



Thematic Brief | Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls in the Pacific

This Thematic Brief provides information and analysis about emerging impacts of COVID-19 on adolescent girls in the Pacific. It has been developed through the Support Unit for Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*) and in partnership with the Pacific Girl program. Pacific Girl, a program under *Pacific Women*, works with partners in six countries to support adolescent girls to reach their full potential.

Through a 10-year commitment, *Pacific Women* connects more than 170 gender equality initiatives supported by Australia and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries. It is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality. Providing technical, knowledge sharing and convening support to the portfolio of partners is the *Pacific Women's* Support Unit. The Support Unit's offices are in Suva, Fiji, and Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 Survey

This Thematic Brief draws on data and information from several sources, including the Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 Survey conducted by the Support Unit in June 2020. The survey sought to hear from Pacific girls about how they are feeling, what they are doing and how they are being affected during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey also provided an opportunity for girls to share their messages of solidarity with adolescent girls across the Pacific – some of their statements are shared in this brief. While not a representative sample¹, the responses from 21 Pacific girls aged 14–19 offer valuable insights into the issues adolescent girls are facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Five Key Messages

The key messages help explain underlying issues about how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting adolescent girls. *Pacific Women*, along with its Pacific Girl program, are working to support the specific needs of adolescent girls during the response and recovery phases of the pandemic. Crises are not gender-neutral and should not involve a gender-neutral response. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by crises. They face even higher than normal rates of violence and sexual abuse and loss of income and opportunity. They also undertake more unpaid domestic work in their homes and communities.

- **Disrupted education:** School closures have disrupted girl's learning and they are less able than boys to access online learning options. Girls are experiencing increased pressure to undertake domestic labour and care responsibilities for their families.
- **Increased anxiety and loneliness:** Particular impacts related to adolescent girl's age and developmental stage include: a loss of peer support, leading to depression and anxiety;² an increased propensity to boredom and risk-taking behaviours;³ and for those with online access, an increased exposure to predators, online harassment, exploitation and bullying.⁴
- **Feeling isolated and unsafe at home and online:** Prolonged school closures and economic recession due to the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to significantly increase the risk of gender-based violence, early and forced marriage,⁵ sexual exploitation and child labour.⁶
- **Increased care burden at home:** The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the burden of care on women and girls. Caring for siblings and children in the community, especially during school closures, and additional household work often falls to adolescent girls. This is because they are traditionally expected to assist their mothers and female relatives undertake the vast majority of unpaid domestic labour and childcare.
- **Disrupted access to menstrual hygiene and sexual health services:** Restricted movement decreases access to sexual and reproductive health information and services,⁷ while increasingly crowded living conditions impinges on girl's access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and menstrual hygiene management.



Message 1 Disrupted education: School closures have disrupted girls’ learning and they are less able than boys to access online learning options. Girls are experiencing increased pressure to undertake domestic labour and care responsibilities for their families.

Schools in the majority of Pacific Island countries were closed for a period of time since the end of March 2020. Rapidly adapting to distance learning has multiple challenges and has never been done on the scale required as a result of COVID-19 school closures.⁸ High poverty rates and limited telecommunications infrastructure mean that access to internet, smartphones and other electronic devices is patchy, unaffordable or simply not an option for many Pacific Islanders. Some students have access to a mobile phone, radio or television but students in rural areas may only have access to a radio. Even when girls do have access to technology, learning at home is an adjustment, given the distractions of family members and the increased care and work burdens in the home.

School closures exacerbate existing inequalities between girls and boys, including access to online learning. According to Plan International, boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls in low and middle-income countries and are 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone that can access the internet.⁹

Adolescent girls in the Pacific say:

One in four adolescent girls responding to the Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 survey say they cannot do their schoolwork as they do not have access to online learning. One in six say they cannot do their schoolwork as they have to work to help support their family.

For those able to learn from home, one in three say that they could do a little work from home, but they find it difficult to do school work on their own.

