**Plan International, Inc.**

**SUBMISSION TO THE REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE REALISATION OF THE EQUAL ENJOYMENT OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION BY EVERY GIRL**

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the forthcoming report to the fiftieth session of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl, pursuant to resolution [47/5](https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/47/5), adopted by the Human Rights Council on 12 July 2021. We have responded to certain questions of the Call for contributions.

Plan International, Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation and is in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC. 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.

1. *The most important* ***challenges and barriers that girls have been facing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic****, at each level of education, namely:*
   * *At early childhood development, care and pre-primary education*
   * *At primary and secondary education*
   * *At technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*
   * *In catch up, non-formal and literacy education for those who have not received formal education or dropped out of school*

*And in relation to the following elements of the right to education:*

* + *Availability (including availability of online or remote education in case of school closures);*
  + *Accessibility (including physical accessibility, affordability, and access without discrimination);*
  + *Acceptability (including quality of education);*
  + *Adaptability (adapted to the needs of students and of societies).*

**Overview**

UNESCO estimated that about 24 million students from preprimary to tertiary education, including 11.2 million girls and young women, were at risk of not returning to education institutions (care centres, schools, universities, other training institutions) in 2020, across 180 countries and territories. 10.9 million of those students, including 5.2 million girls, are in primary and secondary level[[1]](#footnote-1). Factors contributing to school dropout include: financial constraints and pressure to take up employment, household chores, childcare, especially when parents or caregivers are ill or have passed away, early and forced marriage and/or early and unintended pregnancy, with girls being particularly vulnerable, and fear of resurgence of the virus. Loss of learning time and learning gaps incurred during school closure may also further drive disadvantaged learners away from education. Where remote learning has not been effective, learners may become disinterested in education, even after schools reopen[[2]](#footnote-2).

**Availability**

“Usually I spend my time reading, doing homework or helping my mom tidy up the house. Studying at home makes me miss school so much. If only I had access to technology, I could ask my teacher directly. In my house only, my dad has a mobile phone that I can borrow from time-to-time.”

Angel, Indonesia[[3]](#footnote-3)

A study, from the African Child Policy Forum, which interviewed girls aged between 14 and 19 years old in Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Ethiopia and Somalia, highlighted inequality in access to education exacerbated by COVID-19. In Ethiopia for example, study respondents in urban areas explained that while lockdown was very different to being in actual school, they still had opportunities to maintain their studies via television and mobile phones. However, for girls in rural areas without electricity or access to mobile phones, the lockdown completely cut off access to schools, peers and teachers without any alternative sources by which to maintain their learning or communicate with others. A girl from Ethiopia explained:

“School is closed and it is a very difficult situation for girls… Girls are already

challenged to stay in school even while teachers are fighting for them. But now

girls have no teacher to fight for them, so they might get married and drop out from

school. For me, I already have managed to convince my parents to keep me in school. I don’t have any fear of that.”

Teachers then play a critical role in mediating between girls and their parents to influence decision-making in favour of the girls, and the pandemic has eroded social structures that support girls and their education. Despite efforts to promote distance learning, many felt their education had at least suffered, and at worst been truncated. African countries have the lowest proportions of young people who can potentially be reached by remote learning programmes (UNICEF 2020). Girls said that being unable to ask questions to clarify their understanding of difficult topics, or not having the necessary materials to study, presented them with frustrating additional barriers to continued learning[[4]](#footnote-4).

A study profiling the perspectives of young activists working with Plan International in Asia pointed to similar issues. Participants emphasized that online working and studying are not equivalent to normal working or school settings. Online distractions available like games, the home environment make studying and working online more distracting and requires more effort from both sides to maintain connectivity, the sense of working together and discipline. “It takes much more energy and time to maintain connection and discipline in an online class.” Anh, Vietnam to Sreylin, Cambodia[[5]](#footnote-5).

