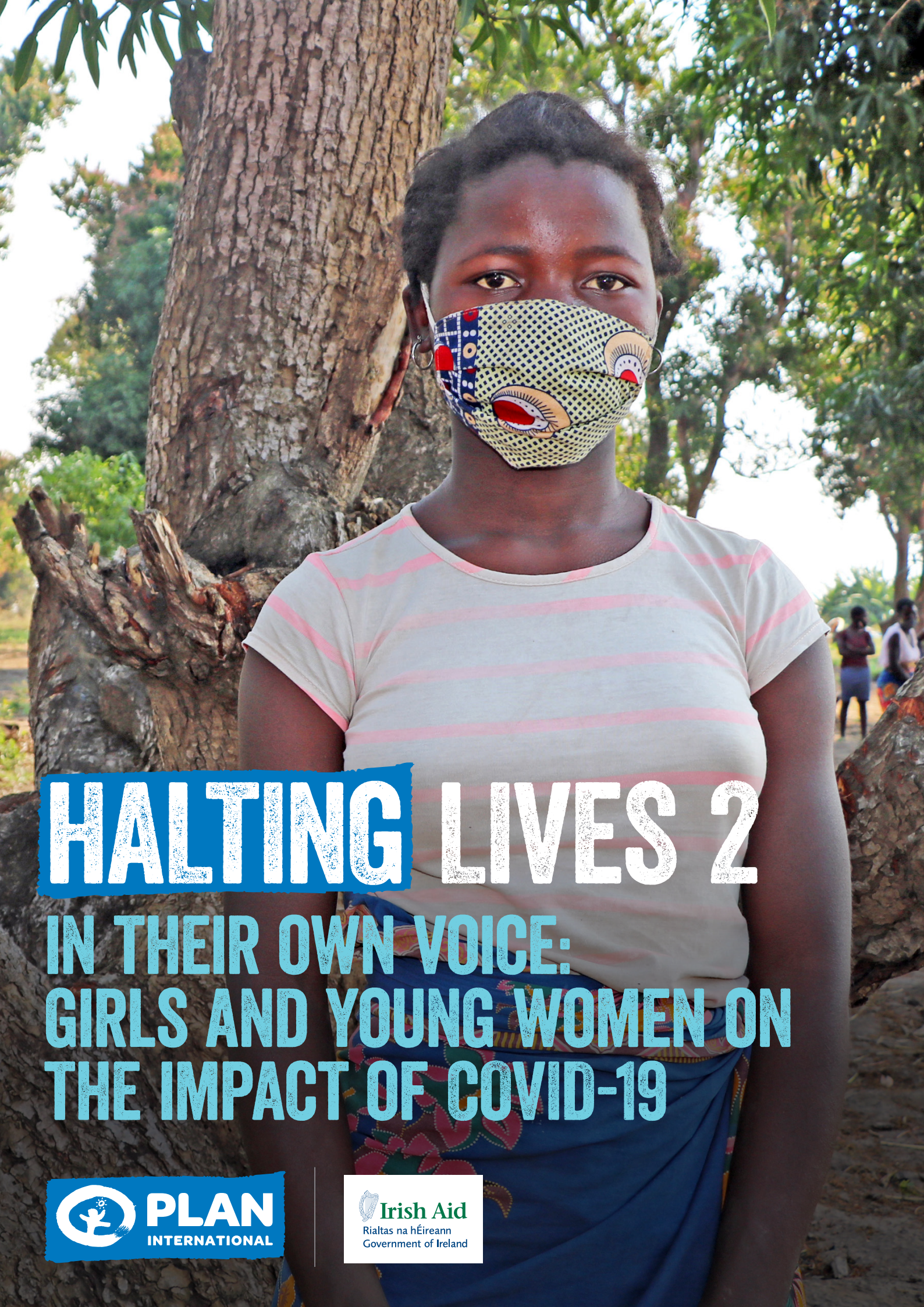

HALTING LIVES 2

IN THEIR OWN VOICE: GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Irish Aid
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

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A young Ethiopian girl washes her hands frequently to prevent COVID-19.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last year Plan International has been conducting research into the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of girls and young women.

This current study took place, with three sets of data collection, between July 2020 and January 2021. It accompanies an earlier survey, *Halting Lives: The Impact of COVID-19 on Girls and Young Women*, carried out in June and July 2020, with 7000 respondents across 14 countries and involves in depth interviews with 74 girls and young women, aged 15-24, across the same 14 countries. The research tracks their experiences of COVID-19 and supplements the statistical analysis with a more granular understanding of the particular impact of the pandemic on girls and young women. What has emerged as the major challenges in girls' lives? How do they view the future? What measures need to be put in place to make sure that their lives and opportunities will not be irreparably damaged? The pandemic exacerbates pre-existing inequalities which makes girls and young women particularly vulnerable: the research reveals resilience but overwhelmingly it charts the negative effects of this year of COVID-19 on all aspects of their lives.

> "I learned I am not great at studying and coping with stress. I know it's been a horrible year for my mental health and it was already horrible going into quarantine, but it's just been going downhill."
>
> **CLARA, 16, UNITED STATES**

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Education, mental health and family income emerged as key overlapping concerns.

EDUCATION

Issues with remote learning in terms of access to technology, lack of space to study at home and schools and colleges themselves struggling to adjust were frequently discussed. As were the difficulties many were finding with being able to concentrate and focus when learning from home. Loneliness and domestic responsibilities also interfered with girls' and young women's ability to cope with distance learning.

MENTAL HEALTH

Stress and anxiety were mentioned by the majority of the respondents. They missed their friends, they felt they were failing to keep up with their school or college work, they worried about their friends and family catching the virus and they were anxious about money and the future.

LIVELIHOODS

Family members losing their jobs meant concerns about money for food, education and many of life's basic necessities and often caused family tensions which added to the mental health problems many were experiencing.

> "I hardly eat, there are days when I feel like I'm under pressure, I don't know how to explain it, but it's a pretty hard sadness, quite strong."
>
> **ANA, 16, NICARAGUA**

GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN FELT THAT ADOLESCENCE WAS A CRUCIAL TIME FOR THEM AND THAT THE PANDEMIC, AND THE MEASURES TAKEN TO CURTAIL IT, WAS PARTICULARLY HARD ON THE YOUNG.

NEXT STEPS

> “The goals have not changed but since the learning has been disturbed by COVID-19 most of my friends who have dropped out of school have been telling me to also stop going to school. But I am determined to continue so that I live a better life in future.”
>
> **AUDRE, 16, ZAMBIA**

The determination to pursue their dreams, despite the pandemic, was expressed by many of the respondents. To do this they will need support and this means funding and political will from international organisations and national governments and from authorities everywhere, who must:

- **Ensure** that all families have an adequate income and basic necessities, including food supplies and essential medicines.
- **Provide** counselling and increase mental health services, recognising the **psychological impact of the pandemic, particularly on girls and young women**.
- **Recognise** that the impact of the pandemic will fall differently according to **age and gender** and plan and invest accordingly, particularly in education.
- **Prioritise** learning continuity during school closures and take measures, including investing in appropriate both high-tech and low-tech, affordable and gender-responsive distance education methods.
- **Engage** with families, communities, leaders, school teams, children and young people to **identify gender norms** that impede education, and help to construct alternative, positive ones. Ensuring that **girls return to school** once they re-open must be a priority.
- **Continue** to support **gender equality** and drive toward the **Sustainable Development Goals**.

A 17-year-old girl in Nicaragua is staying at home to avoid catching COVID-19.

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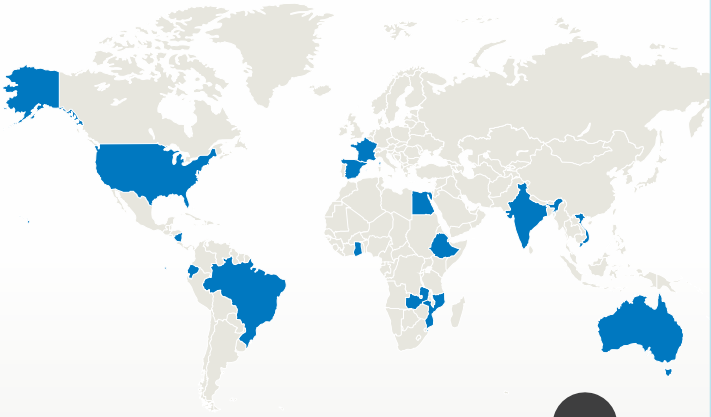
INTRODUCTION

This report is the second part of *Halting Lives: The Impact of COVID-19 on Girls and Young Women* research series.

The first report was released in September 2020, utilising quantitative research methodologies to conduct, a primarily online, closed-question survey with over 7000 girls and young women aged 15-24 from 14 countries. The initial research study asked questions about girls' and young women's knowledge and experience of thematic areas such as education, wellbeing, economic security, livelihoods, and access to technology in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. This second, qualitative study,[1] conducted in the same countries, builds on the earlier research and offers a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the challenges facing girls and young women and their changing experiences as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. Together the two pieces of research will give a deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on girls and young women. And this understanding will help build a future that fosters equality and protects girls' rights.



PART ONE: QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

INVOLVING **7 000** GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

BETWEEN **15-24** YEARS OLD

IN **14** COUNTRIES

SETTING THE SCENE

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was formally notified about a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan City, home to 11 million people and the cultural and economic hub of central China. The cause of the severe acute respiratory syndrome that became known as COVID-19 was a novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak a worldwide public health emergency. Over a year later, only a handful of countries remain unaffected by the virus,[2] with 128,377922 confirmed cases and 2,806,679 global deaths.[3] Many countries are currently experiencing a third period of lockdown and, despite the vaccine roll out, cases remain high. Last year, modelling predicted that the overall COVID-19 pandemic was expected to last for a period of at least 12 to 18 months.[4] In April 2021, at time of writing, with a third lockdown and a third wave of the pandemic across the world, this prediction seems optimistic. It now looks as if COVID-19, in some shape or form, may be with us for very much longer than that and it is very clear that the outbreak of this virus has implications that reach far beyond the direct impact on peoples' physical health.

COVID-19 is having an effect on all sectors of society across the world. But its impact does not fall equally: the virus itself does not discriminate between rich and poor, young and old, male and female but it does take advantage of pre-existing inequalities which over the last year have come sharply into focus.[5] With this in mind, Plan International, in line with its continuing focus on gender equality and girls' rights, commissioned research to look specifically at the impact of the current pandemic on girls and young women, collecting data in: Australia(I), Brazil(I), Ecuador(I), Egypt(P), Ethiopia(K), Ghana(P), India(I), Mozambique(K), Nicaragua(I), Spain(I), United States(I), France(I), Vietnam(I), and Zambia(K).[6]

This large quantitative survey involving 7000 respondents, was followed by a series of interviews with seventy-four young women across the same 14 countries. These in-depth conversations with each interviewee were conducted three times between July 2020, and January 2021 in order to drill down into the changing nature of girls' and young women's experiences. A year into the pandemic what has emerged as the major challenge in their lives? How do they view the future? What measures need to be put in place to safeguard girls and young women as we all navigate out of this crisis and how do we make sure that their future lives and opportunities will not be irreparably damaged?

WHY GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN?

Over the past year, as the world has sought desperately to deal both with the medical impacts of the virus and to prepare a response to its many secondary effects, research on COVID-19 has accelerated. However, there is limited research on the social impacts of COVID-19 and on the consequences for young people, especially those specific to girls. Adolescence, particularly mid to late adolescence (15-19 years), when numerous overlapping transitions can define and limit their potential, is a critical period for all young people. For girls and young women, in many countries across the world, it is a time when they are particularly at risk: decisions are often made for them that are detrimental to their future, and the expectations and opportunities, for girls, in all their diversity, diverge considerably from their male peers.[7] In later adolescence decisions are often being made for girls about their education, marriage and career paths. The burden of household responsibilities grows heavier and their freedoms may well be curtailed in line with gendered expectations about female behaviour and girls' vulnerability to sexual violence. A global pandemic which pulls girls out of school and has a detrimental impact on family income can only make matters worse.

The longer it goes on the impact, on a generation whose education and development has been so severely affected, will become increasingly severe. There are concerns, also, for the mental health of young people and young women in particular who report anxiety and depression.[8] The girls and young women we spoke to were very open about the toll on their mental health but also demonstrated a determination to persevere, whatever difficulties they encountered:

> "I think that the main thing about a person who has goals in their life is to try to break down those small obstacles because deep down we know that we can achieve it despite the situations and that if at some point you fall you have to learn to get up alone, go ahead and don't let the situation affect you or your dreams."

PEQUE,15, ECUADOR

Despite this determined optimism it remains true that the scale of the pandemic affects girls and young women in all aspects of their daily lives: their safety, wellbeing, education, economic security, health, nutrition and access to technology. All pre-existing inequalities are made worse by COVID-19.[9] Its impact on girls and young women, who face unique vulnerabilities, needs to be acknowledged and it is their experiences and perspectives this research seeks to understand.