The challenges have not gone away with schools reopening. For those that have returned, the pressure to resume and fast-track their learning to prepare for exams can be overwhelming. Some adolescent girls will not resume at all. While four in five adolescent girls responding to the survey say they feel great about returning to school, new challenges have arisen for others.

One younger adolescent shared her concerns about transitioning to high school next year. Others expressed the fear that they may contract COVID-19 by people not doing the ‘right thing’ at school.

For older adolescents in their first years of university, the pressure to catch up on assessments and exams is leading to poor health outcomes, such as lack of sleep and skipping meals. For others, the social distancing measures put in place have required students to pay for mobile data to access online school content.

‘For me, during the time of COVID-19, I have to go back to my province for safety and for that it affects my studies, I don’t have time to do my studies and schoolwork.’

Solomon Islands, aged 17

‘Me returning to school will be a great help because I’ll have my teachers to help me out with things I don’t understand. Also, I’ll get to see my friends again after a long time.’

Fiji, aged 16

‘I have to look for a high school to go to next year so I need to get back to school to figure out how I’m gonna do it now with no external exams available this year.’

Fiji, aged 13

‘COVID-19 has impacted my life so much especially after the lockdown. School has resumed and we’re bombarded with tasks and assignments. I have not been getting enough sleep, not eating properly more like I skip breakfast and lunch and only have dinner because I make up for sleeping during the times I skip my meals. I stay up doing take home tests due the next day and also try to complete 3 assignments all due at the same time. I usually sleep at 3 or 4 am in the morning.’

Papua New Guinea, aged 19



Message 2 Increased anxiety and loneliness: Particular impacts related to adolescent girls’ age and developmental stage include: a loss of peer support, leading to depression and anxiety;¹⁰ an increased propensity to boredom and risk-taking behaviours;¹¹ and for those with online access, an increased exposure to predators, online harassment, exploitation and bullying.¹²

With the ongoing uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and removal of peer and family support structures, many adolescents are facing worse psychosocial outcomes.

There are a range of factors contributing to feelings of anxiety in adolescents as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including families’ decreased income, the fear and anxiety being felt by parents being passed to adolescents and the fear of losing loved ones.¹³

Adolescent girls in the Pacific say:

Three in five adolescent girls responding to the survey say they are sometimes, quite often or always anxious or stressed because of COVID-19. They are feeling stress and anxiety at all levels from the global big picture, to their own country’s capacity to deal with an outbreak, to the wellbeing of their communities, their families and themselves.

‘I am stressed and anxious about the number of deaths in the world.’
Fiji, aged 11

‘I feel stressed and anxious because I was afraid that my family or friends might get COVID-19.’
Solomon Islands, aged 16

Four in five adolescent girls responding to the survey say they feel lonely because of COVID-19. When asked if they wanted to explain why they feel lonely, they cited the isolation caused by social distancing and stay at home restrictions as contributing factors.

Message 3 Feeling isolated and unsafe at home and online: Prolonged school closures and economic recession due to the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to significantly increase the risk of gender-based violence, early and forced marriage,¹⁴ sexual exploitation and child labour.¹⁵

Feeling isolated and unsafe at home

Violence in the home (particularly men’s violence against women and girls) continues to be reported in Pacific Island countries in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶ While violence against women and girls is a result of gender inequality, there are several factors that increase the risk of violence in the home, both between partners and by caregivers against children. These include: increased stress in the home due to loss of income; isolation from other family members and friends; limited movement outside the home; and increased anxiety.¹⁷

Combined with school closures, this may result in an increase of incidences of violence in the home going unreported.

