideas or troubleshoot particular tasks.

In Vietnam, girls spoke of their worries not only in remaining engaged in their current learning, but also their fears for their futures and specifically their ability to be employed if their learning levels are not sufficient.

Girls in Indonesia spoke of the incredible stress they have been under, but also the opportunity for self-growth and as described by one workshop participant “learning how to handle emotions”. Further, girls and young women in Kiribati indicated there has been an increase in alcohol usage and in violence among adolescents since the pandemic, due to boredom from dropping out of school and a lack of activities to replace it with. They also spoke to the disappointment felt by those who have worked hard during a year of disrupted education to attain the marks they needed in order to attain a scholarship; only to have those dreams dashed due to border closures, meaning they cannot take up those scholarships for further education in places such as Australia and New Zealand.

A recent survey by Plan International Philippines of 1200 girls, aged 15 to 24, found that 42% of girls felt sadness at their situation and 49% were worried by the slim chances of returning to school.²² The survey found the girls were most worried about the health of the families (68%) and the length of quarantine (53%). For girls, issues of depression, anxiety, well-being and resiliency may also be linked to other protection issues, such as prolonged exposure to violence in the home or fears of being forced into early marriage.²³

The mental health impacts for girls of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression during COVID-19 is significant, with evidence of high rates of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety and suicide, aggravated by situations of stress, family harassment, ill-health, and confinement.²⁴

In the Pacific, three in five adolescent girls responding to the Pacific Girls Speak Out: COVID-19 survey say they are sometimes, quite often or always anxious or stressed because of COVID-19 and four in five respondents say they feel lonely because of COVID-19.²⁵ Girls in the Pacific also noted that they were particularly affected by the loss of school networks and peer support resulting in increased loneliness and anxiety.²⁶ Returning to school after the lockdown period also had mental health implications with Pacific girls describing how the pressure to fast-track their learning to prepare for exams has been overwhelming.²⁷



Shem, 18, Philippines

THE YOUTH ADVOCATE RAISING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Like many young people, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a huge strain on 18-year-old Shem's mental health. The social isolation, loss of routine and breakdown in formal and informal support has had a negative impact on millions of young people's lives, leaving many struggling to cope.

"Mentally and emotionally, I find it hard dealing with stress and the changes in my mood," says Shem from the Philippines, adding: "The quarantine and other measures implemented to curb the spread of the virus, changed my life tremendously."

A large part of Shem's time is usually spent at school taking part in student council activities where she serves as vice-president. She also had a stint leading her school's 'Lusog-Isip ng Kabataan' (LINK) club, a student body that trains adolescents to become effective mental health advocates.

Without her usual routine, Shem admits that dealing with the emotional stress brought by the pandemic has been difficult. "I'm the type of girl who is very extroverted. I always want to be outside and so this pandemic has really changed my lifestyle," she says.

Shem is also aware of the financial impact of the health crisis. Her father, a security guard and the sole income earner in the family lost his job for almost two months during the pandemic.

"I'm the only girl in the family and I'm the youngest, I want to help my parents financially, but I can't because I'm too young and my parents disapprove of the idea," she says. "I do really want to have a job to help my parents with our financial need."

Shem says that many people her age share the same sentiment and are also struggling to cope with this unprecedented situation. Turning to social media to deal with the boredom and isolation of the lockdown, Shem decided to use the platform to raise awareness about mental health issues and help to reduce the stigma that people often experience.

"There's a need to push for mental health awareness nowadays, especially now that we are dealing with a pandemic, something that is relatively new to us. Now that most of us are using social media, youth and parents alike, we can use these platforms to raise awareness on this issue that concerns young people," she says.

THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING REMOTELY - TEACHING CURRICULUM AND FAMILY SUPPORT

“SOMETIMES I STUDY TO PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SCHOOL YEAR OR MAYBE SLEEP BECAUSE I’VE BEEN USING MY PHONE TOO MUCH, WHICH IS NOT VERY GOOD FOR MY HEALTH.”

-
Chelzy, 13, Rizal, Philippines²⁸

Girls experienced major challenges in continuing their secondary education as schools closed down across the region. In Indonesia, schools in particular zones continue to be closed while in many parts of the Pacific schools reopened after several weeks. However, all girls we spoke to noted that school closures and remote learning had been a major disruption to them.

The main issues faced by girls and young women when learning remotely has been changes to the curriculum, inconsistency in engaging teaching styles and abilities, the difficulty to maintain concentration and motivation and a lack of support.

For instance, girls in Vietnam noted the disruption in the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education, with some schools not delivering these lessons remotely. Students who are engaged in lessons that require special equipment noted how their learning in subjects such as Biology and Chemistry has been severely hampered by not having access to a laboratory and hands-on teaching and learning.

Girls in Indonesia spoke strongly about an increased workload with little to no support. They spoke of assignments given outside of lessons; being given many more tasks to complete than usual, with too many concurrent deadlines due to a lack of scheduling and collaboration between teachers; and difficulties in understanding the teaching materials or tasks with fewer explanations from their teachers. It made it difficult to complete assignments all of which left them feeling demotivated and worried about failing or being left behind in class.

They also spoke of how there have been different systems for remote delivery in each school, for example with some using Zoom, some just a WhatsApp group, or some requiring students to come to school once a week to get their tasks and submit last week’s tasks, with no support in between. The latter has especially been the case in areas with bad or no internet connection.

“I AM NOT HAPPY BECAUSE I COULD NOT MEET FRIENDS, TEACHERS. I DID NOT GET COMPREHENSIVE KNOWLEDGE ON THE SUBJECTS AND IT HAS MADE MY RANK DROPPED. IT IS VERY BORING, I DON’T HAVE ENOUGH STUDY TIME BECAUSE OF MANY HOMEWORKS. I’M ALSO UNHAPPY BECAUSE I’M AT HOME ALL THE TIME.”

-
Annora, Indonesia

The challenge of remaining engaged was also raised, with girls mentioning ‘zoom fatigue’ and a difficulty in maintaining motivation without the social aspect of school to balance out the day. The level of self-directed learning required for studying from home was noted as a challenge for many, with girls from rural Indonesia highlighting their boredom at studying alone, unable to exchange ideas with peers or access support from teachers.

