

Statement submitted by Plan International

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the the 54th Session of the Commission on Population and Development taking place from 19-23 April 2021.

Plan International, Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation and is in General Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest children's rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls in both development and humanitarian contexts. Working with children and young people in more than 75 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls, through our programme and influencing activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented global emergency, one which we know has had and continues to have a devastating impact on some of the most marginalised populations around the world, while exposing and exacerbating existing inequalities. Adolescent girls, especially the most marginalised, are particularly affected by the secondary impacts due to their age, gender and other intersectionality factors. Measures taken to control the spread of the virus—including school closures, remote working, physical distancing and movement restrictions—have caused disruption to education and livelihoods, and placed girls, their families and communities under extreme stress from health and economic burdens, crowding and isolation. These measures have far-reaching and long-term repercussions for the rights and well-being of adolescent girls, threatening progress on gender equality and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Currently, COVID-19 is leading to increased food shortages in countries across the world. Food scarcity affects vulnerable populations differently, leaving girls often more affected than other members of the household. In early childhood, boys and girls are equally likely to be malnourished though as they approach adolescence, the impact of malnutrition is more severe for girls and young women who are far more likely to suffer from anaemia (source: The World Health Organization Vitamin and Mineral Nutrition Information System). When families run drastically short of food, adolescent girls and young women may be sexually exploited and forced into harmful and risky behaviour to help families put food on the table (source: Plan International's report, *Living Under Lockdown: Girls and COVID-19*, April 2020).

At the peak of the crisis, over 767 million girls (source: UNESCO) had their education disrupted due to school closures, with serious implications for their learning, and further entrenching gender gaps in education. School closures deeply affect girls' health and lives more broadly, depriving them of vital services such as school meals, essential health information (including comprehensive sexuality education) psychosocial support and the protective environment that school often provides. As schools reopen, new challenges arise as adolescent girls are at highest risk of dropping out. School closures and the associated lower learning outcomes will also have longer term impacts on economies and development.

Research from the Ebola outbreak of 2014-16 found that when schools were closed, there was a steep increase in rates of unintended teenage pregnancy, sexual and gender-based violence and child marriage. There was also a 75 per cent increase in maternal mortality in just 18 months. In times of crisis, we know that girls are at greater risk of early marriage and pregnancy (source: UNFPA), making a return to education even less likely (source: Plan International's report, *Living Under Lockdown: Girls and COVID-19*, April 2020). UNFPA projections have projected that

significant levels of lockdown-related disruption over 6 months could lead to 7 million additional unintended pregnancies, as well as a rise in harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage. This is compounded by the fact that while out of school, girls are at increased risk of abuse and violence. As COVID-19 lockdowns and movement restrictions have kept girls and women at home, many countries have reported increasing rates of domestic and gender-based violence (source: UNFPA).

Furthermore, girls around the world face an unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work, which increases while they are kept at home and during times of crisis and economic downturn. During a public health crisis such as COVID-19, girls and women bear the additional responsibilities of looking after sick family members, putting their own health at greater risk and making it more difficult to keep up with remote learning. The specific health needs of girls risk being side-lined as a result of the pandemic, as the diversion of healthcare resources away from sexual and reproductive health, chronic illnesses and immunisation programmes disproportionately affects children and especially girls.

Recommendations:

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires reaching the furthest behind first and leaving no one behind. As one of the most marginalised populations, adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by the dual threats of the COVID-19 virus and increasing food insecurity and hunger. It therefore requires an integrated and closely coordinated response from donors, governments and all humanitarian actors. Most importantly, this response must include an awareness of the diverse and particular effects of these intersecting crises on adolescent girls and young women.

Plan International welcomes the focus on the impact of COVID-19 on population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development for the 54th session of the Commission on Population and Development. We believe that this focus will not only contribute towards the implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action through a COVID-19 lens, but also play a pivotal role in ensuring the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as women's and girls' rights more broadly. Thus, we urge Member States to ensure that the outcome of the session:

- Calls for the realization of the full International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action which is an essential component to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals;
- Focuses on the importance of reaching the most marginalized groups considering age, gender and diversity first and the principle of leaving no one behind;
- Highlights the importance of adequate domestic and international financial resourcing for accelerated implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action at all levels by ensuring continued flexible funding for existing humanitarian programs and simplifying procedures to enable humanitarian organizations to adapt to the rapidly shifting context of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Highlights the importance of collecting disaggregated population data based on income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, and geographic location to monitor progress and ensure accountability and that those further behind are being reached;
- Recognizes the importance of partnerships for implementation, including with Civil Society who are currently at the frontlines of the pandemic;

More specifically, in terms of the specific impacts of COVID-19 on adolescent girls, we urge Member States to ensure that the outcome reflects:

- The need to recognise, prioritise and fully fund sexual and reproductive health and rights as essential and life-saving in their COVID-19 response efforts, including implementation of the Minimum Initial Service Package for Reproductive Health in Crises;
- The continued access to sexual and reproductive health services and information regardless of lockdown restrictions, including keeping sexual and reproductive health clinics open and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services in person or via telehealth and where schools are closed, comprehensive sexuality education should form part of distant or online learning packages;
- The need for the design and scaling up of essential services to reach all girls and women in the most affected communities, including maternal and young child health, sexual and reproductive health information and services, clean water and safe sanitation, and accessible information about the pandemic;
- Expansion of gender-responsive, unconditional social protection and income support measures for the most affected and vulnerable people including adolescent girls; and
- Strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of girls and young women in all decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and needs are met and creating space for the role of youth and girl-led organizations in initiatives and coordinating bodies.