**Plan International, Inc.**

**SUBMISSION TO THE REPORT OF THE** **UN Human Rights Office on Child Rights & SDGs: “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”**

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the forthcoming report of the UN Human Rights Office on Child Rights & SDGs: “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic” to be submitted to UN DESA in the lead up to the 2021 High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2021.

[Plan International](https://plan-international.org/), 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.

The outbreak of COVID-19 is already significantly impacting progress on the SDGs, amplifying existing inequalities and injustices and will profoundly affect the environment in which children and young people grow and develop as they face wide disruptions to their access to food, education, healthcare, protection and wellbeing. Along with their families and communities, children and young people are placed under extreme stress from health and economic burdens, crowding and isolation. Girls and young women, especially the most marginalised, are particularly affected by the secondary impacts due to their age, gender and other exclusion factors, which may be overlooked in light of a “unified” response to the pandemic. We *must* ensure that all stakeholders (Member States, UN, CSO) uphold their commitment to *Leave No One Behind* during this time and go even further, actively making sure that the voices of the most marginalized are put on the forefront.

**Stakeholders should:**

* **Recognize the impact COVID-19 has on equality and the fragile balance between progress and going backwards.  In the timespan of 11 months, much progress on the SDGs and children’s rights specifically have been undone, including increases in inequality, violence against children, child, early, and forced marriage, and pregnancy among adolescent girls. At this rate, over the next decade, the often-overlooked secondary impacts of COVID-19 could also result in 31 million new cases of gender-based violence, two million more cases of female genital mutilation and an estimated 13 million more child marriages.[[1]](#footnote-2) This means progress on sustainable development is fragile and efforts of Member States must be more firm and sustainable, so that even in times of crises we do not fall back and experience side effects outside of the crises like sexual exploitation of children and gender-based violence.**
* **Ensure the ongoing engagement of youth, specifically girls and young women, in national, regional and global SDG accountability processes, including the Voluntary National Review process and the High-level Political Forum. Specific attention should be paid to the engagement of marginalised girls and young women, included those with disabilities, and those who may lack access to technology. Girls voices and perspective are critical to an inclusive response to- and building back after- COVID-19.**

**Decade of action for the sdgs (2020-2030)**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented disruption for the development community. The majority of UN Member States have acknowledged the growing, global loss of human lives and the negative economic and social impacts of the pandemic. Additionally, COVID-19 highlights the deep divide between the Global North and the Global South, challenging the multilateral system and global solidarity on an unprecedented scale.

The negative short-and long-term consequences of COVID-19 cut across multiple sectors, including education, safety, and wellbeing.[[2]](#footnote-3) More than one billion youth, are no longer physically in school after the global closure of schools and universities. [UNESCO predicts](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef_0000373992&file=/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_5b075951-5390-4056-9935-4163d073d5f1%3F_%3D373992eng.pdf&locale=en&multi=true&ark=/ark:/48223/pf0000373992/PDF/373992eng.pdf#%5B%7B%22num%22%3A31%2C%22gen%22%3A0%7D%2C%7B%22name%22%3A%22XYZ%22%7D%2C63%2C777%2C0%5D) that 5.2 million girls in primary or secondary school are at risk of not returning to school.[[3]](#footnote-4) The potential for increased drop-out rates, will disproportionately affect adolescent girls, as gendered expectations of unpaid care and house work and the pursuit of informal, income-generating endeavours will be placed upon them. The disruption in education and learning will have medium and long-term consequences on the quality of education, and entry points for sustained decent work. These potential setbacks to development hinder the achievement of all SDGs, specifically SDGs 1, 4, 5, 8, and 16.

For many girls and young women, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: In their own homes. Prior to COVID-19, Gender-based Violence (GBV) was already one of the greatest human rights violations. In the previous 12 months, 243 million girls and women across the world have been subjected to sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner.[[4]](#footnote-5) As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, this number is likely to grow with multiple impacts on adolescent girls’ wellbeing, their sexual and reproductive health, their mental health, and their ability to participate and lead in the recovery of our societies and economy. These potential setbacks to development hinder the achievement of all SDGs, specifically SDGs 3, 5, 8, and 16.

UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has urged Member States to put girls and women at the heart of their responses to COVID-19. Similarly, SG Guterres has consistently urged Member States to put girls and women at the centre of their implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the 17 SDGs, and the overarching goal to *Leave No One Behind*. As such, we must ensure that girls and young women are engaged in both the response to- and recovery efforts post-COVID-19.

**Member States should collect both sex- and age-disaggregated data on the impacts of COVID-19 to ensure that the realities that adolescent girls face are both realised and used to inform long-term development strategies over this Decade of Action.**

**SDG 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all.**

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) violations continue to undermine and infringe on girls’ bodily autonomy and the agency over decisions about their bodies. In a challenging political environment, where SRHR are increasingly under attack, adolescent girls and young women are suffering the most from as their lives and futures are placed increasingly at risk. Adolescent pregnancy, child early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and gender-based violence continue to rob millions of girls around the world of their health and future.

COVID-19 is an acute healthcare emergency that shines a glaring light on the underlying fragility and inequalities of our societies, along gender and age dimensions. The crisis highlights the longstanding need to strengthen public laws and policies related to health care systems including the universal right to health and social protection for adolescent girls, girls’ human rights, and the execution of long-term sustainable development, as outlined in the 2030 Agenda /SDGs.

The burden of work is expected to increase disproportionately for women and girls in households due to their gendered role as primary caregivers for children, the sick and the elderly. This will exacerbate their time poverty to access information or services, exposing them to the virus and leading to fatigue that can heighten their susceptibility to the virus. This is likely to increase even further as schools and childcare services close indefinitely and as family members fall ill. Women in essential services face further time poverty as the care burden remains the same. Access to healthcare, already limited for girls and women because of inadequate staffing and lack of knowledge on adolescent and gender friendly approaches, are likely to worsen through this crisis. Furthermore, critical SRHR services may be reduced as resources are diverted, placing women and girls at risk of unwanted pregnancies or other health risks.

***Recommendations:***

* Governments should ensure that all adolescents and young people have access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and age-responsive sexual and reproductive health services to ensure they can make informed choices, free from discrimination, coercion or violence. CSE should be included in online and distance learning packages during school closures.
* Governments must make concurrent investments in CSE across health, education and related sectors to make the strongest possible contribution to health outcomes.
* Governments, UN Agencies and Civil Society Organisations must tackle the sensitive issues which continue to deny millions their right to sexual and reproductive health, such as access to safe abortion, CSE as well as sexual orientation and gender identity.
* Key stakeholders should challenge harmful norms and gender inequality, which hinder fulfilment of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of children, adolescents and young people, particularly girls and young women.
* Governments must address the significant barriers that prevent girls and adolescents from accessing universal health coverage, including user fees, out oy payment payments, physical distance and legal barriers.
* Governments should ensure that all survivors of sexual and gender-based violence have access to urgently needed sexual and reproductive healthcare and psychosocial support.
* UN Agencies and CSOs working in humanitarian settings must implement the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Reproductive Health in Emergencies.
* The report should outline that in crisis situations, girls and women’s access to essential sexual and reproductive health rights must continue to be prioritised, funded and recognised as lifesaving, along with essential health services for young children’s survival and healthy growth

**SDG 8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.**

***Decent Work***

A global challenge is the access for young people, especially for young women, to decent work. Young people are half of the world's population and the highest group at risk of unemployment and unstable employment. An estimated 628 million young people are not engaged in employment, education or training (World Bank). The situation is even worse for young women. They are more likely to be unemployed than young men, and when they do work, they are more likely to be found in part-time formal work and their wages are on average 32 percent less than men’s (World Economic Forum). Three quarters of women’s employment in developing regions is informal, vulnerable and unprotected (UN Women), and globally, women spend at least twice as much time as men undertaking unpaid care work (World Bank).

***Recommendations for the Report:***

* Address decent work in a holistic way that includes transforming socio-economic constraints as well as challenging existing gender roles. A primary avenue of accomplishing this is by ensuring women participate in decision-making processes.
* Promote targets 8.5 and 8.8, emphasizing the human rights impacts in addition to economic impacts of decent work, (or lack thereof).
* Report on the relationship between gender-based violence and decent work.
* Adopt gender-sensitive measures to address specific forms of child labour.