Girls in Indonesia also spoke of how some parents have struggled to understand the technology used for remote learning, impeding their ability to provide support.

Girls in Vietnam mentioned how this can be compounded when family members are illiterate; especially when they are without access to teachers and friends for support like they have at school.

Further, girls in both countries spoke about the additional stresses families and parents and guardians have been under due to the global pandemic, meaning they have been less emotionally available as well as having less time to help with their children’s learning. This difficult home environment has not been conducive to learning, with household conflict being a source of stress for girls and young women – including being acutely aware that their remote learning has been an added factor in that stress.

Remote learning has also been made more difficult by the increased burden of caring for siblings and domestic chores, which disproportionately sits with girls over boys.

In the Pacific, the burden of care, including unpaid domestic labour, has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic with women and girls caring for children who are home from school, as well as older, unemployed or migrating relatives.²⁹ For example, in Tuvalu and Solomon Islands it is reported that women and girls are caring for and feeding relatives who have migrated back to rural areas as a result of government restrictions or losing their jobs.³⁰

The Pacific Girl webinar on adolescent girls and COVID-19 (hosted by Pacific Women and held on 15 October 2020) discussed how adolescent girls have taken on a higher burden of care than male siblings at home during the pandemic and how this has limited time for schoolwork and socialising with friends. Girls reported they are looking after younger siblings who are not at school and undertaking more household chores.³¹ One in six girls responding to the Pacific Girls Speak Out: COVID-19 survey stated they cannot do their schoolwork as they have to work to help support their family. Three in five indicated they sometimes or always look after younger children in their families and communities.³²

THE VALUE OF REMOTE LEARNING

Alongside the challenges of remote learning, girls and young women spoke to us about the things they have appreciated; these lessons can serve to inform aspects of learning to take forward beyond the pandemic.

Girls in Indonesia spoke of how online learning has inspired them to learn new things beyond their curriculum, as well as furthering their own interests and talents by taking online classes and tutorials available from any number of online course providers.

They also appreciated the ability to upskill in a range of different technologies and online tools.

Girls in Indonesia and Vietnam noted that it was possible to be more focused and productive with their school hours, to then have more time to spend on other things; that remote learning enabled flexible learning, where they could dictate how many and which hours to spend on studying. Those in positive home environments also enjoyed being able to spend more time with family.

“ Covid-19 has affected 271 million people in Indonesia and that affects all sectors of human life. What a sign of certainty when everyone can live a normal life as before? When the pandemic occurred in 2020 when I was in grade 12, starting from a two-week holiday until now when I have become a freshman in college, there is no certainty when we will meet face to face with friends that I have never met before.

As students of course with the pandemic, we have to study from home, and the hardest part of online schooling is the emotional aspect. It can get lonely, and I really miss the little interactions in class, having lunch together can make my day really enjoyable.

But for me this pandemic also has its advantages, by studying from home I get a lot of new activities and knowledge. I participate in many activities, I also try many things such as being a moderator at a webinar, speaking at several events. By studying from a home where I feel comfortable makes me more productive. I have a lot of time for myself, allowing me to better understand what I want for my future.”

-
Difon, 17, Indonesia

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO THE INTERNET AND TECHNOLOGY

“ WE WERE GIVEN MANY ONLINE ASSIGNMENTS THAT SHOULD BE COMPLETED BY USING CELLPHONES; PARENTS HAD TO MAKE MONEY IN ORDER TO PROVIDE DEVICES FOR THEIR CHILDREN TO LEARN FROM HOME AND FINISH THEIR ASSIGNMENTS.”

–
Nur, Indonesia

COVID-19 has highlighted the stark inequities in adolescent girls' access to and use of digital technology, and how this impacts girls' ability to learn. Girls told us how crucial access to technology and the internet is in enabling and empowering them to learn, stay connected and have their voices heard.

Adolescent girls in Indonesia, who have spent much of the year schooling remotely, have been significantly impacted by the limited internet access. Girls that we spoke to in Indonesia told us about how difficult it has been to learn online when the internet connection is unstable or due to the financial barriers of data costs and the related quotas that everyone in the household has to work within, as well as a lack of devices available in the family home. Parents were also hesitant to give children their phones and devices due to assumptions that children were playing games instead of learning.

In South Asia 88% (449 million) and in East Asia and the Pacific 32% (183 million) school-aged children are unconnected to the internet at home.³³ UNICEF estimates that in South East Asia region, 20% of girls – 40 million in total – were not reached by distance learning delivered online or through TV or radio, due to the lack of devices and/or policies geared towards their needs.³⁴

In the Pacific, high poverty rates and limited telecommunications infrastructure has meant that access to the internet and devices such as smartphones and computers are often unaffordable and limited for families, but in particular adolescent girls. In the recent report, Online Safety in the Pacific, parents and children in Kiribati, PNG and the Solomon Islands identified financial challenges as the key reason why they were unable to purchase devices or maintain data plans.³⁵

Though internet access in cities is growing with the recent roll out of the Coral Sea Cable connecting Sydney to Port Moresby and Honiara, overall, mobile internet penetration in the Pacific is the lowest in the world with just 38% of the region's population estimated to have access.³⁶

One in four adolescent girls responding to the Pacific Girls Speak Out: COVID-19 survey reported that they were unable to do their schoolwork as they did not have access to online learning.³⁷ Some students had access to a mobile phone or television, but students in rural areas only had access to a radio.³⁸

Adolescent girls in the Pacific also reported being more affected by school closures than boys as a result of having less access to electronic devices and to the internet.³⁹

This unequal access to the internet and technology is a recurring theme in our discussions with adolescent girls. Such inequalities have arisen from long held gender stereotypes and gendered social norms that influence girls' role and status at all levels of society, impacting significantly on their ability to access and use technology.