A school teacher in Mozambique writes on a classroom blackboard.
©Plan International

FINDINGS

Findings are discussed in relation to twelve overarching themes:

1. LIFE AND WELL-BEING
2. AWARENESS OF THE VIRUS/PANDEMIC
3. MEASURES TO DEAL WITH THE PANDEMIC: PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MADE CONTAINMENT MEASURES MORE DIFFICULT
4. EDUCATION: LEARNING FROM HOME/ RETURNING TO SCHOOL
5. WORRY, STRESS, ANXIETY AND SUPPORT TO COPE
6. CONTACT AND COMMUNICATION
7. RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY AND HOW THEY ARE COPING
8. HEALTH
9. INCOME AND LIVELIHOODS
10. ACCESS TO INFORMATION
11. AWARENESS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE VACCINE
12. THE FUTURE – BOTH PERSONAL AND GENERAL

Some themes – awareness of virus/ pandemic, awareness and perceptions of the vaccine, life and well-being, health, income and livelihoods, access to information and personal circumstances that made containment measures more difficult – were only explored in one data collection round. The remaining thematic areas were included in either two or all rounds of data collection and are discussed chronologically.

1. LIFE AND WELL-BEING

> I also felt it becoming worse in many ways, because we all know that it's not always possible to have a good mental health when you're not able to go out, see people and have physical contact. It makes me very sad because I was always a very social person and now staying at home with only two people is not easy at all.

RITA, 18, BRAZIL

In the first round of interviews girls and young women were asked about the overall impact of COVID-19 on their lives and general wellbeing. Their answers centred around three over-arching themes: **education, health, especially mental health, and household incomes** and these themes were followed up again in the later rounds of interviews. Education and mental health, in particular, were the issues that girls and young women came back to again and again throughout the research process and these themes are explored in greater depth in subsequent interviews. Overwhelmingly, the girls and young women outlined the negative effects of the pandemic on their lives. Sara, aged 15, from the United States spoke for many when she said: **"I don't know. I just feel like I'm just not as happy as I was before."**

IN THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY ONLY

5% OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN SURVEYED

SAID THAT THE **PANDEMIC HAD CAUSED ONLY POSITIVE EFFECTS** IN THEIR LIVES[10]

In terms of education many girls and young women talked about how hard it is to communicate and concentrate and how their sense of failure leads in turn to a lack of motivation.

Young girls are worried about the rising number of COVID-19 cases in Nicaragua.
©Plan International

> We study by internet and we communicate with the teachers by telephone, by emails, by WhatsApp. It is highly important to know when and where to add a phone top-up to be able to communicate and avoid failing the year ... I did not even want to leave my room because if I do not have a job how can I continue at the university, and later I failed a class because I could not contact the teacher to receive an email ... failing a class for me is not the best, I felt I was drowning in a glass of water ...

MARGARITA,18, NICARAGUA

Girls and young women missed their friends, found studying from home difficult in terms of space, access to the internet and sometimes too many household chores:

> Even now in Ecuador there is a macho society, where girls, no matter how young they are, have to do housework and are forced to do these things and put their education aside. They say: you already lost the school year so it is better that you do things around the house, help out, and so they do not study any more. I have heard that on several occasions.

GABY, 17, ECUADOR

The experience is however not all negative. Some participants, most notably in the United States and Australia, felt that the new grading systems worked to their advantage, that they had better school/life balance and there were fewer distractions.

> I think it's because I have more time to do stuff. I mean, I think it is harder to learn online, but I really do feel like there's less distractions right now. And if I'm just home alone, I know I can just do it by myself really quickly and get everything done and then I'll be fine.
>
> **MICHAELA, 17, UNITED STATES**

The impact of the pandemic on family incomes was considerable which in turn contributed to the anxiety and stress many were experiencing. In many cases the family's main earner had lost their jobs or had their hours reduced.

> I think it affected all the families, it also affected me because my sister was fired from her job and she was also a fundamental support for the family, my dad stopped working too, and since they were not working, obviously, nobody could go out, only to the hospitals and I think it affected us a lot, but also thanks to the blessing and the help of the Municipality and of foundations that brought food and distributed food baskets, we only have to spend money on vegetables, some fruit or things like that.
>
> **SHAZA, 17, ECUADOR**

Not being able to feed your family, a particular worry in Mozambique, India and Ecuador leads, as one respondent in India pointed out, to family tensions: "Some of my family members also lost their employment opportunities. Or, there has been decrease in their salaries ... I think, their stress has been put on the other family members ... I think, women who actually do the household activities or care for the older ones and also ill people, they are being really affected. Their mental health is affected. Because, men actually try to speak with anger ... they speak furiously to women. I think their mental health is disturbed."

What emerges from the discussions about well-being is that mental health is at the core of the pandemic's impact on girls' and young women's lives: the inability to attend school means they miss their friends and fear for their future as they struggle to adapt to online education, the lack of money means a rise in family tensions and again they worry about the lost opportunities which loss of income results in; they worry about their health being compromised by lockdown and about catching the virus.

> But now, after COVID-19 pandemic, I started experiencing anxiety, or worry and fear, including fear of transmission of COVID-19, or fear of what it takes or what it means to undergo medical treatment for this.
>
> **AVANI, 18, INDIA**

There is no area of life that is stress free and it is quite clear that the resilience of the young is being tested. It is however a tribute to their strength that, in many countries, respondents did feel they had learned from the pandemic: they were grateful for the things they did have, they felt closer to friends and family, they talked about new hobbies and online opportunities and an increase in self-confidence – in their ability to survive.

> I think the most positive change that the pandemic brings to us is that, we have more time for reflection of ourselves, our life: we can see that health is an important thing. And we don't just run too fast, and we have to look back about our personal life, what is the most important thing.
>
> **NGUYET, 23, VIETNAM**

> I thought about that a lot and I feel like it really did give positive change. I know my friends and everyone's so much more educated on things like this. And I feel like we'd be more prepared in the future. Just thinking about the positive parts of the virus. It's offered me so many more opportunities to learn and grow like with virtual internships, things like that. I don't know. After the virus everyone's like, "Oh, it's cancelled," but then new things came up. I got to do so many coding things. And honestly the pandemic made me realise how much I liked the tech industry.
>
> **SARA, 15, UNITED STATES**

2. AWARENESS OF THE VIRUS/ PANDEMIC

> I know the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in China last year and spread within China to the rest of the world. And COVID-19, can cause respiratory infections ... And sometimes it may lead to deaths, and this disease can spread from person to person, through the droplets.
>
> **MI, 22, VIETNAM**

A PASEWAY project participant in Ethiopia receives a hygiene kit.
©Plan International

> Yes, of course, I know about the pandemic; in fact, when it started, I had friends who were on exchange in China and when it (the pandemic) arrived in Spain they came back, and they warned us about what could happen.
>
> **LUNA, 22, SPAIN**

In the first round of interviews the girls and young women were almost all aware of COVID-19 and the fact that it was a global pandemic. Only one research participant said she was not aware of the virus, but still provided a basic overview which meant that she did in fact have some understanding of what was happening.

IN THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY ...

32% OF GIRLS SAID THEY KNEW A LOT ABOUT THE PANDEMIC

41% OF GIRLS SAID THEY KNEW SOMETHING ABOUT THE PANDEMIC

25% OF GIRLS SAID THEY KNEW A LITTLE ABOUT THE PANDEMIC[11]

Most of the research participants were aware of how it had taken hold in their countries and of the local context: some did discuss how it affected other countries and how widespread it was. The girls and young women predominantly spoke of COVID-19 in terms of its impact on people's lives, rather than about the nature of the virus, or the status of the pandemic more generally. There was limited scientific discussion, but a handful of participants – including girls from Vietnam, Ghana and Zambia – gave detailed descriptions of the virus' origins as well as a range of symptoms of the disease.

> The virus are small, small organisms. And when they enter into your system, it may damage the body. And then they said that the virus can pass through our eyes, our ears and our mouth. Even sometimes, it may pass through our hands. And so, we are educated to wash our hands so that it prevents them from entering our body."
>
> **DEDE, 17, GHANA**

The girls and young women provided comprehensive insights into the effect of the virus on many aspects of daily life. They spoke of the effect of the pandemic on education, about missing opportunities, about jobs and economic insecurity, lockdowns and their related measures including a lack of clear government guidance and the general public not adhering to restrictions. They also talked about increases in gender-based violence and child abuse, their health and access to healthcare, food insecurity and panic buying. Many of the effects they spoke about were interrogated in more detail during the later interviews and these findings are presented throughout this report.

3. MEASURES DEALING WITH THE PANDEMIC

> When the measures were first put in place, they were challenging but now we are used to them. It was difficult to wear face masks and observe social distance but we now able to observe these measures.
>
> **IANDISA, 17, ZAMBIA**

In each of the three rounds of interviews, the girls and young women were asked questions relating to the government measures put in place to deal with the pandemic: how they experienced them and what had changed since the previous round of interviews.

83% OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

IN THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY SAID THAT GOVERNMENT VIRUS CONTAINMENT MEASURES HAD CAUSED EITHER A MAJOR OR A MODERATE CHANGE TO THEIR LIVES[12]

In the first round of interviews (July-August 2020) there were three main groupings of measures discussed by the girls and young women:

1. **CLOSURES OF INSTITUTIONS AND FACILITIES (SCHOOLS, PLACES OF WORK, SHOPS ETC)**
2. **LOCKDOWNS, STAY AT HOME ORDERS AND CURFEWS**
3. **HYGIENE MEASURES (FACEMASKS, SANITIZING AND SOCIAL-DISTANCING).**

An Indian woman washes her hands before collecting food rations in Delhi.
©Plan International

At this point in the study there was nothing to compare the measures to, but the girls and women discussed an array of difficulties that they experienced as a result of them. They specifically criticised unclear messaging from governments about how to deal with the pandemic, and the confusion that caused, juxtaposed with criticism of the general public for failing to adhere to government measures.

> Like, in each state, there are different guidelines ... they are saying you can come in it, there is no need of anything. But in certain states, they are saying we need a pass if you want to come in. So you must have your pass. In another state they are saying you must have your pass, sanitizer, your mask, your COVID-19 report. So, there is no clarity between guidelines. In one state there is nothing. But in another, there are a lot of things that you need to fulfil.
>
> **PINKY, 16, INDIA**

They also called out the direct effects of some of the measures: a police presence in some territories, difficulties acquiring masks or hand sanitiser because of costs, panic-buying, having to resort to alternative learning methods, boredom and loneliness at having to stay at home, and difficulties in breathing with masks on.

> “I think that the police presence on the streets when you weren’t doing anything, but riding your bike or whatever, was a little bit of a thing, and I think that’s what affected me the most.”
>
> **VERA, 18, SPAIN**

During the second round of data collecting restrictions had been lifted in some places and confusion increased. Respondents thought that many people had started being careless.

> “Some things have opened here, and are back to normal hours, such as bars, restaurants and shops, and people are not worried anymore. I have asked them if they have found the cure to Covid-19. People walk around with no masks, and think that because things are opened, we can already go out normally. I feel insecure to leave my house because people are not taking care of themselves.”
>
> **MARIELE, 18, BRAZIL**

What became clear over the three rounds of data collection is that the girls and young women started off by mostly being critical and frustrated by the measures taken by governments to deal with the pandemic. Over time, however, the criticism and frustration seemed largely to give way to a level of acceptance and an increasing ability to adapt to the measures. In the final round of data collection, the response from one young woman from Zambia sums this up: “No difficulties because I am now used to the new normal.”

Another important point is that the measures around education were the ones that the girls and young women really focused on, together with hygiene measures, specifically the use of facemasks. The latter in particular seemed to reach high levels of acceptance by round three of data collection. Despite becoming “used to the new normal” girls and young women still made constant references to how the measures adversely effected their mental health.

> “At first I said, ‘Online school is really easy.’ I still think it’s really easy, but it has definitely ... It has a really huge toll on my mental health. Especially this year with college stuff. It’s really, really bad. Because I feel like I’m not learning anything, but I don’t really necessarily think it’s the teachers’ fault ... I’m just so used to being inside that I kind of like staying in here, which I feel like is really bad. Because I used to be really, I would say, extroverted, but now I’ve turned very introverted.”
>
> **MICHAELA, 17, UNITED STATES**

A girl, 19, uses a bucket to carry home water from one of the newly installed water points in Mozambique.