***Entrepreneurship***

Female entrepreneurs account for up to a third of all business people operating in the formal economy worldwide. However, the majority of those who live in the Global South are engaged in small and micro enterprises, with little potential for growth (International Financial Corporation). Women entrepreneurs are also more likely to be in the unprotected informal sector. Women often face barriers to starting a business because of social attitudes and norms, and those who do try are often confined to the informal economy due to the existence of systemic barriers (ILO). In 2016, according to the ‘Women, Business and the Law’ report, 90% of countries had at least one law that was discriminatory towards women in terms of economic empowerment.

In the context of COVID-19, as quarantine regimes hamper economic activities for both women and men, the impact on women’s economic status will likely be more negative due to the higher proportion of women in informal and precarious work or self-employment with little recourse to social protection measures. During the Ebola outbreak, social and economic impacts disproportionately affected women, because of various overlapping socio-economic vulnerabilities and pre-existing gender inequalities. Self-employment was the most important source of livelihoods for female-headed households. The breakdown of small businesses due to the Ebola crisis meant that many women lost an important source of income. Additionally, the loss of cross-border trade had serious impacts on women’s livelihoods. With many governments imposing border closures and movement restrictions, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have very similar consequences for women’s livelihoods. The economic impact of this crisis on many families may put pressure on caregivers to get children working, potentially leading to risks of sexual exploitation and an increase in child marriage and child labour.

***Recommendations for the report:***

* Integrate both an age and a gender dimension when reporting on entrepreneurship, linking targets 8.3 and 8.6 to targets 5.1, 5.5, and 16.7.
* Report on the root causes that prevent women from becoming entrepreneurs, including: discriminatory (customary) laws (i.e. child marriage, property and inheritance), poor access to formal financial institutions, time constraints due to family and household responsibilities, and patriarchal norms, linking targets 8.3 and 8.6, to targets 5.1 and 5.3.

**SDG 16 - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.**

***Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)***

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) can be largely categorised in three main types children who are sexually exploited in the context of selling or exchanging sex; the creation or distribution of child sexual abuse material; and trafficking for sexual purposes (including sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism). Child marriage can also be a form of CSEC when the former includes a monetary exchange. In all three forms, there is a clear gender dimension, with girls comprising the majority of victims. For example, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 96% of the detected victims of sexual exploitation through trafficking is women and girls.

It is important to recognise that while girls make up the vast majority of detected victims, commercial sexual exploitation of boys is likely much higher than current data indicate. For example, research conducted by the University College of London indicates that in the UK, as many as 30% of victims of CSEC are male. Although globally women and girls are trafficked in much higher numbers than men and boys, it may be that for certain subcategories of commercial sexual exploitation and in some regions, men and boys may outnumber women and girls. These gendered elements of CSEC remain under researched, and are critical for ensuring appropriate responses and eradication of such practices against girls and boys.

***Recommendations:***

* Governments must ensure a stronger gender dimension in the reporting on SDG Target 16.2 and 16.3 (and the corresponding SDG Targets 8.7) both when discussing trafficking, as well as when discussing violence.
* Governments should ensure that demand for commercial sexual exploitation of children is clearly addressed and strongly denounced, linking targets 16.2 and 8.7.
* The report should acknowledge that child, early and forced marriage can at times amount to commercial sexual exploitation, linking target 16.2 with targets 5.1, 5.2., and 8.7.
* The report should ensure consistency of terminology used in discussing matters of sexual exploitation, making use of the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (also known as the “Luxembourg Guidelines”).

***Sexual Violence and Abuse***

Sexual abuse and violence against children is a gross violation of their rights and continues to occur in every region of the world. Although boys experience sexual abuse and violence, girls comprise the majority of known victims of sexual violence (recognising that boys may be more reluctant than girls to report violence). UNICEF has estimated that around 120 million girls under the age of 20 (about 1 in 10) have been subjected to forced sexual intercourse or other forced sexual acts at some point of their lives.