Evidence suggests that when a family buys a computer it is often intended for boys rather than for girls because families see boys as being more likely to have a future career in Information and Communications Technology (ICT).⁴⁰

In households with only one phone, it is common for the phone to be owned and controlled by male family members, limiting girls' ability to access learning.⁴¹



An, 18, uses sign language to speak to the Minister of Education and Culture, Indonesia during COVID-19 consultation

LEARNING REMOTELY FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES

Adolescent girls with disabilities who have complex learning needs, or those in poorer households and in remote regions are not able to access online lessons due to not having internet access at home, or accessible computers/laptops. Girls with disabilities in Indonesia reported a lack of support, internet access, and accessible software and learning materials to learn during the pandemic.⁴³

Research by the Australia-Indonesia Disability Research and Advocacy Network (AIDRAN) revealed that children with disabilities face problems with internet connection and being able to purchase enough data to enable online learning as well as finding a learning space that is conducive to learning. Deaf and blind students also encountered additional challenges with inaccessible materials or the unavailability of sign language interpreter support.⁴⁴ Girls also faced difficulties if the teacher aids, basic education support and assistive technology they relied on were only available at school.⁴⁵ These challenges place learning during the pandemic out of reach for so many adolescent girls with disabilities.

An, 18, and Novel, 17, from Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, both have hearing impairments.

“I have trouble doing school assignments at home,” says An, who usually attends a school for children with special needs. Being deaf, she is unable to speak to her teachers online and so she is struggling to complete her online assignments.

“In my class, there are about 10 children with different disabilities. Some are visually impaired, physically or intellectually challenged, and some children have hearing impairments like me. However, not all the teachers know sign language, so most of the time we are only given assignments in school,” says An who explains that she prefers being able to meet with her teachers and friends face-to-face. Girls with disabilities experienced significant barriers to accessing education prior to the pandemic, with some estimating that only 1-2% of girls with disabilities in low income countries are literate.⁴² School closures, the shift to remote learning and learning online has posed significant challenges for adolescent girls in the South East Asia and Pacific regions.



Myanmar's young leaders step up to help and protect one another during the pandemic, taking a stand against violence.

Plan International Myanmar has launched a virtual youth-led education and protection campaign together with UNICEF. The first of its kind, this campaign is spear-headed by 125 young leaders, with over 700 of their peers, in Mandalay Region and Kachin State to raise awareness about COVID-19 and to promote reporting pathways for child protection and gender-based violence issues during this time of increased isolation.

INCREASED RISK OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (BOTH ONLINE AND OFFLINE)

“I THINK GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN SHOULD BE ASSURED THAT EVERY WOMAN IS SAFE DURING THE PANDEMIC AND THAT THEY CAN CONTACT SOMEONE IF THEY ARE MOLESTED OR VIOLATED BY SOMEONE THEY LIVE WITH.”

—
Angela, 17, Tagaytay, Philippines⁴⁶

With learning shifting from schools to adolescent girls' homes and online over the last 12 months, the impacts of gender-based violence in families and on the internet has had very real consequences for girls' lives and their ability to participate in education.

The experience of online and offline violence can contribute to low self-esteem and depression, anxiety and fear of harm, making it more difficult to join classes, concentrate while learning and may drive adolescent girls to drop out of education completely. For example, girls in rural Indonesia spoke to us about how feeling “uncomfortable at home” meant that they found it difficult to concentrate on studying in the home.

With more girls than ever learning online, there is increasing evidence that online gender-based violence has increased. *The Better Normal: girls call for a revolutionary reset* report revealed that girls and young women are at an increased risk of harassment and abuse when learning online, including exposure to harmful content.

Girls and young women in Kiribati that we spoke to indicated they have been at risk of increased violence due to the global pandemic.

Plan International's recent [State of the Worlds' Girls 2020: Free to be online?](#) report detailed the extent of abuse and harassment that girls experienced online. The findings reveal a deep and pervasive form of gender-based violence that families, communities, schools and social media platforms are not well equipped to deal with and that has a significant impact on girls' well-being and their ability to learn online.

The report (which surveyed more than 14,000 girls in 31 countries before and during the pandemic) found that 58% of girls and young women surveyed had been harassed and abused online. Girls were targeted because of their intersecting identities – more than a third of girls from an ethnic minority who suffered abuse said they were targeted because of their race or ethnicity, while 42% of those who identify as LGBTIQ+ said they were harassed because of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Online safety is a key reason why girls are not allowed to use phones or the internet. The *Online Safety in the Pacific* report revealed that the fear of online harm for girls is much higher than for boys and the common response from parents is to block girls' access to the internet. Such measures create the conditions that make it difficult for adolescent girls to engage in learning online.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also sharply increased the risk and incidences of gender-based violence in the home. Globally, 243 million women and girls between the ages of 15-49 have experienced sexual or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner over the last 12 months, including more than 37% of all women in South Asia and 40% in South-East Asia.⁴⁷

While data collection in South-East Asia and the Pacific will require time, an indicator of the heightened risk is the increase in calls to domestic violence helplines. In Bangladesh, a study revealed that beatings by parents or guardians had increased by 42%, calls to the child helpline rose by 40%, and 50% of those interviewed said the safety and security of girls was an issue in lockdown.⁴⁸

Similar emerging data from the Pacific shows that since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls, and particularly domestic violence,

has intensified.⁴⁹ Two in five adolescent girls who responded to the Pacific Girls Speak Out survey say they feel unsafe at home and/or unsafe with their intimate partner at times, with stress associated with school performance, family members losing income and excessive drinking of family and community members identified as contributing factors.⁵⁰

Half of the adolescent girls that responded to the survey say they sometimes feel unsafe online but there is limited further detail. Pacific Women suggests this is an area requiring further attention.⁵¹ The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat also highlighted that exposure to increased risk of gender-based violence for adolescent girls was evident as social protection structures breakdown.⁵²

Vulnerable adolescents also face specific, gendered risks in the Pacific. For example, the high levels of sexual violence and isolation experienced by girls with disabilities are likely to be exacerbated by closed support services and social-isolation.⁵³ Young people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIEs) in the Pacific are also likely to face high rates of domestic violence from intimate partners and family members as they may be forced to isolate in homes which are hostile.⁵⁴

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT – INDONESIA

On 2 March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Indonesia. As of February 2021, there have been 1,099,687 reported COVID-19 infections and 30,581 people had died. This makes Indonesia one of the most affected countries in the region.⁵⁵

School closures have forced more than 68 million young Indonesians out of their classrooms.⁵⁶

In March 2020, schools moved to distance learning, but a lack of supporting infrastructure and educational resources have inhibited the learning of many students in their homes. As of December 2020, schools had been allowed to reopen for face-to-face classes in low/moderate risk areas only.⁵⁷ It is feared that the prolonged school closure will have long term impacts on girls' learning and the future of education in Indonesia.

