

The COVID-19 pandemic has already had a devastating impact on the world's health, economy, and society at large. As countries go into lockdown, young people and young women and girls, especially those that are marginalized on the basis of their skin color, ethnicity, belief, class, employment, administrative status, ability, indigeneity, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, among others, are already being disproportionately impacted by the consequences of this pandemic.

Young people in many countries already struggle to receive adequate sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, and as certain health services are scaled back, young people face further barriers in accessing essential SRH care. Certain services, such as abortion care may be considered non-essential and therefore become less available. This results in consequences such as lack of access to contraception, comprehensive abortion care (including self-managed abortion), and maternal, prenatal, and postnatal (or postpartum) health services, hormonal treatment for transgender people and gender affirming care; as well as increases in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, unintended pregnancies, and maternal mortality. UNFPA estimates that six months of lockdown will result in 7 million unintended pregnancies, 47 million women in low- and middle-income countries unable to access modern contraceptives, and 31 million cases of gender-based violence, with many safe spaces and shelters unable to take survivors due to restrictions put in place to combat COVID-19. Moreover, young women and girls will be particularly at risk, as programmes aimed at ending early, forced and child marriage and female genital mutilation and/or cutting (FGM/C) will be affected, leading to a predicted 2 million more cases of FGM/C than would normally have occurred, and 10 million more early, forced or child marriages, both over the next 10 years.

The economic downturn resulting from COVID-19 is also strongly impacting young people worldwide. Unemployment rates have risen across all age groups, but young people are more likely to find themselves unemployed, due to working in sectors that are not deemed essential that are more affected by shutdown policies. A recent study conducted in the UK found that nearly 2 in 5 of people aged 16-24 who were working prior to the pandemic are currently unemployed, and this trend is almost certainly reflected in other countries as well. Young people are twice as likely as adults to be temporarily employed, of which almost 80% are working in informal jobs; this figure reaches up to more than 95% in developing countries. Particularly in rural areas, youth are 40% more likely to be in casual wage work without a contract. Those working in sectors deemed essential do so at risk to their health, and studies show that women are more likely to still be working in essential sectors. Further financial challenges and stressors placed on families can put youth and children at risk of entering into child labour to earn money or be forced into harmful working conditions where they are at increased risk of sexual abuse or exploitation. Furthermore, young people, especially young women and girls, are already more likely to engage in work that is essential but unpaid, and this burden will only increase with this pandemic, particularly having an effect on mental health. For one, prevention of COVID-19 requires frequent access to water and sanitation, which will result in women and girls more often having to collect water for the household. With more children home from school, young women and mothers will spend more time caring for dependents. Domestic violence during the pandemic has already increased, but factors such as having children home can lead to further increases in

violence. Moreover, policies implemented to contain Covid, including those requiring isolation, especially which penalize non-compliance, do not take into consideration the widespread vulnerability and homelessness among lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming youth, who are up to 120% more likely to grapple with homelessness than young people who do not identify as such. Furthermore, LGBTI and GNC youth may experience an increase in homophobic and transphobic violence, or harassment, including from family members, by being forced into situations of lockdown in hostile environments.

Young people will also feel a heavy social impact from COVID-19. Youth in conflict-affected countries will face further vulnerabilities, as armed conflict has continued and even escalated in some countries over the past few months. This affects the ability of young people in conflict areas to access their rights to health and education and exposing them to further risk of violence. Education has been disrupted, with 89.5% of the world's student population currently out of school. This leads to a backslide on gender equality, as education is proven to be the most necessary tool to achieving empowerment. With the rise of adolescent pregnancies during the crisis, fewer young women will return to school when institutions eventually reopen, and families may choose to keep younger household members employed or at home instead of at school so they can continue to contribute to the household. Comprehensive sexuality education will take a back seat, resulting in a lack of knowledge on issues on SRHR and will lead to the issues discussed above. Furthermore, the lockdown decreases access to political participation, as political and social spaces for engagement and systematic change are inaccessible (on the local, national and international level) due to restrictions imposed to tackle COVID-19. In a world where young people already face barriers entering advocacy spaces, COVID-19 ensures that all decisions that affect young people are made without them. Many young people lack access to reliable internet and thus cannot effectively engage in online and digital spaces, further exacerbating existing inequalities and preventing young people from engaging meaningfully. This is a pandemic that will greatly affect the future of all young people, yet we are excluded from the dialogue, and are at great risk of being left behind.

We call upon governments and UN agencies to ensure young people in all their diversity, particularly those from the Global South, are adequately represented and are able to engage in processes that directly affect their safety, security, health and well-being, in a manner that is not tokenistic but meaningful and impactful. Our health and economic and social well-being depends upon our involvement in making decisions that affect us, and as those that will inherit a post-pandemic world, we should have a significant role in engineering a better future.

Sources:

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