‘Because I don’t have friends to play with, don't have any trusted family member(s).’
Papua New Guinea, aged 16

‘I sometimes miss my friends and classmates. Also when you're the youngest in the family and all your siblings are married and have a family you tend to feel alone.’
Fiji, aged 17

‘Because I'm not able to express my anxiety to anyone.’
Fiji, aged 19

Vulnerable adolescents also face specific, gendered risks. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) youth forced to shelter at home with family members may face emotional or physical abuse. Already, girls with disabilities face high levels of sexual violence and isolation with abusive carers and/or



family members. This is exacerbated during a crisis¹⁸ when vulnerable girls have even less access to outside support and help because of closed services and facilities, quarantine and social-isolating measures.

Importantly, child labour is heightened in times of financial shock, such as illness, disability or parents' loss of income.¹⁹ Without the credit or savings to support families in times of financial shock, adolescents are likely to be engaged in income generating activities.

Adolescent girls in the Pacific say:

Two in five adolescent girls who responded to the survey say they feel unsafe at home and/or unsafe with their intimate partner at times. They talk about the stresses of performing well at school, the pressure caused by family members losing income and excessive drinking of family or community members as contributing factors to why they do not feel safe at home.

'It is a tough situation. The only bread winner in the family has lost his job and suffered from heart attack because of the tension. Financial crisis.'

Fiji, aged 20

Feeling unsafe online

Isolation measures such as schools closing and time spent away from peers has increased opportunities for offenders to target children spending more time online.²⁰ Because children are feeling lonelier and more anxious during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are likely to be more willing to engage online with people they do not know.

In addition, social media platforms have reduced their human moderators working from offices and made a temporary shift to automated content moderation, increasing the response time to review potentially harmful content and the number of potential mistakes made. Europol has reported increased online activity by people seeking child abuse material as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence of this behaviour includes postings via online forums by offenders who are 'welcoming opportunities' that greater isolation, less supervision and greater online exposure brings to engage with children and adolescents.²¹

Adolescent Girls in the Pacific say:

Half of the adolescent girls that responded to the survey say they sometimes feel unsafe online. There is limited detail available about why they feel unsafe. The move to remote learning and increased use of online engagement may be a recurring feature in adolescent girls' lives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, making this is an issue that requires attention.

Message 4 Increased care burden at home: The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the burden of care on women and girls. Caring for siblings and children in the community and additional household work often falls to adolescent girls as they are traditionally expected to assist their mothers and female relatives undertake the vast majority of unpaid domestic labour and childcare.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the burden of care on women and girls. Caring for siblings and children in the community often falls to adolescent girls as their mothers and female relatives manage the double or triple burden of women attempting to care for children, generate income and undertake the majority of domestic labour.

Women and girls spend 4.1 times more time than men on unpaid care work in Asia and the Pacific, including cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood and washing.²²

This burden of care, including unpaid domestic labour, has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and girls are taking on additional work caring for children who are home from school, as well as older, unemployed or recently homeless relatives.²³ There have also been reports of concerns over food and labour. Women are obliged to feed and care for relatives who have migrated back to rural areas as a result of losing their jobs, or government policy (such as in Tuvalu and Solomon Islands).



Adolescent girls in the Pacific say:

Three in five adolescent girls responding to the survey say they sometimes or always look after younger children in their families and communities. In a rapid assessment, Fiji

Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM), found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 20 per cent of girls and young women surveyed experienced compounded challenges to balancing gender role expectations with education and work. Care responsibilities are a key barrier. Participants in FWRM’s GIRLS program reported that they are undertaking more domestic work at home, particularly those who are the eldest sibling. Similarly, Talitha Project in Tonga shared that during the two weeks of lockdown in March 2020, girls said they had challenges balancing schoolwork with domestic and care work at home.