World Bank data suggests that many children cannot access online learning at home in Indonesia, either because some areas lack adequate internet connectivity or because not everyone can afford to pay for it. While 92% of households surveyed owned a television and 95% of households had a mobile phone, only 10% had a computer. Only 5% of households surveyed reported internet connectivity, which is essential to access online learning.⁵⁸

Plan International Indonesia hosted a consultation with girls and boys aged in October 2020 with the Ministry of Education, where children reported how they had difficulties in accessing the internet, which affected their learning and final mark. Some described how they had to climb a hill or a tree in order to access the internet. Others found the one-way communication from teachers to students and the large number of tasks with no assistance difficult. Some girls and boys also reported that they did not have enough devices in their family for all the children with lessons all scheduled at the same time.

Evidence to date suggests that COVID-19 has led to an increase in child, early and forced marriage in Indonesia. School closures and subsequent risk of school drop-out together with the economic pressure on households is thought to be linked with the significant spike in child marriage applications observed in Indonesia in 2020.⁵⁹

There has been an increase of 250% in applications to marry an underage child since 2012.

By June 2020, 24,000 applications for permission to marry underage had been lodged with district and religious courts – more than two and a half times the total number for the whole of 2012.⁶⁰ The estimated 33,000 child marriages in 2020, runs against the overall downward trend seen over the past years in Indonesia.⁶¹ This trend was confirmed in a Policy Corner event hosted by Plan International in January 2021 where it was noted that in West Nusa Tenggara province, child marriage and marriage dispensation requests had increased significantly during the pandemic.⁶²

With one in four households experiencing a reduction in income as a result of the pandemic children will be forced into income generating activities. The ten provinces in Indonesia with the highest child labour figures are also now the locations with the highest number of COVID-19 cases.⁶³ Save the Children Indonesia has estimated that more than 30% of children aged 10 to 17 years (10 million children) will be forced to work with parents, increasing the likelihood of school dropout.⁶⁴



Mehndi decorative designs are traditionally applied to brides hands, Nepal.

ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION IS NOT A PRIORITY FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

“ FAMILIES SEE GIRLS AS AN ASSET TO BE MARRIED OR PUT TO WORK. WE MUST EDUCATE FAMILIES AND SOCIETY AS A WHOLE SO THAT THEY CAN SUPPORT GIRLS TO PURSUE THEIR DREAMS.”

-
Mike Verawati Tangka, Secretary General of Indonesian Women's Coalition (Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia/ KPI).

COVID-19 has placed a spotlight on the gendered norms and expectations that exist to hold girls back and deny them opportunities and choices to pursue their education. Girls aged 15 to 19 are at a crossroads in terms of the trajectory of their lives. It is often a time when families make decisions regarding girls' education, marriage and other rights and freedoms. Girls themselves may not see the value of education and may feel the pressure to conform to social and familial expectations to marry or financially support their families.

The girls in Kiribati (where lockdown lasted only three weeks) spoke about how there are many girls who, once out of school, did not want to return – that there has been a lack of awareness raising about their right to education and countering the attractions of not being in school versus the benefits an education can bring.

Girls in Vietnam similarly spoke about the need for greater individual and community-level education on a girl's right to education.

Gendered expectations have also seen girls take on more of the domestic chores and care of siblings.

A participant of Plan International Indonesia's consultation observed the following:

“ IF GIRLS LIKE IT OR NOT THEY HAVE TO HELP WITH COOKING, LOOK AFTER YOUNGER SIBLINGS AND CLEAN UP THE HOUSE. MANY FRIENDS OFTEN COMPLAIN THAT THEY CAN'T COLLECT ASSIGNMENTS DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS AND INDEED DON'T HAVE CELLPHONES.”⁶⁵

The Pacific Girl webinar on adolescent girls and COVID-19 discussed how adolescent girls have taken on a higher burden of care than male siblings at home during the pandemic and how this has limited time for schoolwork and socialising with friends. Girls reported they are looking after younger siblings who are not at school and undertaking more household chores.⁶⁶ One in six girls responding to the Pacific Girls Speak Out: COVID-19 survey stated they cannot do their schoolwork as they have to work to help support their family. Three in five indicated they sometimes or always look after younger children in their families and communities.⁶⁷



17-year-old KC lives in a coastal community in Maguindanao province, Philippines - home to the Teduray ethnic group. KC was married at 15 and had a child at 16. The COVID-19 pandemic made their situation even more difficult. "These trying times pushed me to start dreaming again," KC says. "I want to pursue my education again - but first, I have to provide for my baby."

CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE AND UNIONS

“ [MY DREAM IS THAT] CHILDREN CAN GO TO SCHOOL, CARED FOR WITH CLOTHES AND FOOD, WITHOUT FEAR OF HAVING TO DROP OUT TO WORK ON FIELDS OR GET INTO EARLY MARRIAGE.”

- Girl, 10-14, Viet Nam⁶⁸

The key informants we spoke to, particularly those in Indonesia and the girls themselves flagged that child, early and forced marriage was one of the biggest concerns for adolescent girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, adolescent girls aged 10-14 in remote areas emphasized the importance of universal access to education to eradicate illiteracy, and a need to stop child labour and early marriage that interferes with schooling.⁶⁹

For girls married before the age of 18, being a child bride changes the course of their lives. Girls forced into early marriage are more likely to experience poverty, violence and early pregnancy, threatening their lives and their health. It limits their future prospects, denying them access to education and opportunities to gain skilled employment. Unlike other barriers to education, CEFM is unique to girls in the age group of 10 to 19, though in some instances, younger than 10. Education is a key intervention that can prevent child marriage, so the significant disruption to education in the last twelve months has placed girls at a much higher risk of marriage.

