



## How the global pandemic threatens the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls

Isabelle Jost; September 2020

**If we think of the impact of Covid-19, in Switzerland or globally, we probably first think of the millions of infections and thousands of deaths that the virus has caused. We might think about lockdown measures and the challenges our favorite restaurant and small businesses in our neighborhood are facing because of these measures.**

What we likely will not think of immediately is how a virus affecting mainly the respiratory system has a huge impact on the lives of non-infected women and girls in low- and middle-income countries, their safety and their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

### Impacts of Covid-19 on SRHR

A recent publication by UNFPA shows that the reasons why Covid-19 has an impact on the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls are manifold<sup>1</sup>. Especially in countries with health systems which were already facing challenges before the pandemic, the rise of Covid-19 results in clinical staff being occupied with Covid-19 response or not being able to attend to patients at all because they lack the personal protective equipment needed to protect them to provide SRHR services safely. Health facilities might be crippled or offering only limited services, potentially leaving thousands of women and girls without access to services such as contraceptives, HIV care and treatment and care during pregnancy, delivery and post-delivery. In circumstances where health facilities are open and the clinical staff are working and equipped with the necessary protective equipment, women and girls might not be accessing services for various other reasons such as: they could themselves choose to stay at home fearing the virus or movement restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the virus. They may feel discouraged by the fear of being harassed at roadblocks or on the way to a clinic by police enforcing the lockdown measures. Women and girls also may choose to alter their health-seeking behaviors due to financial hardships. The pandemic, in particular the effects of lockdown measures, has significantly affected people's livelihoods and small businesses. In many instances, people are not being allowed to sell their produce on the streets, which has been a key income generator for many women and girls.

Considering the indirect impacts of Covid-19, UNFPA estimates that 47 million women might not be able to access modern contraceptives, resulting in 7 million unintended pregnancies if lockdowns last for 6 months and leading to major disruptions to health services<sup>2</sup>. Researchers from the Guttmacher Institute estimate that even with just a 10 per cent decline in pregnancy-related and newborn care, 1.7 million additional women and girls will be experiencing major obstetric complications, resulting in an additional 28,000 maternal deaths and 168,000 newborn deaths.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNFPA, April 2020, Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_impact\\_brief\\_for\\_UNFPA\\_24\\_April\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Estimates of the Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (Guttmacher Institute, April 2020) <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/ipsrh/2020/04/estimates-potential-impact-covid-19-pandemic-sexual-and-reproductive-health>

### **Young women and girls affected by the pandemic**

Even before the pandemic, young women and adolescents were facing multiple barriers in accessing comprehensive SRHR information and services from routine health-care delivery systems in many countries. In these settings, the SRHR needs of young women and adolescents were being addressed through special interventions by using schools and community-based activities as strategic entry points. The pandemic has also affected these special interventions. For example, in Zimbabwe, most of these special initiatives have either stopped completely or function minimally due to Covid-19 safety regulations and school closures. For many girls, school provided a safe haven where they could learn and grow. The closure of schools means that they might be forced to spend more time, in some instances, with an abusive family member. UNFPA estimates that six months of lockdown could lead to 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence perpetrated against women and girls of all ages.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, this trend has been noticed in Zimbabwe, where the number of reported GBV cases tripled within 3 months of lockdown.

As poverty is one of the key drivers of child marriage, the increased economic hardships for many families in low-income countries might push the parents to marrying off their girl children. Taking into account the expected long-term economic impact of the pandemic, UNFPA estimates that by 2030, an additional 13 million child marriages could occur.<sup>5</sup>

### **A time to work together and innovate**

As observed, the impact of Covid-19 goes far beyond direct health impacts caused by the virus and has severe and often deadly consequences for women and girls. Covid-19 will be with us for some months if not years to come, therefore it is of utmost importance that development practitioners, NGOs, UN Agencies and donors work together to ensure availability of reproductive health commodities and continuity of comprehensive SRHR information and services during the response and recovery phases of the pandemic. It is important to continue efforts in raising awareness, responding to and preventing gender-based violence and supporting women and girls who are most at risk of being exposed to violence. To achieve this, new forms of collaborating and strengthening partnerships are critical as well as finding innovative approaches to support service providers at all levels, including midwives, nurses and doctors who are risking their own lives to save others, notably women and girls. New strategies to reach out to young people with comprehensive sexuality education and psychosocial support will empower young women and girls to stand up for their rights and protect themselves from violence, unplanned pregnancies and STIs. Men and boys need to be involved as key allies in order to achieve long-lasting change beyond the impact of this global pandemic. It is important to keep working together towards gender equality and stop harmful norms and practices, as well as address gender stereotypes.



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UNFPA is the United Nations agency for sexual and reproductive health. UNFPA's mission is to create a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and the potential of every young person is realized.

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<sup>4</sup> UNFPA, April 2020, Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_impact\\_brief\\_for\\_UNFPA\\_24\\_April\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.