More than two-thirds of African countries have introduced national distance learning platforms, but in general materials are only accessible in one or two major languages, excluding the vast majority of learners. Only 15 countries are offering distance instruction in more than one language. Most of these distance learning platforms also use digital and online media, whereas almost one third of the world’s young people, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa, are digitally excluded. In Ethiopia, only 2% of rural households have access to television, meaning the current TV-based learning options exclude the vast majority of learners in the country. When disaggregated by gender, in Sub-Saharan Africa women are 50% less likely to use the internet than men. 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. Even where smartphones and internet are accessible, the cost associated with using internet data is prohibitively high for many girls. Thirty seven percent of the girls contacted in Uganda as part of the Plan study ‘Under Siege’, reported having no access to television and radio-based study material run by the Ministry of Education. They said they relied on their school notes/handouts. Fifty percent of them reported not having any home school help. Girls from poor backgrounds and those living in rural areas are less likely to have a quiet place in their home to concentrate on their studies and/ or to get the necessary parental pedagogical support. The pandemic is magnifying the social inequities between girls and boys, and also between children living in rural and urban settings[[6]](#footnote-6).

In a survey of over 1,000 girls and young women aged between 14 and 24 in the Philippines, nearly half said they were only able to study for 1 to 2 hours per day, while only 12% said they still studied between 3 and 5 hours a day. This inability to study at home had two main causes: internet connectivity problems and the need to help with household chores, which girls are expected to perform more than the male members of their families[[7]](#footnote-7).

While access to the internet during lockdown helped both girls and boys continue their education during COVID-19, it can increase the risk of exploitation. The Government of the Philippines, for example, recorded 280,000 cases of cybersex trafficking against children between 1 March and 24 May 2020, totalling almost four times the number of cases recorded in 2019. Girls are at particularly high risk of such exploitation, especially if their parents are not familiar with computers and do not provide sufficient parental oversight, advice or guidance[[8]](#footnote-8).

**Accessibility**

“I also know two girls who have just gotten married during this pandemic. I truly think that education offers us a chance to a brighter future however, due to the current pandemic, many girls are giving up their learning opportunities for marriage to release the new economic hardship.”

Huu, Vietnam[[9]](#footnote-9)

From 2000 to 2016, the number of out-of-school girls in primary and secondary school dropped by 67 million[[10]](#footnote-10). The number of females in tertiary school rose by 41 million. COVID-19 has led to increased rates of out-of-school girls, unemployed young women, gender-based violence and lack of access to family planning. All of these impacts are leading to an increase in child marriage, disrupting efforts to end the practice. It is estimated that there could be up to 13 million child marriages worldwide between 2020 and 2030[[11]](#footnote-11).

Asia is home to more than half of the world’s 1.1 billion girls under the age of 18[[12]](#footnote-12). Rapid gender analysis conducted by Plan International in collaboration with partner agencies in several countries in Asia revealed that the shift to quarantine as a result of the pandemic led to isolation of learners with the shutdown of schools along with services and economic activities[[13]](#footnote-13). Reduced access to contraception and sexual health services contributed to increased risks of adolescent pregnancy and the frequently associated early marriage and school dropout.

A study led by a women-led Syrian partner of Plan International, explored with adolescent girls in Syria the impact of the multi-layered crisis, including COVID-19, on their lives. All girls interviewed agreed that COVID-19 had made education more difficult to access with many not being able to participate in online schooling due to poor internet connectivity, increased costs for online learning and lack of electricity. Attendance rates at training centres had also dropped dramatically due to forced lockdowns, limited numbers and the closure of child care services at the centres[[14]](#footnote-14).

Comparably, a study conducted using participatory research approaches with adolescents in North West and South West provinces of Cameroon, revealed the interlocking impact of conflict and COVID-19. Education, including vocational training and learning about sexual and reproductive health, tackling poverty, peacebuilding and freedom from violence all emerged as strong inter-locking themes. Community resilience, already undermined by conflict, is put under further stress by COVID-19[[15]](#footnote-15).