Save the Children estimates that 2.5 million girls are at risk of marriage by 2025, with South Asia being one of the regions most likely to see a rise. Close to 200,000 girls have been identified as at risk of child marriage in the first year of the pandemic and 956,000 within five years in South Asia.⁷⁰ In India, Childline, a children's helpline, has reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage of girls in June and July this year compared to 2019. The reasons for the increase in child marriage in India included not only financial difficulties and wanting a secure future for their daughters but also minimising the cost of weddings. Parents are usually expected to pay for big weddings and COVID-19 restrictions have limited the size of weddings, making them cheaper and easier to arrange.⁷¹ In a World Vision study carried out in Bangladesh, 67% [eight out of 12] children and young people said that "child marriage is an issue that they had heard about or were worried about more than before the onset of COVID-19."⁷² As noted above in the Indonesia country snap shot, the analysis of marriage dispensations in the region demonstrates a steady rise over the last twelve months.

Over the last decade South East Asia has seen progress in addressing child marriage, with legislation and community-based initiatives in countries such as Bangladesh and Indonesia tackling the issue at every level. The deep and long-term economic consequences of the pandemic driving millions in the region into poverty, alongside the significant disruption to learning and the gendered social norms and inequalities, has led to a surge in CEFM.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Girls in Kiribati spoke about the extreme financial pressure families have been under due to the collapse in the tourism industry as a result of the global pandemic. Secondary education is not fee-free, and so families who relied on this industry for their income have been unable to send their girls back to school.

The economic devastation that the global pandemic has brought about is, without a doubt, one of the most significant challenges to girls being able to continue with or access secondary education in South East Asia and the Pacific regions.

Poverty and financial hardship are deeply connected to many of the barriers that stop adolescent girls from learning. Poverty and financial hardship are key drivers of whether girls are married before they are 18. It drives decisions as to whether girls will work to support their families rather than continue their education or whether girls take on the role of caring for siblings and doing domestic chores while their parents go out to work. It drives girls' access to technology and the internet, with families struggling to meet the costs of devices and the internet. With secondary education being fee-based in so many countries in the region, school fees, the cost of books, uniforms and travel are simply out of reach.

In Vietnam, the impacts of COVID-19 could double the poverty rates. Cambodia's economy faces a similar plight as garment factories have suspended production and export, and tourism declines. Cambodia's loss in revenue generated from its tourism sector alone is estimated to be at around US\$3 billion in 2020.⁷³ The Room to Read Report revealed that 42% of girls interviewed (9,887 girls) said their household had lost income during the pandemic, making the financial impact of COVID-19 the most significant risk to a girl's education.⁷⁴ This included 4,942 girls in India, 1,731 in Bangladesh and 780 girls in Cambodia.

Pacific Islands are seeing sharp declines in income, growth, employment as vital international trade, tourism and labour mobility opportunities are disrupted. Research by ANZ has projected GDP falls across Fiji (-12%), Vanuatu (-13.5%), Cook Islands (-60.4%) and Samoa (-18.7%).⁷⁵ It is estimated that a 20% contraction in economic activity arising from travel and movement restrictions imposed to contain COVID-19 could result in an additional 1.2 million people in the Pacific and Timor-Leste being pushed into extreme poverty, an increase of over 40% on pre-COVID-19 levels.⁷⁶

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT – VIETNAM

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Vietnam on 23 January 2020. The Government moved quickly to put in place regulations to restrict people's mobility and to close schools and non-essential facilities.

From April 2020, Vietnam was one of the first countries in Southeast Asia to ease movement restrictions. In May 2020, schools and educational institutions reopened on the basis of meeting a set of 15 criteria issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), to ensure a safe and healthy return of students and staff.⁷⁷ A second wave occurred in Da Nang in the school holidays (July-August 2020) and preschools were closed in 12 provinces.⁷⁸ In early February 2021, schools were again closed in 22 provinces ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday following a COVID-19 outbreak.⁷⁹

During the period of school closure in Vietnam, nearly 44,000 schools from pre-primary to upper secondary were closed to prevent COVID-19 spread, affecting more than 21 million children.⁸⁰ Analysis by the COVID-19 Social Impact Working Group of the UN notes that COVID-19 may have triggered school drop-outs, as children accompany parents seeking employment opportunities at new locations. Some 3% of surveyed rural households reported they stopped sending children to school due to reduced incomes.⁸¹

“ DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, MY EDUCATION DID NOT CONTINUE BECAUSE I HAD TO SPEND TIME HELPING MY PARENTS' WORK AND LOOKING AFTER MY YOUNGER SIBLING, SO I WAS TIRED AND WENT TO SLEEP AND HAD NO TIME FOR MY STUDY.”

-
(Female, 13 years old, Lung Chinh district, Ha Giang province).⁸²

School closures, along with increased poverty rates, have been assessed as increasing children's vulnerability to human trafficking and early marriage for girls in rural areas of Vietnam. As poverty increases, there is a risk that traffickers may “offer false job opportunities to the most vulnerable.”⁸³ School closures have also limited the engagement with adolescent girls about the implications of leaving school to marry young. Traditionally, these weddings are arranged over the Lunar New Year holiday. Due to both the extension of this holiday with school closures and the impact restrictions have had on organisations' early warning systems, the likelihood of these marriages has increased.⁸⁴

A rapid assessment by the Child Rights Working Group revealed that in some cases, children are having to assist with chores and care for younger siblings, which is impacting on time for schoolwork. In addition, as the COVID-19 lockdown period was also the time for crop cultivation and harvest, children in upland/mountainous areas frequently had to support their parents with this work, meaning they could not spend time on schooling like they did when attending boarding and semi-boarding schools.⁸⁵ The study also noted the risk of children dropping out of school and increased child labour:

“ SOME FRIENDS SPEND TIME SELLING THINGS ONLINE, SO DON'T LEARN THROUGH ZOOM SOFTWARE, BUT JUST LEARN ON THE GOOGLE CLASSROOM TO EARN MONEY TO HELP THEIR PARENTS”

-
(Female, 14 years old, Kinh, Quang Nam province)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

As the world is reimagined and rebuilt after COVID-19, girls have told us that secondary education is their number one priority.