©Plan International

Youth volunteers conduct door-to-door awareness raising campaigns in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
©Plan International

PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MADE CONTAINMENT MEASURES MORE DIFFICULT

> “Adolescents have not been thought of at all in the matter of quarantine, isolation and all that, and that has been noticed, and we have been left out.”
>
> **MARINA, 17, SPAIN**

In round one research participants were also asked whether they believed that their experience of the government protection measures was made in any way more difficult by personal characteristics such as gender, age, migrant status, if they identify as a member of the LBGTIQA+ community or other intersectional characteristics. The overwhelming majority of girls and young women did not identify as having intersectional characteristics that may have affected the way they experienced the protection measures. The research participants who did discuss personal characteristics having an impact on the experience of protection measures, often did so by speaking generally rather than personally.

Age was the most commonly discussed characteristic judged to have had an impact on the experience of government safety measures. Comments were made by a small number of girls in relation to adolescence being a time of development and for socialising with friends, making limitations on freedom such as curfews or lockdown measures more difficult to adjust to. One girl, from Spain, specifically mentioned a lack of consideration of adolescents within the development of government lockdown measures and two girls from Australia believed young people were being unduly blamed or incorrectly perceived as not following government protection measures.

> “... I think the lockdowns were definitely more difficult, because at the start of the lockdowns I was like this flourishing young person that just wanted to go out and explore the city and do cool things, so that was a bit tough. And then also the targeting on young people, because I felt as if we were being outed to the community as being a problem and that was a bit more difficult to deal with.”
>
> **AMIE, 17, AUSTRALIA**

A young girl wears a face mask to fill water containers in Vietnam.
©Plan International

There was a strong sense that COVID-19 had come down hardest on the young: their futures as well as their present lives jeopardised by the virus and perhaps even more by the measures in place to contain it:

> A lot of the people I see not social distancing are middle aged people ... A lot of middle-aged people, especially upper middle-class middle-aged people, the people I am surrounded by, who still have jobs, stable income ... they are just working from home now. Whereas we are thinking about the fact that, you know, our travel plans, our jobs in the future, our ability to study overseas, live by ourselves, have any sort of part time job during uni ... of course we are aware of it, like we aren't ignoring everything, we aren't completely ignorant. It is affecting us more than anyone ...
>
> **JANET, 18, AUSTRALIA**

Gender was also mentioned as having an effect on the impact of containment measures. Reasons cited were: inequitable food distribution, pressure to go and look for food, gender-based violence, pressure for those acting as primary caregivers, increased household chores and responsibilities, and difficulties dealing with hormones and menstruation during lockdown.

> Due to gender gap, I become more involved in the house work compared to previous time, the work load is huge.
>
> **ZEINEB, 17, ETHIOPIA**

Three girls, from Egypt, India and Vietnam felt that men and boys, who pre-pandemic had more freedom, were struggling harder with lockdown measures. Others mentioned that low-income families had the hardest time and yet others felt that ethnic minority communities were targeted with more rigid enforcement measures and that racism had increased.

> My best friend of 10 years, she is Chinese, she is already being completely racially discriminated against ... and now, you get the go back to where you came from, the Chinese virus ... 100% amplified because of COVID. One of her experiences was her walking down the street with a mask on, and someone shouted out of their car ... stop eating bats ... with a bit more swearing that I don't want to say.
>
> **MAX, 16, AUSTRALIA**

One young woman in France felt that in terms of enforcing lockdown rules: "some communities were much more stigmatised than others, I realised that there was a difference in treatment depending on how we were seen by the media, by the politicians in place and by the police."

Illness, disability, and education status were mentioned by a very few number of girls and the impact of LGBTIQA+ identities on the experience of lockdown was noted by one young woman from Australia:

> I think a lot of my friends who were queer and had to go home to their parents, they're not out to them, it's not the same environment they found at college ... And so, you'd been thrown initially into that lovely environment where you're surrounded by people with your identity, and then you're forced to go back home to your really, really religious parents, and I think a couple of my friends have struggled with that.
>
> **JENNI, 18, AUSTRALIA**

The impact of the virus has been felt by everyone. However, age and gender does make a difference to how both your daily life and your future are affected. Listening to the concerns of girls and young women and to their particular struggles keeps the focus on ensuring an equitable build back, not the setback to gender equality that many are anticipating.

> I think that, with regard to girls, they have been one of the most affected sectors. I believe in gender equality, in access to quality education, in their right to education, in their reproductive rights, and in all their rights.
>
> **GABY, 17, ECUADOR**

Students wear face masks to return to the classroom in Ghana.
©Plan International

4. EDUCATION

> When I used to go to school, I learn and don't stay idle so I wasn't forgetful. Now, all we do is stay at home and do house chores so our mind is affected.
>
> **TSEDEY, 16, ETHIOPIA**

For the girls and young women who participated in the study, education was one of two critical issues that they mentioned throughout the course of the research. It was identified in the first round of the study, almost unanimously, as one of the issues most affected by the pandemic and was revisited in interview rounds two and three in order to assess any changes over time.

> What worries me the most is whether I will be able to complete my education since schools are closed.
>
> **IANDISA, 17, ZAMBIA**

In round one most girls and young women highlighted the difficulties of remote learning which were both practical – lack of internet access, no mobile phone or lack of data, home environment too busy and distracting – and more psychological problems which included loneliness, feeling they were unsupported and falling behind and losing confidence.

> I worry about school. For us who are in examination classes, we are no longer learning the way we used to learn before COVID 19. At the moment, we are learning for a short period of time compared to before. This may lead to pupils not passing the examinations.
>
> **AUDRE, 16, ZAMBIA**

Overall, the girls and young women felt that face to face learning was the optimal way to be taught. They have adapted to alternative ways of learning, but continue to find them problematic.

> I am really invested in school, I took it so emotionally and personally because I invest most of my time in it and I love being at school because it is such a privilege to get an education, and I just felt that was being stripped of me being in that environment with people who support me and people that I love to talk to ... I felt quite angry and just a little bit lost.
>
> **AMIE, 17, AUSTRALIA**

In interview rounds two and three questions about education were structured around four specific themes:

1. **LEARNING FROM HOME**
2. **HOW GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN PERCEIVED THE SUPPORT THEY RECEIVED FROM SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS**
3. **WHAT THEY THOUGHT ABOUT THE ALTERNATIVE TEACHING METHODS THE PANDEMIC HAD IMPOSED ON THEM**
4. **HOW THEY COPED WITH THE RETURN TO SCHOOL**

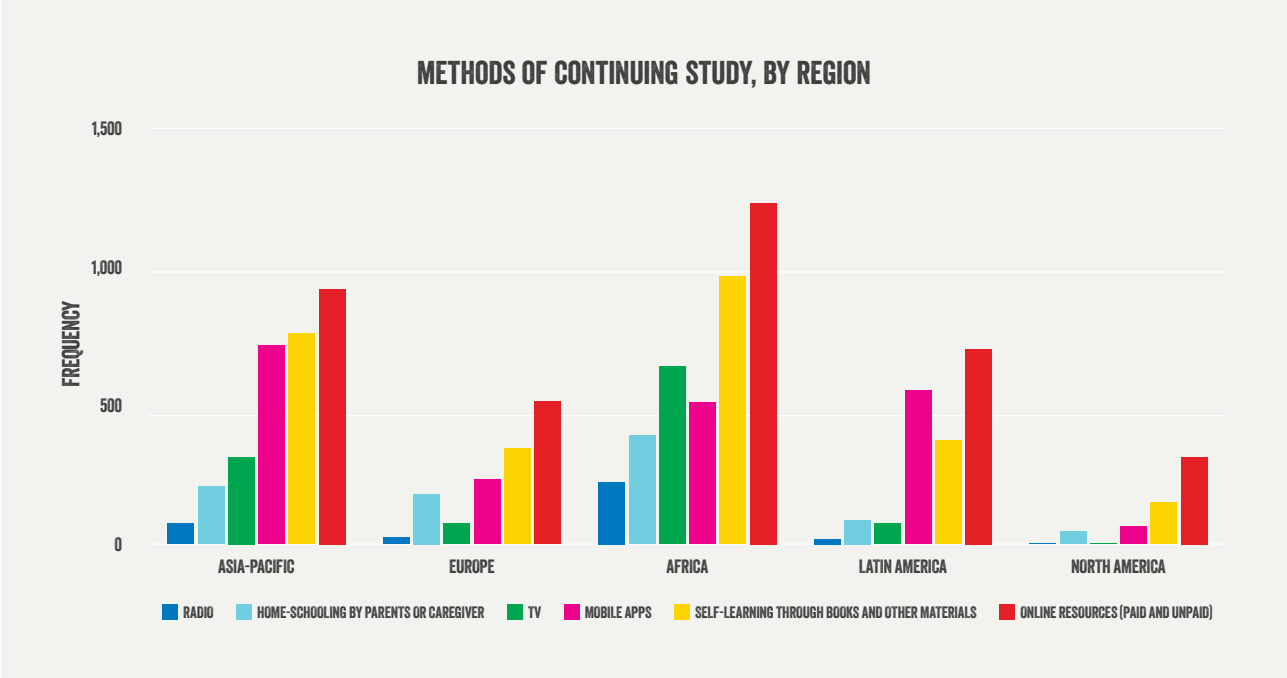
4.1 LEARNING FROM HOME

> My home is too busy and noisy. I am not able to follow the classes.
>
> **BARBARA, 16, BRAZIL**

Learning from home, however it was attempted, was not at all popular and virtually all the participants felt they were falling behind. Many discussed having little space, too many noisy siblings, being easily distracted by online apps and social media and in some cases not having enough time to study.

> I don't think I am learning properly from home. As the classes are not adequate to replace the formal class ... I feel like I'm falling behind even if I am allowed the time to study at home.
>
> **ZEINEB, 17, ETHIOPIA**

HALTING LIVES: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN – WAYS GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN WERE ABLE TO CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION AT HOME, N=12,387[13]



Then there was the issue of technology and internet access – raised multiple times before – which they either experienced themselves, or which they knew some of their classmates were struggling with, as well as system errors in digitally loading or accessing assignments.

> The most difficult thing is the lack of internet ... I used to use the neighbour's internet, but I don't know what happened and she cut off the internet even when my mother was helping her to pay the cost.
>
> **EMILY, 17, ECUADOR**

> Well, if I'm being honest, it's a lot harder to just keep track of everything, especially if the system isn't working and then all of a sudden you notice something that wasn't there before like an assignment that just didn't load up when you first checked your work to do or just not being able to write out an assignment, but having to type it out.
>
> **MARY, 17, UNITED STATES**

Many students also talked about not having money for data, or phones and other costs related to online learning. Finally, not having anyone who could help explain concepts or lessons and not having the opportunity to ask questions were also factors that militated against learning from home.

> It is not the same, at school we have a more practical approach and we can ask questions, in the online classes we have little opportunity to ask questions and the teachers only give the lesson and do not clarify our doubts.
>
> **BARBARA, 16, BRAZIL**

Some respondent did have a more positive take on home schooling. These tended to be those who had some private study space and/or family support with the work itself.

> I can study at home; with dedication and time it is possible. I have help from my mother and brother. My mom does everything to give me three hours of time to help me with some subjects. When I can't do anything related to studies, she helps me.
>
> **LUANA, 16, MOZAMBIQUE**

A 17-year-old teenager in Nicaragua is now studying at home.
©Plan International

4.2 SUPPORT FROM TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

Despite recognising that some teachers had been supportive and helpful during the time that they spent learning from home, the majority sentiment was that there was a lot of room for improvement: schools and teachers were not supportive enough and, in many cases, not competent or equipped to manage the alterative learning methods.

> “The only thing that has improved about distance education is that they have decided to use two platforms instead of a thousand as before ... Teachers don’t know how to do it either, they are very lost.”
>
> **MARINA, 16, SPAIN**

Criticisms included: difficulties in getting hold of teachers, lack of contact due to teacher’s disabling the chat function and microphones on conferencing calls or ignoring virtual ‘hands up.’

> “Yes, there are a lot of students, but in this platform in Zoom we can raise our hand and everything, but the teacher can disable the chat, he can disable the microphones and not be able to speak, then when you want to ask you raise your hand, but teachers do not realize it, consciously or unconsciously this is how it is, and it is there when you have difficulties.”
>
> **IRIE, 17, ECUADOR**

Other students emphasised the limited contact hours and teachers not being particularly responsive or not being available to help with homework.

> “But what was difficult was to work alone and on our own ...I think there is an improvement to be made, I think they really need more staff ... you can only call them between 1.30 and 3pm ... They have to adapt to the situation. Because it’s not always the same thing when classes are in person and students can go and see you. When you are at a distance, you have to reach them on the phone, you send e-mails, they don’t answer so you don’t know if they’ve received them, and you’re worried. You don’t know.”
>
> **SENY, 19, FRANCE**

Girls and young women also felt that many teachers had not adapted to online teaching: they didn’t understand the technology, they went too fast, they failed to schedule breaks, were disorganised with lesson materials and marking and many did not seem to care about their students at all.