In light of COVID-19, the implications of quarantine or home isolation can increase tensions in the home which may in turn increase the likelihood of intimate partner violence, child early and forced marriage, or violence directed towards children. At a time when protection, justice and health services are critical, these may be curtailed as resources are diverted or shut down to support the COVID-19 response. In some contexts, where state powers of surveillance and/or military presence is increased as a result of forced isolation, this may lead to abuses of power, increased threats of SGBV, and fear and trauma for those in conflict and post-conflict settings.

***Recommendations:***

* Within the report, whenever violence against women and girls is discussed, this should be linked to gender inequality, patriarchal social norms and unbalanced power relations as root causes, linking targets 16.1 and 16.2, to targets 5.2 and 8.7.
* Governments should prioritise the enactment or strengthening of national laws to criminalise sexual violence, including in marriage as well as violence and abuse committed online.
* Key stakeholders should acknowledge sexual violence that occurs in the context of child marriage, and married girls’ heightened vulnerability to all forms of violence, including sexual violence, linking target 16.2 to targets 5.2 and 5.6.
* Governments should recognize comprehensive sexuality education as a key strategy not only for empowering women and girls but for addressing the harmful social norms that perpetuate sexual violence against them, linking targets 16.1 and 16.2 to targets 3.7, and 5.6.

***Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM)***

While boys are also married as children, child marriage disproportionately affects girls, with 12 million girls marrying each year before the age of 18 (UNICEF).

Given the complex and interlinked causes and consequences of child marriage, the most effective policy

and programme interventions are those that take a holistic approach. This is more important than ever with COVID-19 putting at risk recent progress, potentially resulting in an additional 13 million child marriage cases worldwide between 2020 and 2030, as per UNFPA predictions.

***Recommendations:***

* Governments should set the minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys at 18 in national law, with no exception, linking targets 16.1, 16.2, and 16.3, with targets 5.3
* The report should refer to girls who have been married at a young age as “married girls” to avoid removing all agency by solely referring to them as “victims”, and promote their empowerment and active participation.
* The report should highlight the role of men and boys in eliminating child marriage.
* The report should acknowledge that child marriage can under some circumstances amount to slavery or trafficking, linking targets 16.2 to target 8.7.
* Key stakeholders should prioritise support to girls who are already married.
* Governments should include comprehensive sexuality education in national curricula, as necessary for changes in gendered power imbalances and addressing gender inequality, the root cause of child marriage, linking target 16.2, with targets 3.7, 5.1, and 5.6.

***Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)***

Today, there are about 200 million girls living in about 30 countries who have experienced FGM (UNICEF). Usually performed between infancy and 15 years, FGM has no actual health benefits (WHO). As the practice has gained more awareness, many countries have opted to medicalise the procedure. This is not an acceptable alternative for a practice that is a human rights violation, which denies girls the ability to decide over their own body, and can have grave health consequences.

**Governments should put in place effective legislation banning FGM/C, including forbidding the medicalisation of the practice**.

***Recommendations:***

* The report should highlight that female genital mutilation is a violation of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls, and highlight comprehensive sexuality education as a key strategy to eradicate the practice, linking target 16.2, with targets 3.7, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, and 5.6.
* The report should explicitly mention gender inequality, patriarchal social norms, and control of female sexuality as root causes of female genital mutilation, linking target 16.2 with target 5.1.
* The link between child marriage and FGM should be emphasised, recognising the common root causes and the interrelations between the two harmful practices, linking targets 16.2 with target 5.3.
* Ensure that the importance of comprehensive sexuality education is highlighted in resolutions on FGM as a key strategy to prevent the practice and address its root causes, linking target 16.2, with targets 3.7, 5.3, and 5.6.

1. Goulds, Sharon, Fergus, Isobel, and Winslow, Esther. *Halting Lives: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and young women.* Plan International. September 2020. See more [here](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/final-draft-covid19-halting-lives_070920.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children*. Every Women Every Child. 16 April 2020. See more [here](https://www.everywomaneverychild.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_children_16_april_2020.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. # Mendez Acosta, Amina, and Evans, David. “COVID-19 and Girls' Education: What We Know So Far and What We Expect.” Center for Global Development. 2 October 2020. See more [here.](https://www.cgdev.org/blog/covid-19-and-girls-education-what-we-know-so-far-and-what-we-expect-happen)

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. # “Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic: **Statement by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women.” 6 April 2020. See more** [here](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic)**.**

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)