Girls face unique risks to gender based violence as a result of COVID-19. School closures mean that girls miss out of the protective elements associated with formal education such as life skills, access to essential information, and connections with existing referral pathways and forms of support. Without the daily routine of education, out-of-school girls are also more likely to experience violence at the hands of relatives, neighbours or others within their communities. Girls not in school are also more at risk of resorting to harmful work or falling prey to various forms of exploitation[[16]](#footnote-16). Research from 7 countries in East and West Africa[[17]](#footnote-17) highlighted that quarantines, stay-home measures and movement restrictions related to COVID-19 have brought potential victims and potential perpetrators together under the confines of the home setting, increasing girls’ close and constant exposure to abuse and violence[[18]](#footnote-18).

Schools provide safe havens for girls, where they serve as the first port of call for reporting child marriages and sexual violence. As a respondent from Nigeria noted, ‘school teachers are mostly the first people that abused children come in contact with and thus report the abuse to; when schools are closed, violence against girls in the home go on without someone noticing or trying to stop it’. Schools also serve as centres for girls to access sexual and reproductive health services, including information and sanitary materials. Many more also rely on school meals for food. The closure of schools has disrupted these protective mechanisms and services[[19]](#footnote-19).

**Acceptability**

In Africa, more than 26 million girls missed out on school meals as a result of school closures, more than 5.2 million of them in Egypt and more than 4.5 million in South Africa. The disruption of school feeding programmes not only affects girls’ access to food but it also aggravates the household poverty situation. For families, the value of meals freely served in school is equivalent to about 10% of a household’s income[[20]](#footnote-20).

All too often when shifting from offline to online learning, Comprehensive Sexuality Education is not included in learning packages. Even where it is, with connectivity still being a luxury rather than a right and an ever-widening digital gender gap, girls and young women from marginalized, poorer households are the least likely to be able to access this information[[21]](#footnote-21).

Feminist Participatory Action research conducted by Plan International in Zambia and Zimbabwefound that the detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school attendance and attainment are overlaid on those from environmental threats, estimated to disrupt the education of over 37 million pupils each year globally (Theirworld 2018). The findings of the research, conducted by groups of young women and allowing adolescent girls to speak for themselves, highlighted the importance of ensuring that young people have the opportunity to learn, understand, and act on climate change in their communities. This involves governments acting to soften the impacts of climate change on girls and young women especially those that affect their access to and attendance in schools. COVID-related school closures have therefore impacted efforts to reduce the impacts of climate change for the most vulnerable groups[[22]](#footnote-22).

**Adaptability**

Girls with disabilities, those living and/or working on the street, girl domestic workers, girls from poor backgrounds, including those living in crowded, urban slums, and girls in institutional and detention centres and in refugee camps, have been affected with disproportionately greater impact[[23]](#footnote-23).

1. *Concrete* ***measures taken to respond*** *to challenges and barriers faced by girls indicated above, at each level of education and in relation to the four elements of the right to education,* ***as a part of the short-term responses to, and mid- and longer-term recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic****.*

Listening to and amplifying the voices of children and young people, particularly girls in all its work, Plan International seeks to work with children and young people, facilitating them to speak for themselves. The ‘Hear it from the Girls’ report from Asia[[24]](#footnote-24) during the COVID-19 pandemic, cited in section 1, is an example of a concerted effort by the organization to amplify girls’ voices and determine the best ways to tailor response plans to suit their needs. The current section describes some of the interventions supported by Plan International and its partners, that have successfully mitigated impact of COVID-19 on girls’ education. ‘Living under lockdown’, also cited in section 1, draws on previous pandemics and the experience of COVID-19, to show how learning from the past, and listening to girls now, we can help protect them as this crisis unfolds and ease its long-term impacts[[25]](#footnote-25).

**Advocacy**

In its advocacy on the response to COVID-19, Plan International emphasises that authorities must support a multi-sectoral, integrated and comprehensive approach to the pandemic, including: Working with teachers and mobile phone companies to make distance education affordable and accessible to all; Giving girls and young women continued access to sexual and reproductive health information and services; Protecting families from hunger by providing direct support to vulnerable households and tackling gender-based violence and providing helplines and refuges for girls and women.