Girls and young women from around the world were unanimous in their agreement that education – including vocational training and tertiary education – is their human right and that everyone should have access to it, with a need to secure equal access for people from minority and vulnerable groups in particular.

They talked about dreaming of a transformed education system; where learning extends beyond the classroom, builds skills relevant to the labour market, with freedom to pursue their passions, and a focus on gaining critical thinking, empathy and emotional intelligence skills. Girls and young women also want to be educated in the issues of the world – from climate change through to Indigenous history – so that they can better understand the ways they can take action as global citizens to help address these complex issues.

Donors and governments must act now. Now is the time to focus on the programs and approaches that will enable girls to return to or, for the first time, access secondary education. Expanding on the girls' recommendations, we have outlined some of the ways this can be achieved.

For this report, we asked girls who took part in our workshops in Indonesia, Vietnam and Kiribati to provide their recommendations for donors and decision-makers to create equal access to quality and inclusive secondary education for all girls.

Our vision: All adolescent girls must be able to complete their education, including being able to return to school if the pandemic has pushed them out of the classroom.

This was the message that the girls we spoke with issued, loud and clear. They want to see gender equality in education; they want schools to be able to 'build back equal'.

In particular they called on donors and decision-makers to invest in initiatives that:

11. Educate girls, families and communities about girls' right to complete 12 years of education, including an end to child, early and forced marriage/unions
12. Bridge the digital divide
13. Provide age-appropriate support for girls' mental health and emotional wellbeing
14. Create more opportunities that enable girls to be leaders
15. Provide girls living with a disability with the same opportunities to access and complete education as all learners
16. Rebuild the education system to promote values-based learning that encourages and teaches diversity and inclusion, respect and care for each other, so that schools are more welcoming environments for all and free from discrimination, gender-based violence and harassment
17. Remove financial barriers to accessing or completing education, and ensure all schools have access to the same level of resources
18. Ensure girls' voices and views are central to decision-making, with school systems and curriculum co-designed with young people and participatory policy making processes
19. Embed comprehensive sexuality education in formal and informal education settings and ensure it is accessible for all children, adolescents and young people
20. Ensure schools are more environmentally-friendly and teach climate change and action

WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO CHALLENGE GENDER NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS

Overwhelmingly, the girls we spoke to and the stakeholders we interviewed highlighted the central role that families and communities play in adolescent girls' ability to access and complete secondary education.

Recognising that change must happen at all levels of society –from the individual, family and community as well as the education system itself – is key to dismantling barriers that stop adolescent girls from being able to learn. Recognising and addressing the root causes that contribute to social norms is also essential.

Recommendations:

Governments and donors recognise and invest in programs that work with children, adolescents, families and communities to challenge existing gendered norms and expectations. This includes programs that promote and strengthen gender equality, such as working with men and boys to challenge gender stereotypes, promoting girls' education and challenging the expectations with respect to child marriage and work.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE

The pandemic has exposed the deep inequity that girls face in accessing technology and the internet in South East Asia and the Pacific. However, it does not need to be this way. The possibilities of digital technology and how it can harness the power of

adolescent girls and connect them to learning as well as social movements, peer networks, support services are boundless.

Recommendations:

Donors and governments must redouble their efforts to ensure that girls have access to digital resources as well as the training, confidence and desire to use them in their every-day lives. This requires ensuring that science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is central to curriculums and training for adolescent girls, both in school and outside of formal school settings.

It is clear from girls' experiences of online learning that internet connectivity and access for girls and their families in many parts of South East Asia and the Pacific is wholly inadequate and must be addressed. This means creating affordable pathways for girls and their families to access the internet – for example through low costs data bundles, waiving of caps and additional fees on data usage or ensuring websites with key educational content can be accessed for free.

Alongside this must be social infrastructure that ensures children, adolescents, families and communities have the tools and information to support children and adolescents to use technology responsibly and protect them from harm.

The Online Safety in the Pacific report provides a comprehensive set of recommendations for creating a safe and supportive environment for children and adolescents to take up these opportunities in the Pacific.



Implemented by Plan International Vietnam in the northern province of Ha Giang, the Keeping Girls in School project improves girls' ability to access secondary education. Often girls from ethnic minorities are unable to make the transition from primary to secondary school due to poor school conditions, gender dynamics and lack of decision-making power.

Many girls are forced to marry young and stay at home to fulfil household duties or work in farms. Up to 43% of girls in communities in Ha Giang drop out after completing primary school. The project will directly benefit 2,126 adolescent girls and 1,900 parents. Up to 25,000 community members will also be reached (indirectly) through the project.

The project encourages girls to attend and stay in school by raising awareness of the benefits of education and promoting gender equality; improving school infrastructure, including constructing girl-friendly latrines and dormitories; establishing girls' clubs and parenting groups to promote positive parenting and gender equality; and developing income generating activities to improve parents' ability to send their daughters to school.

SUPPORT FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

There is little doubt that the devastating impact of the global pandemic on adolescent girls will leave lasting scars on girls' mental and physical health and well-being. Donors and governments must recognise that rebuilding a 'better normal' requires a focus on girls' mental health and the ways it impacts on their learning.

Recommendations:

Donors and governments must invest in adolescent friendly, inclusive and high-quality mental health and counselling services that are accessible to all adolescents in different settings, including educational settings.

Alongside this, donors and governments need to invest in life-skills programs that focus on psychosocial support for adolescent girls and can be built into community-based protection, health or youth economic empowerment programs or take place in formal and non-formal education settings. Life-skills programs can cover socio-emotional learning, protection, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), menstrual hygiene management (MHM), nutrition and financial skills.

FOSTERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' LEADERSHIP AND VOICE

Girls are our next generation of women leaders. If the world is serious about achieving gender equality across public, private and political spheres, we must provide opportunities for adolescent girls in all their diversities to have their voices heard and be part of decision making. There is growing evidence that communities, businesses and economies reap the benefits of women and girls actively taking part in leadership and decision making at all levels. Adolescent girls, when given the tools, the opportunities and the confidence to lead, can be powerful agents of social and political change.

Recommendations:

Donors and governments recognise adolescent girls as key stakeholders who should be consulted and engaged with, particularly in the context of this report, in transforming education systems to ensure equitable and inclusive access.

Secondary education and informal learning networks (such as girls clubs) can provide girls with opportunities to learn leadership skills, such as decision making and negotiation, equip girls with the knowledge that allows them to confidently express their views, negotiate power dynamics and influence and motivate others. Working with girls to strengthen their voices is crucial.

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Girls have told us the ways in which learning and education systems can be transformed after COVID-19. A recent joint report, *Building Back Equal: Girls' back to school guide* provides a comprehensive road map for supporting girls to return to education as well as reforming education systems. Some of the recommendations from the joint report are outlined below.

Recommendations: Donors and governments must invest in programs and education reforms that:

- Strengthen inclusive education systems to ensure that all children with disabilities, including girls, access quality education by supporting the development of inclusive education sector plans that budget for inclusion, monitoring progress through data disaggregation, ensuring inclusion in emergencies and protracted crises, and recommitting to the full delivery of SDG4 for every child.
- Invest in gender-transformative, inclusive curriculum and teaching practices, and support women in education workforces
- Embed comprehensive sexuality education into curriculums that are age appropriate and inclusive
- Address the financial barriers associated with secondary schooling, adopting policies and practices that address the costs of school fees, learning resources and travel to and from school
- Ensure every girl receives gender-transformative green learning as a key climate change strategy.



View and Poppy are students at a school in Thailand's Chiang Rai, an area prone to earthquakes, landslides, flash floods, forest fire, droughts and air pollution. To increase children's awareness of disasters and build their knowledge in using digital technology to create climate solutions, Plan International has developed a program to promote innovation learning for disaster risk reduction.

Integrated into STEM lessons at three schools in the province, the project aims to inspire all children to participate in the digital world, with a particular focus on girls and those from disadvantaged groups. Innovation learning encourages children to apply scientific knowledge and process to solve problems using tech solutions including micro:bit computers.



An Eco Club meeting in progress. Credit: Plan International / Vivek Singh

"Climate Friendly Schools in Environmentally Sensitive Communities" was set up by Plan International India in 40 locations across Vikarabad District in Telengana, India, especially focusing on the most marginalised and excluded communities, and continues to this day. The goal of the project is to create model schools where children learn about the environment in their local context and how they can engage in climate action by making their communities resilient as well as standing up for their own rights.

The approach recognises children as future leaders and the generation that will face extreme challenges of climate change. The project through a carefully designed curriculum – which includes reading material, group discussions and creative workshops – educates, equips and enables children to understand what climate change means to their communities and what they can do to stop its advance.

"Given girls are most disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change – particularly in disadvantaged communities, the project is specifically designed to include and be led by them," says Abhilash. "While boys are traditionally seen as

financial assets, girls are considered liabilities in many communities. When families are short of income, it is girls that are most likely to be pulled out of school as parents struggle to pay their fees. Girls are also most likely to be forced into labour to support family income or married off by parents to reduce their financial burden of feeding all members of the family."

The project places girls at the heart of climate action. Groups of children – mostly adolescent girls, have been mobilised into eco-clubs in schools and communities across Vikarabad district. They learn about climate change and environmental protection measures, and discuss ways to take action and engage their families and communities in saving their local habitat.

From broader concepts of global warming, to climate action measures such as renewable energy, effective waste management and innovative farming practices, the knowledge and skills given to children and young people in Eco Clubs is transforming them into eco-champions. About 1200 children, mostly adolescent girls, have been trained as change agents on climate change across 40 schools and 40 communities. Additionally, more than 5000 children from 40 schools have been informed and educated about climate change adaptation.

Vishnupriya, 14, on the other hand, is raring to start a movement for collective action. "There is just too much pollution in my town, and I want to put a stop to it. We girls, who are part of the Eco Club, have done rallies in our community, installed garbage bins and spoken to elders in the community about the harmful effects of climate change and environmental pollution. Climate change affects everyone – but it affects girls the most. Yet, at the same time, if girls are given the power and means to stop the advance of climate change, we will do it. Girls are naturally more resilient and better understand how our environment is linked to our lives," she says.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA'S AID AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Australia's response to the COVID-19 crisis in our region as outlined in the Australian Government's Partnerships for Recovery — Australia's COVID-19 Development Response recognises that education is central to maintaining stability and promoting economic recovery in the Indo-Pacific region.

"We will support countries to maintain healthy and educated populations that are food and water secure and resilient to threats such as climate change. With education affected in 177 countries, 1.3 billion children are or have been out of school. In many low and middle-income countries, it may be hard for them to return, affecting national human capital, social cohesion and prospects for recovery."

The Partnerships for Recovery policy also affirms Australia's strong commitment to enhancing gender equality and prioritising the needs of those most marginalised, including women and girls and people with disabilities to promote social cohesion and stability.

Plan International's report highlights the ways in which the right to complete secondary education is shifting further out of reach for millions of adolescent girls in South East Asia and the Pacific as education systems are disrupted and families and communities descend into poverty and hardship.

The new [Education Financing Watch](#) report, launched by the World Bank and UNESCO in February 2021, shows that two thirds of low and lower-middle-income countries have cut their public education budgets since the onset of the pandemic.