> “Some teachers support but not all, only two teachers created a WhatsApp group to explain the students. To improve this process, teachers should always be available, whenever students need it, as well as guardians. Teachers can help by providing books, more material, reviewing assignments.”
>
> **XILUVA, 17, MOZAMBIQUE**

It was also felt that schools failed to really grapple with the challenges the pandemic was presenting: no psychological help offered, no technology training and little preparation for the different sorts of assessments that were put in place.

> We're getting all this, "Look, we're here to support you. We're here for your mental health. We're here for any Higher School Certificate stress you might have." They gave us this one-hour workshop on how to manage HSC stress which I kid you not, the essential bottom line was just don't stress.
>
> **MAX, 16, AUSTRALIA**

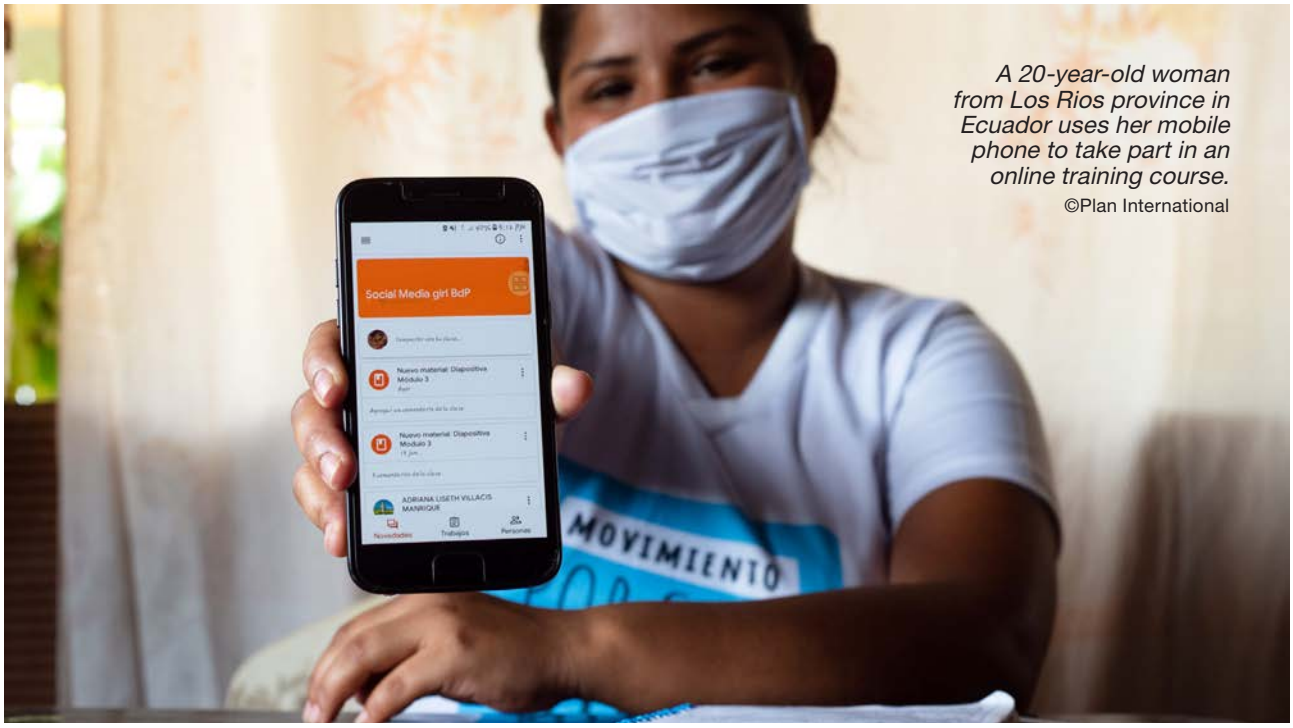
It was not all bad, some teachers were brilliant, both at adapting their teaching and at providing support and were much appreciated by their students:

> During the lockdown, when we all had a mental breakdown, I was able to talk to my school life coordinator ... she would send us emails telling us that we could call or email her if we had problems because of the classes or if we didn't feel well ... I've e-mailed her a couple of times, and it went well, she cheered me up. Otherwise, we could talk to our main teacher, who was also a good listener. So, the pedagogical team and the teaching staff were really very present and very good on this one.
>
> **EVE, 15, FRANCE**

4.3 ALTERNATIVE TEACHING METHODS

> I think like just honestly the way that everything's structured is really hard and difficult. It's like I think they're trying to accommodate us, but they're not really ... I feel like they're giving a lot more work than they used to when we were at school. Because they think that we have more time at home, which is not the case ... A lot of my friends have siblings to take care of and all that stuff. We get a lot more work, and we have a lot more responsibilities ... and it's really overwhelming.
>
> **MICHAELA, 17, UNITED STATES**

Though some girls reported that both their access to and understanding of the alternative teaching methods had improved, most girls and young women still struggled. Their difficulties included limited interaction with teachers, a dislike of online presentations and pre-recorded videos, a lack of interactive lessons or break out discussions, problems concentrating, not understanding teachers or the lessons, unrealistic expectations by teachers and/or schools, and finally online classes either being cancelled or not happening at all. Overall, little had changed as time passed and even where schools were better organised, girls and young women still reported feeling uninspired and having trouble learning.



A 20-year-old woman from Los Rios province in Ecuador uses her mobile phone to take part in an online training course.
©Plan International

Girls take part in COVID-19 awareness raising activity at school in Ghana.
©Plan International

4.4 RETURN TO SCHOOL

"I found it really difficult to learn essentially anything through the computer because I prefer face-to-face interaction and discussion. Now that I'm back, in terms of discussion and in terms of learning face to face and just immediately absorbing information, it's great."

MAX, 16, AUSTRALIA

The second and third round of data collection enabled the study to capture the views of girls and young women who had been studying from home and had now returned to school: only one girl had never stopped going to school and, during the second round of interviews, twenty-six other girls and young women were still not back at school or their place of study. For those who had returned, in both sets of interviews, the feeling was largely of relief: the girls spoke about being back on track with their education, being able to interact with friends and classmates and how face to face studying reduced miscommunication. Additionally, being physically back at school or college was beneficial in that it represented a change of scenery: they were not sleeping, living and working in the same space.

"Yes, it's very positive to go back because human contact is extremely important when you're studying ... to really see teachers again, to have teachers who are in front of you and who can answer you ... that's what was missing during the confinement with the online courses. So being in a classroom is a big positive point, you can have the opportunity to reconnect with the teacher, be able to ask questions and even be more concentrated because you're in the classroom, on your chair, and not in bed."

MILENA, 18, NICARAGUA

In discussing their return to school or college, in both rounds of data collection, the girls and young women also recounted some of the changes that they had experienced in returning to their place of education. The most predominant of these was the proliferation of COVID-19 prevention measures. The research respondents spoke about the use of facemasks, social distancing, the need for hand sanitiser and disinfecting desks and chairs, not being able to share equipment, having smaller numbers of learners in rooms and temperature checks.

"The school has changed dramatically than pre-COVID. Now we have to wear face masks all the time, use sanitiser, and they reduced our attendance days to only 2 days per week."

SALMA, 17, EGYPT

Apart from the prevention measures, which also restricted socialising, other changes included adjustments to the curriculum, reduced or altered school hours, as well as staggered returns to school for different learners, and blended or hybrid learning where some teaching was still done online.

> Some of my semester one classes are going to be online. And then I think two of them will be dual delivery. So, for some, we'll go in and then for like tutorials and classes they'll be in and then lectures will be online. So, it's sort of half and half, which is I think really good because I think I'd be a bit anxious if it was just all normal and everyone on campus because it's quite a lot of people. So, I think this is a good sort of staggered way of going about it.
>
> **AMIE, 17, AUSTRALIA**

Though glad to be back many girls and young women experienced difficulties with some of the Covid-19 prevention measures and were also anxious when they were not adhered to.

> It was positive because I missed the interaction with my teachers and classmates, but what was negative was the anxiety-provoking atmosphere, everyone is afraid, which is normal in itself but it's a bit complicated to be all together.
>
> **MARIE, 17, FRANCE**

By the final round of data collection some of the unfamiliarity of the blended education experience, and the anxiety about contracting the virus, had receded:

> I like the blendedness thing, although at first it could be a bit scary because of transportation, having to be here on the subway for example with a lot of people, but with the passage of time I have gotten used to it and that is what I prefer.
>
> **LUNA, 22, SPAIN**

The girls we spoke to, despite the many problems they are experiencing, are in some ways the lucky ones. Many young women will never return to school: globally it is estimated that **20 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school after the crisis has passed.**[14]

A 17-year-old girl in her classroom in Mozambique.
©Plan International

> In a crisis like COVID-19, girls and young women are the first to be removed from school and the last to return.
>
> **MALALA YOUSAFZAI**

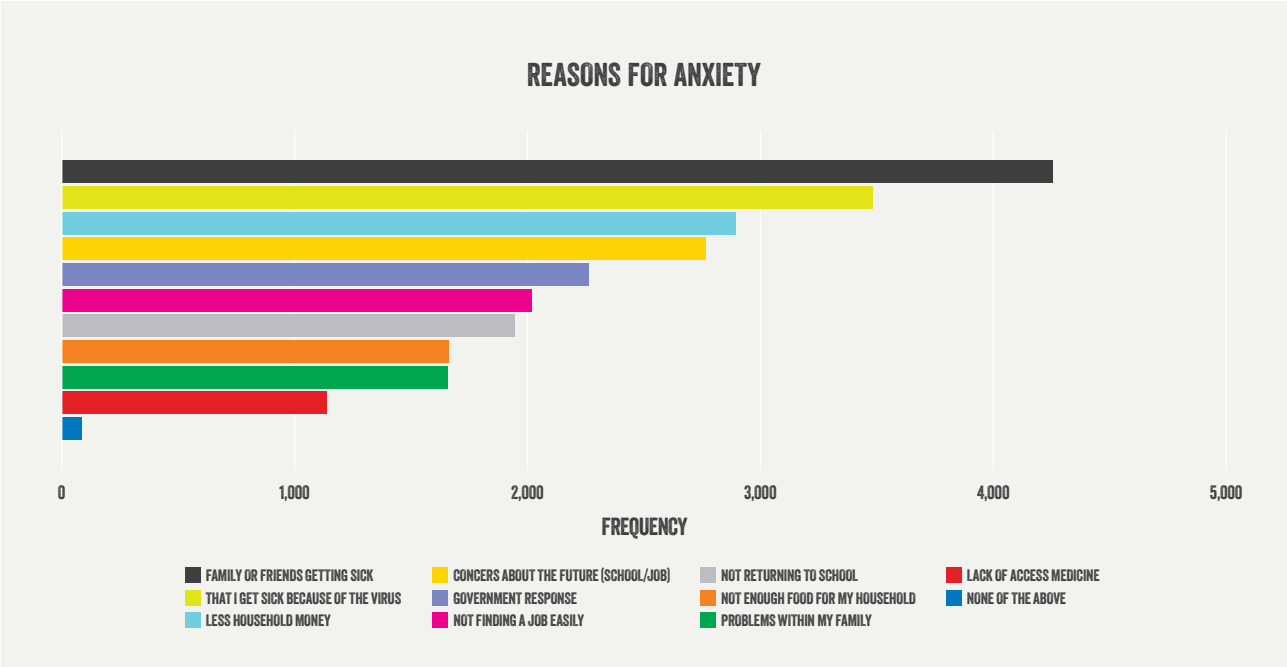
A young girl from Mozambique is keeping her community safe from COVID-19 by wearing a mask.
©Plan International

5. WORRY, STRESS, ANXIETY AND BEING SUPPORTED

> "What worries me most is that there is a new outbreak like the first time the virus came, that it there is a new regrowth due to the lack of awareness among people in the society. Then, that is the fear that would affect all of us at health, economic and education levels."
>
> **GABY, 17, ECUADOR**

Anxiety and stress underlie girls' and young women's responses to many of the interview questions and this is apparent in all three rounds of data collection: they worried about the virus itself and the health of themselves and their friends and family, their education, their family's income, and their future.

HALTING LIVES: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN – 7,105 SURVEY RESPONDENTS ACROSS 14 COUNTRIES.[15]



> I'm afraid of losing the people I love. You can like several people, but you love few.
>
> **MÁRCIA, 15, BRAZIL**

Similar concerns were also apparent in the initial Halting Lives quantitative study as the diagram on page 18 illustrates. In response, the current study sought to identify the key difficulties facing girls and young women in terms of the impact on their mental health and where they turned to for help.

> With this pandemic, I was more concerned with talking to friends and we're lifting the spirit of each other, I have two friends who help me a lot, they ask how I'm feeling and we're growing stronger together. Because I never was the one who talks about their concerns, anguish and all we can do now is, in some way, talk and the way I found was definitely talking and opening up to some people.
>
> **RITA, 18, BRAZIL**

In round one of the current study the main sources of worry was the virus itself – would they catch it, would someone they loved die – and education. In the second interviews girls and young women were specifically asked if they were experiencing feelings of anxiety, stress and loneliness. Overwhelmingly they said yes, with only ten not reporting these feelings.