Policies and practice must be informed by an understanding of the different impacts of gender, age, poverty, diversity and vulnerability that govern people’s experiences of the pandemic. Education policy makers must make sure that girls are not discouraged from returning to school by being flexible in their approach to education and schooling and adapting future admissions procedures to the particular challenges they face. This must include making it easy for pregnant girls and young mothers, who often face stigma and discriminatory school re-entry laws, to return to school. The impact of the loss of education, of increased poverty and of rising levels of gender-based violence are all areas that need to be addressed if the force of the current pandemic is not to be unequally felt by girls and young women, destroying both their present and their future. Consultation is key: and this includes strengthening the participation of girls and young women in decision-making arenas to make sure they are heard, their rights are respected and their needs are met[[26]](#footnote-26).

In the Asia Pacific Region, Plan International’s response to COVID-19 in 15 target countries[[27]](#footnote-27) involves collaborating with governments and other partners to prioritise the needs of vulnerable groups, including girls, boys, young women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The organisation is driving changes in practice and policy at the local, national and global levels using the knowledge and reach that come from more than 80 years of experience in over 75 countries. The response focuses on incorporating the voices of all groups experiencing the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 in the decision-making process and ensuring that their perspectives influence the design of support, in order to meet their needs more effectively[[28]](#footnote-28).

**Programming**

Through a longstanding partnership with Barclays Bank, Project Suraksha in **India** supported a response to COVID-19 including an education component[[29]](#footnote-29). It aimed to enable 16,000 girls in the 8th, 9th and 10th grades to continue their education while schools were closed by supporting them with both education and hygiene kits. Girls in these groups of secondary education are more likely to drop out than girls in primary and higher secondary education, exacerbated by the negative effects of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of their families. As targeted schools were in Plan India’s programme areas, frontline workers continued to monitor girls and organized meetings once small gatherings were approved to encourage communities to return girls to school, and prepare the buildings with hygiene measures necessary to receive students.

In **Indonesia**, the Education Cluster and the Ministry of Education collaborated to develop home learning guidance, complemented by partnerships with both the National Alliance to End Violence Against Children and Indonesia Joining Forces who advocate with the Government and national task forces to ensure the fulfilment of children’s rights.

In **Nepal**, radio outreach included 288 curriculum-based radio schooling classes and child protection messages in programme areas.

In the **Philippines**, Plan International partnered with Y-Peer Pilipinas to disseminate youth-friendly information and educational materials and offer peer education sessions.

In partnership with the Prudence Foundation in the **Philippines, Cambodia** and **Thailand**, Plan International focused on influencing and advocacy for education and safe school practices.

An evaluation of COVID interventions in Plan International programmes in the **Middle East, East and Southern Africa**, found that community based interventions helped to improved continued access to learning. Strategies such as door-to-door, model households and community learning hubs as illustrated helped to enable learners to access some form of education. Such approaches depend on existing community structures and leadership, but were seen to yield results.

For example, in **Zimbabwe** mobile phones were used to connect learners with a community educator thanks to SAGE (Supporting Adolescent Girls’ Education) an accelerated learning programme being implemented by Plan International as part of the UK Aid funded Girls’ Education Challenge. It offers more than 21,000 girls aged between 10 and 19 the chance to ‘catch up’ their education at one of 132 community-based learning hubs being established in Zimbabwe over the next five years[[30]](#footnote-30).

Digital technologies and innovations have helped the **Asia-Pacific region** to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accelerated technologies were used to provide outbreak management and emergency relief, education for children and social protection for vulnerable communities. While these innovations can and should be used to mitigate further outbreaks, the region must remain conscious of green, inclusive and resilient technologies. In some cases, organisations that primarily focus on young female activism have used digital technologies to assist in the COVID-19 response. For example, WeMen View, an organisation that aims to counter sexual harassment in **Bangladesh**, has moved online and added several relief projects to support children and communities during the pandemic[[31]](#footnote-31).

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