Recommendations:

- **Australia increase its investment in education aid in the May 2021 budget by reinvesting the regional scholarships fund of \$66m into education aid - with a focus on initiatives that will strengthen secondary education systems and address barriers that have pushed girls out of school during the pandemic.**
- **The Australian Government rebuild its standing as a leading bilateral donor to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), committing to a replenishment of \$70m in the May 2021 budget.**

Australia's investment in education aid is well below the 20% OECD average. With education being central to the region's recovery efforts, it requires a significant commitment in the aid budget over both the short term and long term. With the restrictions on travel likely to last for the foreseeable, there is a strong argument for directing the regional scholarship budget towards initiatives that support girls returning to school in the region. In the 2020-21, 66.6m was earmarked for regional scholarships which could be committed to education aid in the short term and used to reach a broader group of vulnerable girls who are out of school.

With a growing number of Pacific countries partnering with the GPE (Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Tonga joined in 2020) and long-standing partners Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, Australia's support for GPE is more critical than ever before. GPE is the largest global fund solely dedicated to transforming education systems in lower-income countries as well as incentivising policy reform through funding. With the newly established Girls' Accelerator Fund and a clear strategic commitment to gender equality in education, GPE's work in the South East Asia and Pacific regions will have a significant impact in returning girls to school in the region.

- **The new Pacific Women Lead program (currently being redesigned) include both a stand-alone adolescent girls program with a focus on secondary education as well as mainstreaming adolescent girls across the new program.**

The new Pacific Women Lead proposal has a notable lack of emphasis on the adolescent girls. Building on the success of Pacific Girl, it is crucial that the new program include a program dedicated to adolescent girls. The effectiveness of the regional program would be significantly improved if it adopted a long term, generational approach that recognised the intersection between age, gender and diversity.

- **Australia play a leading role in advocating for and supporting countries in the region to prioritise education as a key component of COVID-19 response and recovery through its bilateral partnerships.**

With the emerging evidence that education budgets are being cut in lower and low to middle income countries, Australia's bilateral partnerships and engagement are an important part of ensuring that education and getting girls back to school remains a priority. This could include supporting government efforts to adopt fee free education policies that extend to secondary education, eliminating gap fees at all levels of education and strengthening psycho-social supports within education settings.

CONCLUSION

We now stand at the twelve-month anniversary of the first of the lockdowns that swept the globe as countries struggled to contain COVID-19. The pandemic has threatened to undo the years of progress and hard-won gains we've made for development, gender equality and girls' access to inclusive and quality education. We can no longer afford to wait on getting adolescent girls back to school.

If donors and governments invest in dismantling the barriers to secondary education that have been magnified and exacerbated by COVID-19, then we can positively transform the lives of girls. We can boost the economic growth and social cohesion that is needed to power the COVID-19 recovery in our region. Donors and governments in our region have a unique opportunity to kick start progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and build a better normal – where every girl grows up with equality, justice and full access to her rights.

The incredible news is that girls are already leading this change. In their homes, their classrooms, their communities and their countries, girls are taking on power structures, demanding an education, challenging harmful practices and proving that they can do anything. Education is everything. It is the quickest path to achieving an equal world for all children. By making sure every girl has the opportunity to go to – and complete – school, this is the world you are helping us create. A world where girls in all of their diversities are given choices for their futures and opportunities that can change their lives.

METHODOLOGY

Globally, within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (and beyond), there is a growing call to listen more carefully to what adolescents have to say; both about what it would mean to achieve their potential and how to get there, by determining what support and interventions they believe would be most effective in enhancing contextualised adolescent development trajectories.

The two research questions that we posed in our workshops with girls were:

1. What were the barriers that adolescent girls experienced in accessing learning and secondary education in the South East Asia and Pacific regions in the 12 months since COVID-19 lockdowns?
2. What are girls' recommendations for addressing the barriers to secondary education and how can education be transformed and rebuilt after COVID-19?

Workshop

Four qualitative workshops were held with 55 adolescent girls and young women (aged 15-24) in Vietnam (online), Indonesia (one urban, online workshop and one rural in-person workshop) and Kiribati (online). These workshops extended upon the Appreciative Inquiry approach used in the Better Normal research study. Participants explored the challenges and appreciations of studying from home via a mind mapping activity, to then dream of a transformed education system via a guided imagery. Finally, they collectively identified and prioritised their solutions for change. Several of the participants self-selected to write case studies for this report, to co-author the girls' foreword, and to join the influencing and advocacy team to connect with stakeholders.

Desk review and situational analysis

A literature review was undertaken which provided data from the last twelve months on barriers to girls education since COVID-19 including secondary education statistics, child and early forced marriage, gender based violence, child labour, mental health impacts and access to online learning. The desk review included other surveys of adolescent girls in the region during COVID-19, which were included in the report to strengthen the voice of girls.

Key informant interviews

Six interviews were conducted with Plan International staff and stakeholders in the Philippines, Timor Leste, Indonesia and the Pacific to provide a stakeholder perspective on the current impacts of COVID-19 on adolescent girls in country.

Research limitations

With respect to the data, the research was limited by the fact that official statistics with respect to enrolments and other data had not been updated for the period of COVID-19. This meant the desk review captured what official data was available but largely captured other research from UN organisations, NGOs and girls themselves. The workshops were conducted online and remotely with the in country research team and Australian research team and the full value of face to face consultation and multiple workshops was not possible within the time-frame and given the travel restrictions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the adolescent girls and young women across Indonesia, Vietnam and Kiribati who gave up their time to participate in the workshops, as well as writing their stories, co-authoring the foreword and participating in various communications and influencing opportunities. Thanks also to the team coordinators – Aditya, Novita, Phuong Anh and Loleina – who brought them together and co-facilitated the workshops, as well as translating findings.

Thanks to Plan International colleagues in Australia, Global Hub and across the Asia Pacific region that developed, translated and distributed the online survey. We would also like to acknowledge the stakeholders who participated in interviews including staff from Plan International Timor Leste, Plan International Philippines, Plan International Indonesia, Mike Verawati Tangka, Secretary General of Indonesian Women’s Coalition (Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia/ KPI) and Rasita Ekawati Purba, Monitoring Evaluation Research Learning (MERL) INOVASI Program,

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Cover Image Caption:

Sari, 12, is able to learn from home due to a radio supplied by Plan International Indonesia

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