Worrying about education remained a constant but girls and young women talked too about being confined to the house and not seeing their friends as a major cause of stress.

> I feel like I need to breathe a little bit, but I don't know how because I don't really have the capability to do that, because I'm at home all the time. And for me, I know that the way I recharge, and the way that I reset is by socialising and leaving my space, and I'm always in my space, and it's really hard to relax."
>
> **JANET, 18, AUSTRALIA**

Others talked about feeling unproductive and being stuck, whilst some emphasised the impact of the uncertainty of life under COVID-19 and the unexpectedness of what had happened: would life ever be the same again and how would it be different?

> You don't know what's going to happen in the future. You don't know anything. You plan these huge things, you have so many plans, you have so many expectations, but then it came out of nowhere. You never saw it coming and it totally demolished them ... or maybe it's the start of something new, you know what I'm saying?
>
> **ZARA, 17, UNITED STATES**

As with the first round of data collection the most frequent source of support that the girls and young women mentioned was family and friends. There was a slight increase in those who turned to their teachers or coaching staff to help them with their feelings. In these second interviews girls and young women spoke of different activities and other outlets to deal with anxiety and stress such as watching television, going online, doing schoolwork or meditation and exercise. A significant minority also talked about seeking out more professional counselling services.

> Well, as I told you, I have been looking for support. In the past I had an almost similar problem and frankly a psychologist helped me, so thanks to her I had not felt that way for more than two years but now I started to worry again, it's like these feelings become more and more strong and everything accumulates.
>
> **TSEDEY, 18, ECUADOR**

In the final round of data collection, the girls and young women were asked what they had found most useful in coping with feelings of stress and anxiety and whether they would continue with these strategies and activities going forward. Only three of the study respondents said that they had done nothing, the remaining responses can be divided into three categories: starting new activities, talking to and spending time with someone who was supportive, and proactively protecting their mental health.

A teenager in Mozambique washes her neighbour's clothes to earn food.
©Plan International

The first category included a wide array of activities from exercise, to watching television, to taking up new hobbies, to doing chores.

> “When the quarantine was over a friend and I started to go running and we have continued until now and it has been very good because between when we had exams, when we were unable to study anymore and our heads were bursting, you would go out for half an hour or an hour and you cleared up a lot. Then there have been people who have dedicated themselves to painting or drawing, and it has been a good distraction. But for me it is about going out for a run.”
>
> **ROSA, 17, SPAIN**

Going online and using social media was seen in some cases as a coping strategy but it was clear that the participants also understood the adverse effects exposure to too much social media might have on their mental health.

> “So, at the same time that I want to be close to these people through the social networks I want to get away. Sometimes staying away from social networks has been a great remedy. I started to do a lot of new things, for example playing the guitar, having tea, learning new types of coffee, reading more, reading books on other themes, sociology, detective novels, diversifying a lot, I like series, films and moving on until I find myself.”
>
> **RITA, 18, BRAZIL**

Similarly to the first two rounds of data collection the girls and young women still relied heavily on talking to friends and family, as well as seeking support from teachers, coaches and mental health professionals.

Finally, the girls and young women spoke of looking after their mental health by limiting social media or exposure to the news, improving their sleep or diet, and exercising self-care or self-reflection.

> “Number one thing I’ve learned, is that I need to learn how to take breaks. I’ve never really been one to be like, “Oh, let’s just take a break since I’ve done this assignment.” I’ve always been like, “Go. Next thing, next thing, next thing.” That’s all, until end of the year. But then going through such a high stress situation has made me feel like, ‘Okay. Maybe I do need to take a couple of days, and just not do homework. Read a book, draw, talk to friends only, and then not feel guilty about it.’ That thing, just to give yourself a break has been the huge thing that I’ve learned that I need to do.”
>
> **MAX, 16, AUSTRALIA**

88% OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

IN THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY EXPERIENCED MODERATE TO HIGH ANXIETY LEVELS. ONLY 12% REPORTED NOT BEING ANXIOUS AT ALL.[16]

The theme of mental health – anxiety, stress, depression and how to cope with it – is a key issue running throughout the research. This is not surprising as many studies have found that overall girls and young women struggle more with anxiety and depression than boys and young men, especially if they are not well supported.[17] The significance of having friends and family to help and the self-awareness that the girls obviously possess in order for them to speak so openly about their worries and concerns is notable. Equally impressive is the proactiveness that a number of them demonstrated in coping with the pandemic and the challenges it presented. The findings across all three data collection points paint a vivid picture of how girls and young women, as well as their families and friends, have struggled with the pandemic and its emotional and psychological effects on them and point to challenges for us all in the years ahead: acknowledging these mental health issues and providing real support to those in need must be part of post-Covid recovery.

6. CONTACT AND COMMUNICATION

Plan International's emergency reponse team in Brazil.
©Plan International

> "It was just online, we used to do everything online. But the issue was that if you do not have data, then you are lights out. You don't speak to anybody, nobody speaks to you. Sometimes when you don't also text that one, they don't text you. So, if there's no bundle, then power cut. You wouldn't hear from anybody, nobody will hear from you."
>
> **MIRIAM, 23, GHANA**

Given that government measures aimed at preventing the spread of the pandemic resulted in the closure of institutions and facilities, as well as lockdowns and stay at home orders, understanding how girls and young women stayed in touch with their friends and families is important. Contact with friends and family was the chief source of support for girls and young women, very much in the majority according to our larger survey, who struggled with anxiety during the pandemic. Questions on how they contacted and communicated with family members outside of their households as well as friends was asked in round one and round three of the data collection.

Girls receive their menstrual hygiene kits during distribution in the Kafue District of Zambia.
©Plan International

In the initial interviews it was the mobile phone that was most used: calling, using mobile apps and texting. Those who did use video conferencing used Zoom. Some participants had limited access to any communication device: perhaps a shared family phone, no internet access and lacking data and electricity. These girls and young women were all situated in lower- and middle-income countries: Ghana, Mozambique, Zambia, India, Brazil, Ecuador. In two countries, Ghana and Nicaragua, girls mentioned writing letters or emailing.

Some participants talked about maintaining careful face to face contact as well as connecting online:

> “Yeah, well, I did communicate with my friends and my family members outside my household, by texting or calling them via Messenger or Zoom, other online apps. And when we met up outside, we stayed two metres apart and we also did not gather in a big crowd of 10 persons.”
>
> **MI, 22, VIETNAM**

By round three some of the participants were back at school or college, but outside school socialising seemed to largely stay online, using mobile apps, with some face-to-face contact:

> “Face to face meeting in normal conditions are much better as through face-to-face meeting we can understand and express each other very well, but in current situation of corona, talking through phone and other social media is better.”
>
> **PINKY, 16, INDIA**

One young woman talked about the initial shock to the system when some restrictions were lifted and you could go out and see your friends:

> “I think because we’re also keen on going out, it all kind of hit us pretty strongly, the aftermath of going out and seeing people that you haven’t seen in a while, and doing things you haven’t done in a while. So, I definitely experienced a little bit of burnout.”
>
> **MIA, 18, AUSTRALIA**

Despite issues with access to technology girls and young women adapted to virtual socialising, as they had done with online lessons. However, despite some vestigial anxiety, most were grateful to get back to the real thing once they were allowed to:

> “For me the question doesn’t even arise, of course it’s much nicer to see your friend or family face to face, to have a real contact and to dialogue and communicate. That’s what the word is for, so for me it’s obvious that I prefer to have the person in front of me.”
>
> **EVE, 15, FRANCE**

7. RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND HOW THEY ARE COPING

In order to deepen our insights into the lives of girls and young women it was important to look at their relationships with family and friends: how had these changed during the pandemic? In round one of the data collection the research respondents were asked whether their relationships with friends and family had changed and, if so, how?

There was an even split of responses: with half of the girls and young women reporting that their relationships had been adversely affected and half saying the opposite. The adverse effects mentioned by the respondents included not being able to socialise with friends, and feeling, both physically and emotionally disconnected from family members.

> “Maybe the most troublesome thing is that, I cannot visit my family in hometown, even though we have some gathering for the whole family, and now we cannot organize it anymore because we cannot travel. I have to call my parents and ask for the help, and listen to their concerns by phones. Maybe my parents are a little upset because I cannot come back home like every summer.”
>
> **NGUYET, 23, VIETNAM**

At the positive end of the spectrum, girls and young women spoke about becoming closer with their family members by speaking with them more openly and spending more time together. Only seven girls said their relationships had not changed in any way.

> “In my family we are talking more and have more communication because every day all of us had to do various things. My father used to work and I also used to go out, so we did not have time to talk, and during the pandemic we talk about how we are and how we feel, even with my classmates we have strengthened our ties of friendship.”
>
> **EMILY, 17, ECUADOR**

In the second round of interviews, the focus shifted to finding out how the girls and young women’s friends and family were coping with the pandemic and how they were supporting their family and friends.

> “I was helping my mother by doing some household work, by which she will not feel bad ... and if I talk about my siblings and I was playing with them and I was talking to them and if they have any work so I was doing for them”
>
> **PINKY, 16, INDIA**

> “I felt that during the quarantine my interaction with my family improved, we were able to laugh more together and talk a lot. I realised that what I really needed was to talk so this pandemic period is helping me a lot in this regard.”
>
> **MARIELE, AGED 18, BRAZIL**

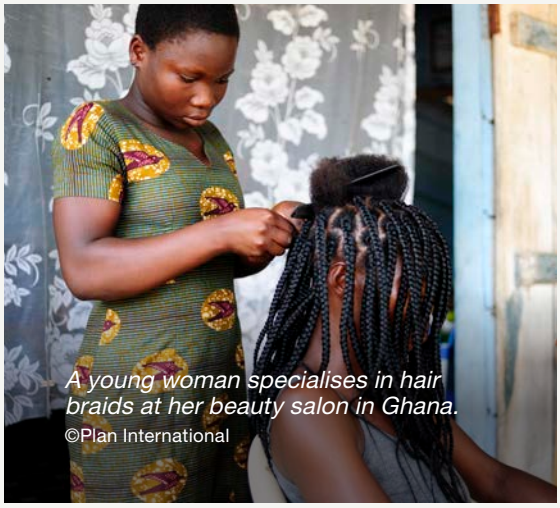
A young Ethiopian mother has received one of Plan International’s food kits.
©Plan International

The family members that were seen to be struggling the most were mothers and brothers. Fathers and sisters were also mentioned but less frequently. Some concern was expressed for children and the elderly more generally and extended family members, but much less frequently.

> My mother, because she's taking the lead in everything. She's taking everything, whatever is good, whatever problems we are facing and all. So, she is feeling the difficulties if our families are facing any problems in this.
>
> **SHANTI, 18, INDIA**

Girls and young women talked mostly about helping friends and family "through dialogue" but they also recognised how hard it could be to reach out when everyone was suffering from the impacts of the pandemic:

> I think it's also hard for us to consider the fact that there are other people in the household who are going through different kinds of exhaustion, because we all feel like, 'Well, you're not more stressed, or this, or that, than I am.' But then, it's subjective, and everyone is going through different things ... especially my dad, he has a lot going on right now, very busy. He's stressed. And then I have this going on right now and I'm stressed ... it's kind of hard I think for us to understand that we're all stressed, it's all subjective, everyone's going through a separate stressful year.
>
> **JANET, 18, AUSTRALIA**



A young woman specialises in hair braids at her beauty salon in Ghana.
©Plan International

8. HEALTH

In round two the theme of health and healthcare, identified in the earlier section on life and wellbeing, was examined in more detail. Encouragingly many of the girls and young women reported that access to health services had not been an issue apart from the initial few months of the pandemic. In some cases, services had improved:

> Recently the health centre near my house held a meeting because they were going to explain about sexual and reproductive rights and we met with the girls and those doctors told us that if we had any questions we should not hesitate to go and ask because they would be there to give us support. I think that now there is going to be more support than before for us.
>
> **IRIE, 17, ECUADOR**

However, challenges remained and others reported services being overrun, being inaccessible, being afraid to use them for fear of getting COVID-19, as well as issues with the supply and cost of drugs.

> No, the truth is that in recent days we have wanted to make a medical appointment in the Social Security, but we have not been able, even yesterday I was still trying to make a medical appointment online and the page is there loading ... loading ... and it never loads. You can also call to make a medical appointment and they hang up, they never speak, never answer.
>
> **GABY, 17, ECUADOR**

> There are issues of shortage of medicines. SRHR services are not provided since COVID 19 started."
>
> **BUPE, 17, ZAMBIA**

The supply of menstrual hygiene products was also variable with some having problems, others not.