‘Most of the time I am busy with too much chores I do not go and see my friends.’
Papua New Guinea, aged 16

Message 5 Disrupted access to menstrual hygiene and sexual health services: Restricted movement decreases access to sexual and reproductive health information and services,²⁴ while increasingly crowded living conditions impinge on girls’ access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and menstrual hygiene management.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing major disruptions in family planning and sexual health services. Key issues include: health services are limited or closed; outreach services are cancelled; mobility restrictions have been imposed (resulting in greater surveillance by parents and male partners); women and girls are unable or unwilling to visit clinics and hospitals due to fears of contracting COVID-19; and supply chains of contraceptives are disrupted.²⁵ The United Nations Population Fund estimates that the impacts of COVID-19 could result in 47 million women and girls globally being unable to use modern contraceptives. This could lead to an estimated 7 million unintended pregnancies.²⁶

International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) has reported that its nine national Pacific member associations had to cancel more than 25 mobile clinics and outreach activities and halt services at 75 community-based distribution sites. This has significant potential consequences for women and girls who rely on these services. Several Pacific Island countries have reported commodity shortages, including for family planning. Three of IPPF’s member associations have already experienced shortages in commodities including contraception and pregnancy tests with three more facing delivery delays.²⁷

Pacific Island girls already face multiple barriers managing their menstruation and maintaining menstrual health safely, comfortably and with dignity. Previous *Pacific Women* research showed that negative cultural attitudes toward menstruation in some areas of the Pacific, plus taboos associated with menstruation, impinge on girls’ health, self-esteem, physical activity and attendance at school.²⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic has made managing menstrual health even more challenging. Crowded living conditions due to lockdown, unemployment and poverty leads to: restricted access to private and hygienic WASH facilities to help change, clean and dispose of sanitary products; potentially less access to information about menstrual hygiene management; and reduced access and availability of clean water to help manage periods.²⁹ Organisations advocating for menstrual health have highlighted the impact of the pandemic on girls’ access to period products due to shortages and disrupted supply chains.³⁰

Adolescent girls in the Pacific say:

One in four adolescent girls responding to the survey say COVID-19 affects the way they manage their periods and sexual health, such as family planning and safe sex.

‘I have to leave Honiara and go back home for safety but I didn’t bring any girls’ stuff with me, so I use pieces of cloth during period.’
Solomon Islands, 16



What can be done?

Pacific adolescent girls have the ability and insight to help themselves and their communities respond to the multiple and intersecting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pacific Island countries. Empowerment programs which build their self-esteem, solidarity and sense of agency will increase girls' opportunities in an uncertain economic and social climate and strengthen community resilience.

A study from the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone demonstrated the advantages of empowering adolescent girls during crises. It found that in villages where empowerment programs had been in place, girls and young women who were engaged in the programs were more likely to return to school and take on income generating activities. In these communities only, half as many girls dropped out of school once it resumed; and girls spent a significantly lower amount of time with men, resulting in a lower number of adolescent pregnancies.³¹

Creating space for adolescent girls to develop their sense of agency will increase positive outcomes for the girls themselves and their communities, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adolescent girls in the Pacific say:

Four in five adolescent girls responding to the survey understand the symptoms of COVID-19 and the recommended strategies for slowing transmission of the virus.

Seven in 10 girls responding to the survey source information about COVID-19 from social media, with half saying they also get information from radio and newspapers and one in three saying they get information from TV.

Four in five girls responding to the survey would speak up if they saw people their own age engaging in an activity that goes against the advice to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Two in three girls responding to the survey want to share information with people their own age and their community. Half want to share information online and be part of their community's response to the pandemic.

'I just sometimes sit back and think that COVID-19 is a very dangerous thing for us people, I feeling very anxious and also need more advice from TV and social media for more information.'