9. INCOME AND LIVELIHOODS

This loss of income is backed up by the earlier survey where it was clear that many households were struggling with nearly a third of girls reporting no access to income at all.

A woman sews face masks after receiving training from Plan International in Ecuador.
©Plan International

> “Family members no, but if I count friends and close people, yes, there were people who lost jobs, either because of the workload or because of the service they had to do for the owner of the company, or they simply decided to close down, so many people lost their jobs or did not even have the opportunity to enter a job.”
>
> **RITA, 18, BRAZIL**

The majority of participants said that their families had not experienced significant income losses but they talked more generally about their wider communities and one young woman, despite not thinking her family had suffered economically, described financial problems that had an impact on the money available for her education.

> “Well, right now my dad doesn’t have money. He said he doesn’t have money, so maybe later he’ll help me with it. I’ve not been able to buy any provisions for school. We are using my roommate’s provision for now. Now that we are on campus, we’re using my roommate’s provisions.”
>
> **MIRIAM, 23, GHANA**

Some families had experienced significant income losses, with parents losing their jobs, or having their hours reduced, and the young women themselves not being able to contribute to their own expenses or the family income as their part time work dried up.

> “We can say that my whole family has lost their jobs during the pandemic, but as time goes by, what we have learned helps us to apply for different jobs so now my sister, my brother and my mother are working. I would also like to work, but I don’t know what will happen in the future. For a while I was able to support my family a little because I was working two days a week and earned some money, not much but I was helping a little.”
>
> **GABY, 17, ECUADOR**

31% OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY WERE **UNEMPLOYED** WITH NO HOUSEHOLD INCOME.[18]

Loss of income means food shortages and some participants reported getting help from the government and from NGOs: sometimes cash and sometimes food parcels.

> “My father had lost his job during the lockdown, now he has resumed his job but his salary is half of his earlier salary. So, we are still facing financial problems. We got free rations twice from Plan India and for few months from Government and once through NGO Gunj but other than that we didn’t get any other help.”
>
> **PINKY, 16, INDIA**

10. ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Young woman uses her mobile phone to take part in an online training course, Ecuador.
©Plan International

In the initial interviews participants were asked about their access to information during the pandemic and this issue was returned to in greater depth in the third round of data collection. In round one, some of the participants talked about their information sources in terms of where they went to find out about the virus: participants were all keen to find out as much as they could about the pandemic both in terms of local and global information. The majority of girls and young women used a combination of different sources in their search for news which included: television, social media, online websites including government sources, friends and family, radio and newspapers. A handful of participants also mentioned healthcare professionals, school and community groups.

> “I mixed all this up a bit, I tried to get different information so as not to have just one fixed idea, then I went to sites that were reliable enough not to have fake news and I think that it’s all this that allowed me to have a little reflection about Covid or at least to start thinking about it ... I went on the government site, then I also went on ‘pass-santé’ ... I watched the news too, sometimes on social networks, and if not, I talked with my family and friends.”
>
> **MARIE, 17, FRANCE**

There were mixed feelings about how accessible information was and some participants reported being overwhelmed by too much news about COVID:

> “I found the information useful because it’s always good to find out what’s going on around us but afterwards, at one point, I felt it was a bit too much, all the time we were talking about Covid, when you turn on your TV, at some point I couldn’t even get there, I had the impression that when you turn on your TV, it’s always Covid Covid, as if apart from this Covid there was nothing else around, at some point it made me ... I don’t know ... It was too much.”
>
> **SENY, 19, FRANCE**

Many were wary about fake news:

> “I find the information very helpful especially that internet publish everything thing on the pandemic, however, I need to make sure to get the info from a trusted website and not believe everything I read online.”
>
> **AMINA, 15, EGYPT**

> “My main source is usually social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook, and mostly Facebook. You don’t even have to look for the information. You just go to your news feed and everything was already there. You don’t even have to look for that. But it also comes with the issue of fake news and misleading views about the pandemic, so it is so important that we have to categorise which news should we listen to and which news should we get rid of.”
>
> **HA, 20, VIETNAM**

11. AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION OF THE VACCINE

A COVID-19 awareness raising session at school in Ghana.
©Plan International

> “Of course, I will take the vaccine as it will protect me from infection. I have no concerns about any side effects of course they will only give us what is good for our health.”
>
> **SHAZA, 17, EGYPT**

> “It is good that the vaccination for corona is going to be released soon but we are worried about the side effects of this vaccine, how will it affect different people. It will take time to understand about the side effects of the vaccine and maybe it will be too costly to be afforded by the common man and we don’t know how much time it will take to launch in India.”
>
> **PINKY, 16, INDIA**

In the third and final round of data collection the research participants were asked about their perceptions of the vaccine: how they felt about getting it, whether they felt positive about the development of it, and if they had any worries or concerns in relation to it. Overall, the majority of girls were aware of the development of a vaccine in relation to the COVID-19 virus. Responses from the overwhelming majority of girls and young women were mixed with both positive and negative feelings towards the vaccine. Amongst those who did have definite opinions, a considerably larger number of girls and young women were concerned or held negative views.

> “As I said I am waiting to see how things will evolve because the first people who had tested the vaccine at the very beginning, I saw that some were paralysed and it is a bit scary. I’m not totally sceptical that there is a vaccine but I think the best thing to do for now, especially as I’m not part of the health care staff or a medical team, is to wait and see how things develop.”
>
> **MARIE, 17, FRANCE**

Out of those who held positive views, a reasonable portion suggested they would have the vaccine if it was available to them, whilst a few discussed the vaccine offering a chance for a COVID-free future or return to normal life, and excitement that others (especially their loved ones) would be able to be vaccinated.

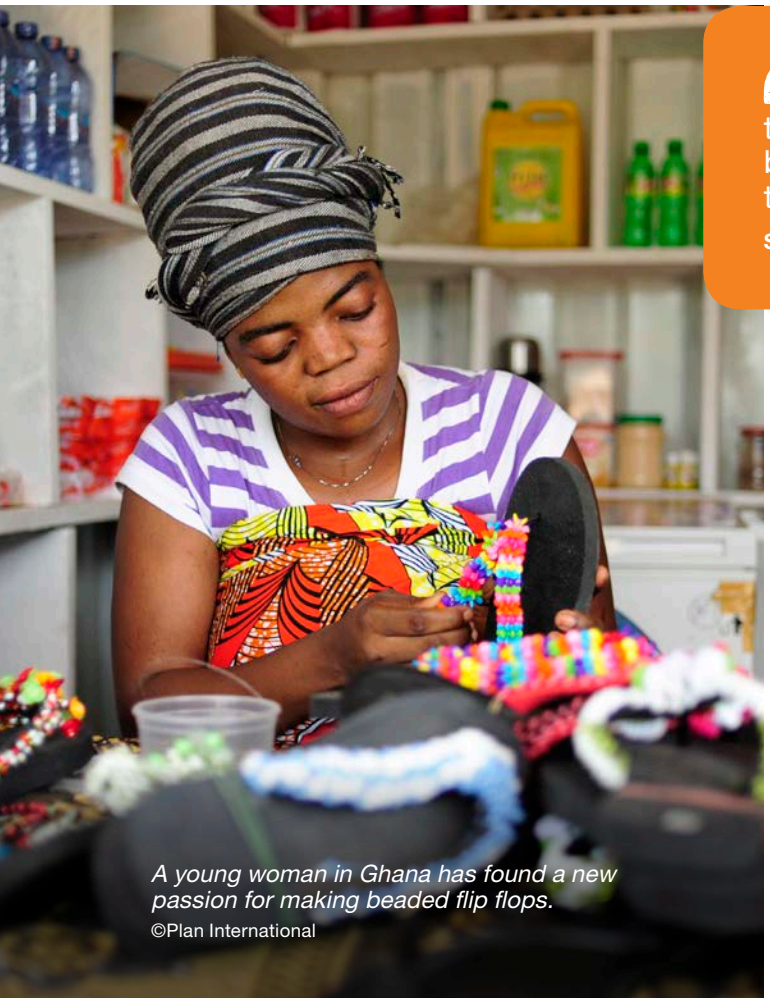
The most commonly discussed concerns about the vaccine related to potential side effects, limited testing or rolling out the vaccine too quickly. Access, availability and cost were also very widely discussed.

> “Although we can’t afford it, I recommend that the vaccine should be distributed fast to both developed and under developed countries; giving priority to students. To me I feel positive about it but many people in our community don’t want to get vaccinated because they think the pandemic is over and the vaccine has side effects.”
>
> **ZEINEB, 17, ETHIOPIA**

There were a number of other less frequently discussed concerns raised which included: its effectiveness, that others may elect not to have the vaccine (putting their faith in their religious beliefs), limited scientific understanding of the vaccine among the general population or lack of clear scientific information. Two girls in Ghana reported hearing rumours that the vaccine was being used to spread Covid-19 or to carry out experiments in Africa.

> “... There are so many rumours about the vaccine. It might be something that would rather spread the virus more among Africans ... If whatever people are saying about it is not true, I would really like to use it because I want to protect myself and my family from getting the virus, that’s all, and everybody around me. Me personally, I would love to use it, if only the rumours about the vaccine I’ve heard are not true. The problem is that we cannot truly confirm that.”
>
> **MIRIAM, 23, GHANA**

12. FACING THE FUTURE



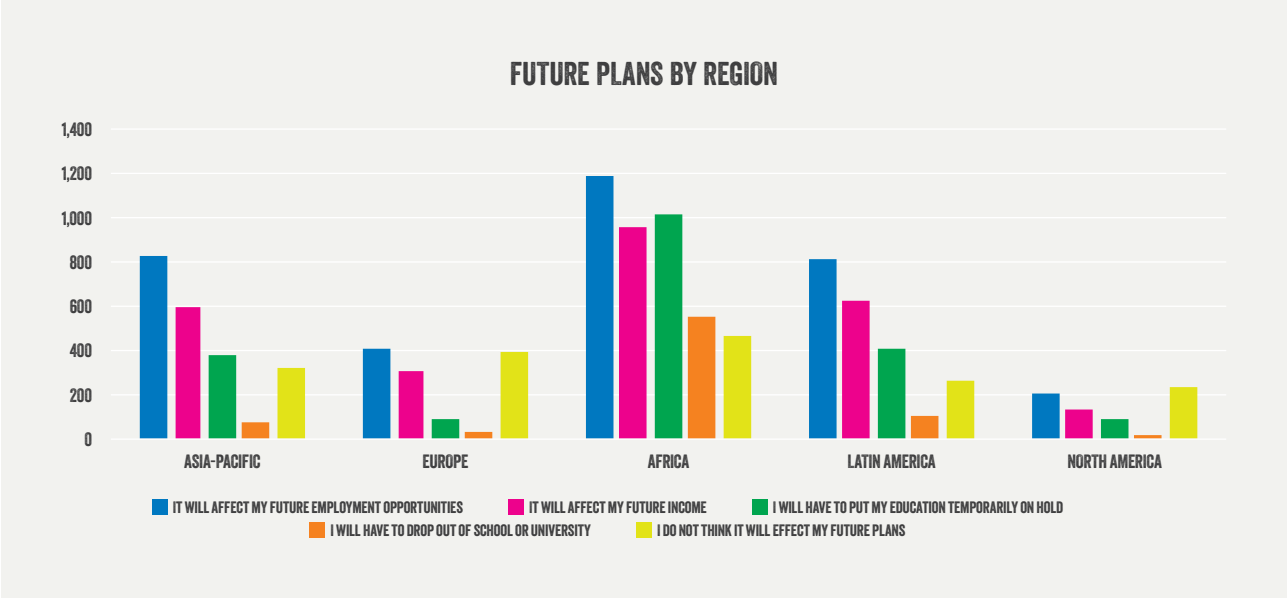
A young woman in Ghana has found a new passion for making beaded flip flops.
©Plan International

> “My hopes? Maybe that when we start the next school year, that everything will be back in order and that we can go back to school in good conditions.”
>
> **SENY,19, FRANCE**

Throughout the study, one of the key themes pursued was the girls and young women’s outlook on the future in general, and their own individual futures, in light of the pandemic.

In the first and final rounds of data collection questions were asked about their general concerns for the future and in all three data collection rounds girls and young women were asked questions about how they were feeling about their own futures. Overall, the girls and young women’s answers were more focused on how the pandemic would impact their own futures and this was evident not only in the responses to these specific questions but is also evident in their responses and views about education, as we have seen in section four. In the earlier quantitative survey, though the majority of respondents were worried about the effect of COVID-19, particularly on their employment prospects, it was in the African countries where incomes are under greater pressure that girls were most concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the years ahead.

HALTING LIVES: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN – HOW THE PANDEMIC WILL AFFECT FUTURE PLANS[19]



12.1 INDIVIDUAL HOPES AND DREAMS

In the first round of data collection the overwhelming majority of girls and young women framed their responses in relation to completing their schooling and pursuing higher education. They were certainly not feeling defeated: there was an array of incredible aspirations mentioned including becoming healthcare professionals, human rights lawyers, journalists on international social change, academics and environmentalists.

> “I’m doing my arts degree at the moment ... I’ve been angry at systems for a long time and it’s given me a lot of language to talk about how those systems work, and a bit of credibility. And I’m doing my law degree after that, Juris Doctor at Melbourne, and so I definitely want, just in concrete terms, I want to be doing that kind of human rights law with international.”
>
> **JENNI,18, AUSTRALIA**

Linked to these longer-term ambitions were some personal goals including pursuing activism to make a difference, becoming independent, as well as owning their own homes, marriage and families.

> “I’m even excited to talk about my future, I see myself as an entrepreneur with my own business, and working for my community, working for young people ... this is how I see myself, as a strong woman, prepared with a business and getting ahead, supporting my community and doing what I like most to support teenagers, and to know every day more about different issues concerning violence against women and girls and other themes that are affecting young people.”
>
> **MARGARITA, 18, NICARAGUA**

In the more short-term the girls and young women framed their futures yet again in the realm of education, referring to returning to school and assuming their ‘normal routines’.

It was clear from the second round of interviews that, despite the pandemic, girls and young women had hung on to their aspirations.

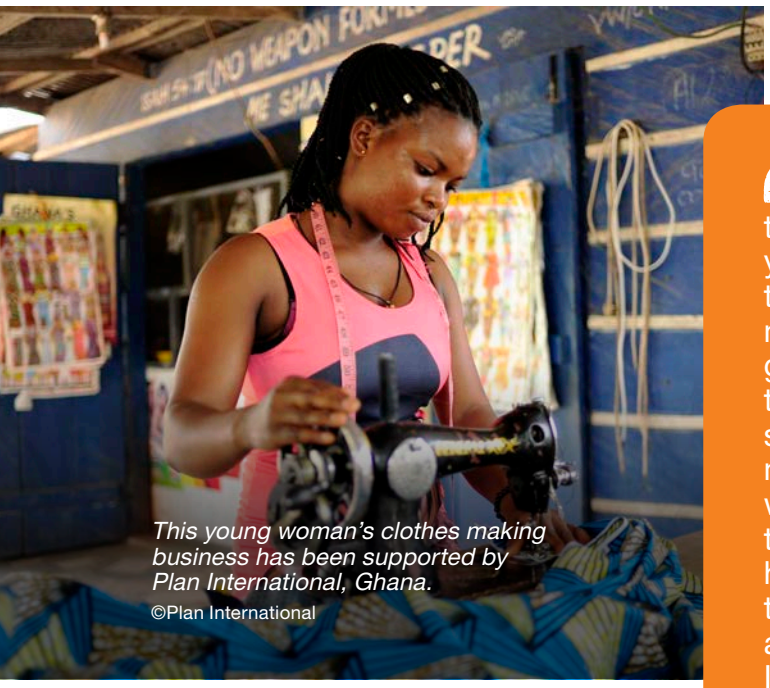
> “In a way, the dreams and wishes stay the same, but with a different perspective, for sure. For instance, many things that I planned for myself physically, there have been changes ... But the goals such as going to university, having a profession, family, continue, the essential goals that are the strongest ones continue: finishing my undergraduate course, getting a job within the public sector, having my lawyer´s authorization to work, and being a counsel attorney or a delegate.”
>
> **RITA, 18, BRAZIL**

In some cases, COVID-19 has increased their determination to realise their dreams. They are not unrealistic about the challenges ahead, particularly in terms of catching up with education and finding the money they need for the years ahead. They are having to adapt, but have not given up.

> “Maybe now instead of 5 years you see it at 6 or 7 because you do not know, for example, to what extent all countries are going to open or what measures you are going to have to take to move to a country or things like that. So, I think that I do continue to advance towards my goals but it is true that maybe not in such a hurry but more calmly: let’s see how the situation goes, I will keep trying to do this but ... little by little.”
>
> **LUNA, 22, SPAIN**

In the final round of interviews, in December 2020/ January 2021, it was clear that most girls and young women remained committed to their education aspirations. They were also asked whether they were going to do anything differently in the next year because of the pandemic. Their answers indicated a more thoughtful approach to life: spending more time with friends and family, helping others, and living in a more environmentally friendly way.

> “This make me feel like I have to take more responsibilities for taking action to protect our environment. And there are so many problems out there and I really want to give a hand to make the world better but, maybe just ... Well, first and foremost, I think I have to improve myself every day.”
>
> **MI, 22, VIETNAM**



This young woman's clothes making business has been supported by Plan International, Ghana.
©Plan International

12.2 THE WORLD AHEAD

> For me it's that balance of freedom to be doing what you love, being who you are without that discrimination, with that security. So, you've got the financial means to be doing what you love, you've got back up plans from governments if things go wrong. Because I think liberal society tends to focus and say, 'Oh my God, we're so free. People can do whatever they want.' But they can't if they don't have the security ... And so hopefully that world will look like that, with that kind of peace, that sense of peace and passion and security in your life. And I think the pandemic has the potential to bring that about.
>
> **JENNI, 18, AUSTRALIA**

A good proportion of responses mentioned improved hygiene and health practices to protect themselves and others from the virus as well as improving their lifestyles and diet. A minority of responses indicated that there was still doubt around how or when countries would be moving on from the virus in that the girls and young women were just waiting, deliberately not making plans:

> I'm going with the flow.
>
> **NGUYET, 23, VIETNAM**

Many of the respondents felt that they had learnt a lot from their experiences over the last year. They mentioned being more reflective, more appreciative, how they had learnt mental health strategies and become more resilient.

> I learned about the value of life, now I think that we shouldn't be angry or upset with each other as we might die at any point, I learned about myself that I am social and going out with friends used to be a great source of joy for me.
>
> **ASMAA, 16, EGYPT**

> I think 100% it made me deal with uncertainty so much better and easier as well, knowing that there are definitely things I can't control. But also knowing the things I can control was nice for me to add stability back into my own life.
>
> **MIA, 18, AUSTRALIA**

As for the girls and young women's thoughts about the future, post-COVID-19, in more general terms, in the first round of data collection the majority discussed their hopes for positive change: that lessons learnt during the pandemic would be built on. One young woman from Ecuador commented: **"I believe the poorest people should be taken into account."** Others spoke about their desire for social reform to the education and healthcare systems; social support for the elderly and disabled; youth empowerment; and the desire that a work/life balance would be achieved through innovations in technology.

> I need to say that the pandemic pushes us to shift everything to online, like studying, working, meeting. Everything is shifted to online platforms So I think this will promote digital and technological industry. Maybe, I would say, that it is a motivation for companies and other corporations to learn more and to be more flexible and creative in working, creating, and developing apps and online platforms ... I think, this is such a chance that the companies and some business can grab to improve their technology and to ... how to say it? And to catch the trend that we have now during pandemic.
>
> **HA, 20, VIETNAM**

Another group of girls and young women spoke of keeping the value of community and family relationships and a number of them also spoke of their desire for improved health and hygiene practices as well as the development of a vaccine and how this would be managed for current and future pandemics.

> If I'm coming to positive changes, I think we are well taught by COVID-19 that it is very important to inculcate some healthy habits, to have good food and immunity boosting foods.

AVANI, 18, INDIA

Not all of the responses were positive, a sizeable number of the research participants were concerned about the economy, both on a personal level (the financial status of families) and on a national or global level (leading to food insecurities). Other concerns mentioned included the changed dynamics of physically interacting with others, government corruption, gender-based violence and other inequalities.

> I think it will have really long-term impacts on people. Firstly, COVID-19 it is a bad thing for feminism and for gender equality. Secondly, it will affect the economy badly. Thirdly, it will have a really huge impact on minority groups ... Girls are always thought to be those who take care of the child and their siblings. I think due to the pandemic lockdown, girls needed to take a lot of burdens on their shoulders ... Also, women will lose their jobs more than men because of the social norm that men can work better than women. Women who are working as teachers and helpers, they will lose their jobs because of lockdown. It is predicted that even when they can go to work after the pandemic, women seem less likely to get their job back as soon as men. They will earn even less after the pandemic.

HA, 20, VIETNAM

One participant discussed the potential for an increased risk in child, early or forced marriage (CEFM) or pregnancy in relation to school closures and economic hardships and was concerned about girls and young women being allowed to return to school:

> I hope that we may return to classes; that there is no increase in cases of early marriages during the pandemic, because I think that during this period some girls will be subjected to early marriages, others will be pregnant. Because the girls are at home doing nothing, some family members do not accept that the girl does not contribute to food. They force the girl to go out to look for food; for parents, having a girl at home is a burden on their backs and to get rid of the weight they hand over their daughters to a man.

XILUVA, 17, MOZAMBIQUE.

By the final round of interviews, generally speaking, most of the research participants felt that their outlook on the world had changed for the worse. There was a range of reasons for this: distrust in governments and politicians, society failing to care for families and the elderly and a general distrust in people.

> But honestly, in terms of looking at on a world scale, the pandemic has this made me lose even more faith in world leaders, to be completely honest. I always try and look at the bright side, but it's very hard to look to the bright side, when leaders of global superpowers are letting millions of people die from a disease, that could have been easily contained if you imposed actual laws.

MAX, 16, AUSTRALIA

Others spoke in more positive terms of countries coming together to fight the pandemic, of there being more equality and humanity and more attention to social issues.

> I used to view the world as separate countries that don't help each other at all, however due to the pandemic, many countries started collaborating to produce the vaccine which is a good thing for humanity.

AMINA, 15, EGYPT

CONCLUSION

A young woman in Ecuador uses her tablet to take part in an online training course.
©Plan International

> “I am still able to continue with my goals and my dreams. COVID-19 helped me understand that there will be some problems equal or worse, COVID-19 taught me how to deal with some problems and increased my hope for the realisation of my dreams and goals.”
>
> **CELSA, 17, MOZAMBIQUE**

The aim of conducting the study at different points in time was to capture any fluctuations in attitudes and experiences in the lives of girls and young women, in the 14 study countries, over the pandemic year. From the findings set out above it is evident that, unsurprisingly, the pandemic has changed girls’ and young women’s lives in fundamental ways. Overwhelmingly, it has had a negative effect: most of all in the areas of education and mental health.

Girls’ and young women’s educational experience went through considerable fluctuations over the three interview points: they were in and out of school and college, struggling with remote learning and adapting to lockdown and studying at home. This, fear of the virus itself, and the measures taken to combat the pandemic, took their toll and many of the participants struggled with stress and anxiety. It is issues with mental health and education that dominate the data collection across the six-month period – though attitudes and coping strategies changed and developed over time.

> “I think I’m going to start living my life as if every day was the last day of my life, because I was always looking at tomorrow, what will happen ... but now I see it as: I will make the most of today and every day.”
>
> **MARGARITA, 18, NICARAGUA**

It was interesting to note the openness and self-awareness which the girls and young women demonstrated in speaking about their feelings and concerns. Their openness provides insights into the coping mechanisms that they employ – including some that are potentially harmful – which in turn provides opportunities to learn from them and improve mental health provision for this particular target group in the future. Their discussions also revealed just how resilient the girls and young women are – how they adjusted quickly to the measures put in place to combat the pandemic and how they have adapted to what a few of them term ‘the new normal’.

> “Well, I don’t think much has changed since we spoke. But hey, I did tell you that doing online classes was not turning out to be very easy for me, but the truth is that now I’m super comfortable with them.”
>
> **VERA, 18, SPAIN**

Likewise, their outlook for the future – despite all the challenges and problems they spoke of – remains positive: they are determined to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. To support them in the future special attention must be paid to the two areas that will remain problematical regardless of their ability to adapt: education and mental health. The measures that interfered with their enjoyment of the former continue to frustrate them, and the anxiety, stress and sadness felt over this pandemic year will not magically be eradicated.

Policies and programmes need to be focused on these issues if girls and young women are to be enabled to build back better. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and as several respondents noted gender equality is at risk. Building back has to be done with equality at its heart, listening to the concerns and suggestions of girls and young women whose futures are very much in jeopardy. The cumulative effect and the interconnected nature of the impacts of the pandemic also mean that building back by international authorities, governments and NGOs has to be global, comprehensive and not tackled in separate silos.

> “Globally, the pandemic also reveals many facets of the world order and the way the governments are working ... It also reveals some negative truth about cheating in some governments and global crimes and corruption in the system. When it is revealed, I think this is a good thing because ... when we are aware of the problems, it is the opportunity for us to raise our voice and to give our opinions and make changes for a better society.”
>
> **HA, 20, VIETNAM**

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a real fear, recognised and articulated by some of the girls and young women taking part in this study, that COVID-19 has the capacity to set back the cause of women's and girls' rights for years.