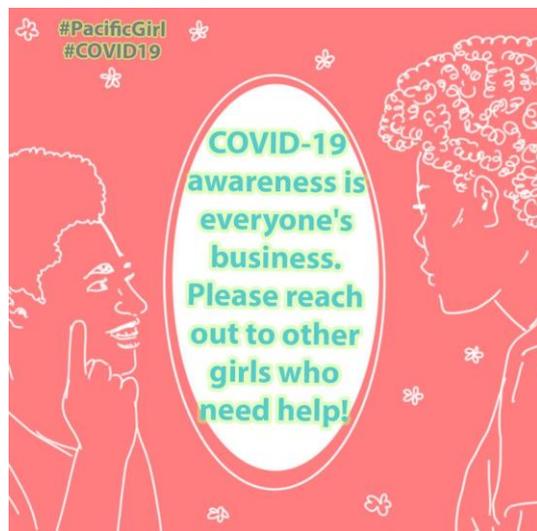
Solomon Islands, aged 17

'I want to be part of my school response.'

Papua New Guinea, aged 16

COVID-19 Survey: Girls sending girls messages of solidarity

Pacific girls were able to send messages of support to each other, through the Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 Survey. These messages were published and shared across social media channels in the Pacific. The *Pacific Women* [Facebook album](#) shares these messages of sisterhood, support and solidarity to Pacific adolescent girls. New messages can still be submitted through the *Pacific Women* Support Unit via the online link: <https://pacificwomen.typeform.com/to/YVmg1i5>





How are Pacific Girl's partners responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Chuuk Women's Council: Young Women's Empowerment Program

In the Federated States of Micronesia, Chuuk Women's Council aims to reach 150 marginalised girls through its young women's empowerment course. The curriculum focuses on sexual and mental health, healthy relationships and developing future goals. Chuuk Women's Council has conducted COVID-19 awareness workshops and distributed COVID-19 care kits to adolescent girls in their training communities.

Equal Playing Field: Safe Schools, Strong Communities

In Papua New Guinea, Equal Playing Field seeks to reduce violence by educating girls and boys about the importance of respectful relationships, using sport as an entry point. The project aims to reach adolescents (up to 6,000 girls) and work with teachers on establishing Safe Schools Frameworks. Equal Playing Field has set up COVID-19 awareness booths at the University of Papua New Guinea and is providing ongoing training with teachers to better support adolescent girls during the pandemic.

Fiji Women's Rights Movement: Girls Arise

Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) is working with girls aged 10–12 to build their life skills and confidence. FWRM conducted a rapid assessment on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young women and girls in Fiji and has continued to extend activities to girls outside the capital Suva. Initially, this was through online, remote engagement and now FWRM is easing back into direct engagement (in line with Fiji's social gathering restrictions). The project is developing an adolescent girls' toolkit and advocates on girls' issues with decision makers.

Talitha Project: My Body! My Rights!

In Tonga, Talitha Project aims to reach 375 girls aged 10–14 in four locations, including outer islands. Talitha Project was actively engaged with the national COVID-19 taskforce and was also engaged in post-tropical cyclone Harold relief. The project works to improve community perceptions of girls' value, amplify girls' voices through creative media and train girls on health, sex and sexuality education and self-esteem.

CARE Australia (Vanuatu): Laef blo mi, vois blo mi

In Vanuatu, CARE is working with girls aged 12–19 in rural and remote areas of Tafea province. CARE continues to extend life skills and respectful relationships education to younger adolescents in schools, including around 800 adolescent girls. The program includes male peers, teachers and families to ensure girls are safe and respected. In response to COVID-19 restrictions during lockdown, CARE developed home resources for ongoing support to adolescent girls and boys during school closure.

Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Solomon Islands: Girls Rise Up!

In Solomon Islands, the YWCA, in partnership with CARE Australia (Vanuatu), supports at-risk girls to develop their confidence, skills and knowledge and to establish supportive peer networks. Girls are given the opportunity to safely advocate on issues that affect them, while service providers support the needs and priorities of the girls. The YWCA has included COVID-19 awareness in all its activities with girls and mentors. In addition, YWCA (with Live and Learn Solomon Islands and CARE Australia through the Australian Humanitarian Partnerships program) will implement specific COVID-19 response activities focusing on providing hygiene promotion and hygiene kits to adolescent girls and at-risk women and some targeted livelihood support to young women.



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