It is incumbent on authorities and civil society everywhere to continue to support gender equality and drive toward the Sustainable Development Goals: in particular by addressing the structural barriers and gender norms that prevent girls from accessing and completing education, and funding and implementing gender transformative learning environments. Once the virus is under control, the priority must be a just recovery, one which addresses those most in need. The transition to a more sustainable, climate-responsive and gender-equal future must focus in particular on girls and young women in all their diversity, and must include targeted support for their families and communities. This should be at the core of all response strategies from governments, global and regional institutions and resourced accordingly.

A 19-year-old woman in Mozambique sells fish caught by her family using nets she bought.
©Plan International

Global, regional and national decision-makers must:

Recognise when planning and implementing measures to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak and its aftermath **that the pandemic has affected people differently according to their multiple and intersecting identities**. They should ensure that policies and interventions are equitable, gender-transformative, protective of human rights, inclusive of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society, and responsive to the different needs and risks faced by individuals.

All service providers should gather **gender and age-disaggregated data on reported cases of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM)**, during COVID-19 in a way which ensures the safety of survivors and does not put them at any further risk of violence.

Ensure equitable access to and availability of **safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines** in low- and middle-income countries. Failing to do so will be a 'catastrophic moral failure'[20] that will not only impede progress towards ending the acute pandemic; it will compound and deepen the setback to girls' and women's rights, leaving them further behind.

Protect aid budgets: post-COVID recovery will be dependent both on funding and political will. **Sustainable Development Goal Four's commitment to quality education** focusing on disadvantaged girls, needs to be honoured with a renewed commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on overseas development assistance (ODA) with 15% of ODA going to education by 2025.

Promote and ensure the involvement of girls and women, as well as their wider communities – including local leaders, families and caregivers - so that their interests **are represented in the** pandemic response and the solutions adopted to protect lives, prevent the spread of the virus and plan for the future.

Ensure the availability of accessible, objective, age-responsive and gender-appropriate information about the crisis, **through institutional campaigns on digital platforms** used by adolescents and young people.

National governments must:

Ensure that all families have an adequate income and basic necessities, including food supplies and essential medicines. This may involve **providing and expanding gender-responsive social protection systems and provision**, as well as assessing and monitoring the potential impact of cash and other transfers on gender roles and gender-based violence.

Take robust measures to safeguard all children, and particularly **to protect girls and women from gender-based violence**. All service providers responsible for delivering child protection and sexual and gender-based violence services must adapt these to ensure accessibility during the outbreak, including through remote provision. This should include awareness raising campaigns, counselling and other mental health and psychosocial support services, case management, hotlines and reporting mechanisms. **Mechanisms for reporting gender-based violence must be easily accessible and safe spaces** provided for girls and women at risk.

Provide counselling and increase mental health services, recognising the **psychological impact of the pandemic, particularly on girls and young women**. Ensure information and services, which should include helplines and digital access, are accessible, non-discriminatory and stigma free. Psychological services, including **trained counsellors, should be available in schools and colleges** and **support made available to families** as tensions at home are exacerbated by COVID-19.

Fund technological infrastructure improvements and provide the relevant resources so that all students have access to, and are able to benefit from, remote learning. In parts of Africa and Southern Asia, internet penetration is less than 50% compared to 96% in Northern Europe. **Access to the internet, laptops and mobile phones** should be as fundamental to education as text books and pens.

Increase support to promote girls' employment and entrepreneurship with particular attention to their inclusion in **key future labour markets** related to STEM careers and green employment opportunities.

Education ministries must:

Fund and enable a safe return to school for all students, recognising that **girls are at heightened risk of dropping out permanently**. It is imperative that **back to school planning addresses the specific needs of girls and young women** in a way that is inclusive and gender-responsive, with efforts to involve families and communities and ensure individual monitoring of the most vulnerable adolescent girls, including pregnant girls. **Community learning centres** where girls can catch up on education missed and which also provide vocational training are a useful, and often more accessible, alternative to formal school attendance.

Prioritise learning continuity during school closures and take necessary measures to ensure distance learning is accessible for all, particularly the most marginalised girls. This includes; **investing in appropriate both high-tech and low-tech**, affordable and gender-responsive distance education methods using radio, TV, and online spaces as well as distributing school kits with lesson plans, stationery and pens.

Recognise that blended and flexible learning is here to stay and **train both students and teachers in the use of technology** to improve the quality of remote learning, working with communities and families where possible to ensure children and young people are supported at home with distance learning. **Plan for future closures** with prepared distance learning materials and ensure that schools and colleges **consult students, particularly girls and young women**, to identify those most in need of support.

Engage with families, communities, leaders, school teams, children and young people to **identify gender norms** – including those on sexual orientation, disability, or early pregnancy – that impede education, and **help to construct alternative**, positive ones.

Ensure psychosocial support for children and young people, prioritising girls and other vulnerable groups. As schools reopen, psychosocial support and socio-emotional learning activities need to be a priority. **Age responsive gender-sensitive, inclusive, accessible messages on psychosocial wellbeing and stress prevention** should be incorporated into school curricula.

Address financial barriers to girls' returning to school by ensuring the most vulnerable girls and their families have their **food needs met** through food vouchers, meal deliveries, take home rations, in-school meals and cash transfers.

UN agencies, international donors and civil society actors must:

Pay attention to the critical needs of low-income countries, **in particular those in fragile contexts and those facing humanitarian crises: including rapid, flexible funding, additional grant funding and technical cooperation**.

Encourage national governments to **protect aid budgets** to ensure that the health, economic and social burden of the COVID-19 pandemic does not fall on the poorest countries and the most vulnerable populations.

Prioritise programming that addresses the digital divide and redresses the gender **inequalities in internet access and access to technology** so that the particular needs of adolescent girls and young women in respect of both education and mental health support are addressed.

Support communities in **raising awareness** of mental health issues involving both individuals and their families and help provide services targeted at adolescent girls and young women and their parents and carers: matching resources – radio, TV, phones, online platforms, print materials – to local circumstances.

Advocate with Ministries of Education to ensure a gender-responsive approach to improve the quality of curricula, teacher training programmes, textbooks, policies and plans: ensuring that **content on gender equality, human rights, mother-tongue education, conflict sensitivity, comprehensive sexuality education, and resilience** is integrated into national curricula and is included in distance learning.

Strengthen cross-sectoral partnerships that recognise the crucial links between social and environmental issues that are the key to a better future. COVID-19 has presented unprecedented challenges, never has there been a more critical time for strengthening partnerships and securing the next ten years of **collaboration for sustainable development**.

Young mothers faced difficulties finding food and water for their children in Mozambique.
©Plan International

PLAN INTERNATIONAL: ADAPTING TO COVID-19, PROGRAMME AND PRACTICE

EDUCATION

- **Indonesia:** Plan International reached 28,000 girls and boys through *"equal access to learning"* activities. This included distributing 4,850 school kits containing books and stationery, 2,385 menstrual health management kits and 29,956 board games, to support children to learn at home. We also worked closely with the Education Office to adapt lessons to accommodate distance learning, training teachers to deliver ICT-based lessons via video and radio. In collaboration with the **Indonesian Psychologist Association** education personnel were trained to provide mental health and gender-sensitive psychosocial support to children, parents, and their support networks.
- **Ghana:** to address COVID-19 school closures, the **Make Ghanaian Girls Great!** project in Ghana supported distance learning by designing, recording and broadcasting lessons on the Ghana Learning TV channel. Where children lack access to the internet, lessons via radio ensured education continued during the pandemic in many countries.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

- **Philippines:** Increased reporting of abuse during COVID-19 meant that we intensified existing work with partners – as in Cambodia and Uganda – **to set up or strengthen online counselling and toll-free helplines** for children to report abuse or to ask for information about the virus.
- **Latin America:** To support children during COVID-19 quarantines the regional office developed *The Adventures of Zuri*, a self-learning package with cartoon characters, that offers a gender equality perspective and emotional support for children, adapted for three different age groups, and caregivers.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

- We supported young people to raise awareness about COVID-19 in their communities and to raise their voices about how they are affected by the pandemic. We **facilitated girls' inclusion in decision-making spaces in Uganda's** response, provided training on digital participation in **Paraguay**, and equipped young people in **Peru** and **Guinea** with devices and credit for data to help them participate this way.
- With UNICEF in **Togo**, we co-organised a Facebook webinar on the impacts of COVID-19 on children, reaching 23,974 people. We also financed the activities of 22 child and youth organisations to fight the virus. Three digital campaigns produced by children and young people reached 100,000 people.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS SERVICES

- Adapting to COVID-19 restrictions, we developed and increased **the use of digital tools to inform young people on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Laos** created the popular *"Merlin Pha Hoo"* learning tool, which may be included in national education curricula. **Bangladesh, Peru, Indonesia** and **Zimbabwe** were also among places to adapt projects to deliver health and rights messages and education digitally.
- In **Zimbabwe**, we worked with the Ministry of Health and Child Care to **provide sexual and reproductive health services to adolescent girls** and young people through mobile clinics. We also supported mentors and SRHR educators to deliver sessions via WhatsApp and SMS during the national lockdown.

Girls receive their menstrual hygiene kits during distribution in the Kafue District of Zambia.
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ANNEX ONE

METHODOLOGY

Part 2 of the *Halting Lives* research used qualitative research methodologies, conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews three times over a six-month period. Qualitative data was collected in fourteen countries: Australia, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Ghana, India, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Spain, USA, Vietnam and Zambia.

The first round of data collection took place between July-August 2020, the second in October 2020, and the third and final round of data collection between December 2020- January 2021. Each country aimed to conduct interviews with the same five research participants in all three rounds: a very small number of research participants dropped out of the second round of data collection and a few more at the third and final round. In some cases where girls and young women dropped out of the research after the first round of data collection, including India and Nicaragua, additional participants became involved. Seventy-one interviews were conducted in round one, sixty-eight in round two and sixty-three in round three.

The interview templates for all three sets of data collection comprised of between six to eight questions, with additional sub-questions. Using both deductive and inductive research methodologies the first round of questions investigated established themes, whilst the second and third rounds of interview templates explored themes that had begun to emerge from the data collected in the previous rounds, in order to explore particular topics in greater depth: including education and mental health, as well as global developments in relation to the pandemic such as the emergence of the vaccine. All questions were open-ended and intended to be explorative, offering the girls the opportunity to give as much or little information as they felt comfortable with.

The qualitative interviews were conducted predominantly using digital methods such as telephones, or video conferencing applications such as Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Zoom and Skype, which helped ensure the safety of both data collectors and research participants in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were held in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Arabic and Amharic, transcriptions and translations were mostly undertaken by in-country data collectors, whilst some transcriptions were completed by an online service.

SAMPLING

Purposive sampling was employed, and a selection-criteria based on gender and age was applied. Research participants were female and aged between 15-24, drawn from Plan International's programme participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was undertaken through content and sentiment analysis using qualitative NVivo software. A combination of deductive and inductive coding techniques, using a hierarchal coding frame, were employed. Whilst the coding approach was predominantly deductive, it was necessary to allow some inductive coding to enable new themes to emerge.

ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING

Qualitative interviews were conducted by two members of Plan International staff. Information sheets were provided ahead of time and informed consent was given prior to the interviews, verbal consent was also given to record the interviews. Ongoing informed consent was also sought verbally before round two and three of data collection as an important part of ethical practice across a study over time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection, analysis and write up process. The girls and young women have chosen pseudonyms to be used in the report.

Ethics approval for the research was granted by two international children's rights academics from the Department of Public Law and Jurisprudence, University of the Western Cape in South Africa and Professor of Children's Rights in the Developing World, University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ACROSS ALL 3 ROUNDS OF DATA COLLECTION BY COUNTRY

COUNTRY	ROUND 1 JUL – AUG 2020	ROUND 2 OCT 2020	ROUND 3 DEC 2020 – JAN 2021
Australia	5	5	5
Brazil	5	4	4
Ecuador	5	5	5
Egypt	5	5	5
Ethiopia	5	5	4
France	5	5	5
Ghana	5	5	3
India	6	5	5
Mozambique	5	5	5
Nicaragua	5	4	4
Spain	5	5	5
USA	5	5	4
Vietnam	5	5	4
Zambia	5	5	5
Total interviews per round of data collection	**71**	**68**	**63**

ENDNOTES

1. For detailed methodology please see Annex One.
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5. *"Coronavirus vs. inequality: How we'll pay vastly different costs for the COVID-19 pandemic?"* UNDP, 2020, https://feature.undp.org/coronavirus-vs-inequality/, accessed 27 August 2020.
6. Countries marked with I signify that Ipsos collected the data for the respective country, countries marked with K signify that Kantar collected the data and P signifies that Plan International Country offices collected the data.
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Cover photograph: A 15-year-old girl is pleased to receive her PeriodPanties to help her manage her menstruation, Mozambique. ©Plan International

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No photographs were taken during the course of this research.

About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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