PRESS RELEASE

Girls at greatest risk as COVID-19 threatens to leave a generation of African children behind

The pandemic may undo decades of progress in child rights and gender equality

(NAIROBI / DAKAR / ADDIS ABABA): A whole generation of children in Africa is at risk of being left behind due to COVID-19 with girls likely to suffer the most, warns child rights and humanitarian organisation Plan International.

As the world commemorates the International Day of the African Child today, the organisation has expressed serious concerns that the pandemic might undo decades of progress in child rights in the continent and put millions of girls at great risk of violence, abuse and exploitation.

Drawing upon its extensive grassroot presence in 29 countries across Africa, Plan International is warning that besides losing out on education, girls – particularly in poor and marginalised communities - are facing heightened risks of hunger, child labour, trafficking, child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation due to the pandemic.

On a continent already battling food insecurity, climate change, conflicts and economic downturn, the virus is amplifying existing inequalities (including wealth and gender inequalities) and affecting the long-term environment in which African children will grow up.

“African governments responded quickly to the pandemic, but nevertheless COVID-19 continues to have devastating repercussions for the education, health, security and protection of children across Africa, especially girls,” said Roger Yates, Plan International’s Regional Director for Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa.

“In times of crises, we know that girls are hardest hit due to harmful social norms and double discrimination based on age and gender. As a consequence of the virus, some 743 million girls are now out of school. Many of them are unlikely to return, due to challenges such as teenage pregnancy or forced marriage, which often increase during emergencies.”

Angelina, 17, from Mozambique, said: “Things have become very uncomfortable for me since the state of emergency began. Being at home all day with my family is dreadful, because they are rushing me to get married.

“Sometimes I try to avoid the issue of marriage by doing extra chores or showing interest in my books, so they put less pressure on me or change the subject of marriage in conversations - but it keeps coming up and I don’t know how to respond anymore.”

Halima, 16, from Niger said: “I am really missing classes. Sometimes I try to study at home but the house chores are so much that I can’t revise my notes.

“I take care of my siblings as well as the house and the farm. I start working very early and go to bed very late. I pray the government finds a solution to this disease as soon as possible, so girls like me can go back to school. My dream of becoming a doctor should not be broken, please.”
School closures and stay-at-home orders have also resulted in a rise in cases of FGM in some African countries.

A recent case in Egypt involved three girls, all below the age of 18, undergoing FGM under the pretext of receiving a coronavirus vaccination. According to reports, a doctor went to the girls' house after their father told them they would receive a 'vaccination'. The girls were reportedly drugged before undergoing FGM. In Egypt, the practice has been outlawed since 2008.

In Somalia, the lockdown is being viewed as an opportune time to cut girls for supposed benefit of ample “healing” time. According to Sadia Allin, Plan International's Head of Mission in Somalia, the already bad situation of high FGM rate in the country is being made worse by the economic downturn that's seeing the cutters more aggressively market their services to earn an income. “They are knocking door to door to cut girls.”

The pandemic is exposing girls and women to increased risk of violence and abuse, including in their own homes, as stress from the outbreak exacerbates existing gender inequalities.

Those experiencing, or at risk of, violence may have trouble accessing relevant protection services, due to social isolation measures and the diversion or withdrawal of necessary funding and resources, including those for sexual and reproductive health, mental health and psychosocial support.

Kenya, South Sudan, Liberia, and Niger have all recently reported an increase in domestic, child and gender-based violence. As COVID-19 spreads across the continent, it is feared this will only increase.

Rotimy Djossaya, Plan International's Regional Director for West and Central Africa, said: “Regional and national authorities must continue to invest in and prioritise the protection of girls and young women from gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and FGM.

“While the virus continues to circulate and social isolation measures remain in place, current interventions must be adapted to ensure girls and young women can access these essential services.”

Plan International is calling on African governments to ensure:

- families are protected from hunger with cash assistance to vulnerable households.
- distance education for children is made accessible and affordable to all, especially rural girls and/or those unable to access the internet.
- helplines and refuges are provided to help protect girls and women from gender-based violence.
- girls and young women continue to have access to sexual and reproductive health information and services.

“While the impact of the global pandemic may have overshadowed this year’s International Day of the African Child theme: Access to a Child-Friendly Justice System in Africa, the spirit of it to ensure we are accelerating protection, empowerment and equal opportunities for children in Africa in line with the African Union agenda 2063 must not be lost. All stakeholders must work to ensure we do not undo decades of progress in child rights and gender equality.” said Samuel Norgah, Plan International African Union Liaison Office Director.

Plan International is responding to COVID-19 in more than 50 countries. The organisation
is raising **€100 million** to protect some of the world’s most vulnerable children and their communities from the impacts of COVID-19. The organisation’s response is focused on assisting girls, who are disproportionately affected by the crisis.

*Donate to Plan International’s COVID-19 appeal and find out more about our response [here](#).*

**Notes for editors:**

The Day of the African Child was established in 1991, to honour the hundreds of black school children who were shot while peacefully protesting for the right to be taught in their own language in Soweto, South Africa in 1976.

**Evidence of COVID-19 and its impact on girls**


- COVID-19 School closures around the world will hit girls hardest [https://plan-international.org/blog/2020/03/covid-19-school-closures-hit-girls-hardest](https://plan-international.org/blog/2020/03/covid-19-school-closures-hit-girls-hardest)

- REPORT: Going Hungry [https://plan-international.org/publications/going-hungry](https://plan-international.org/publications/going-hungry)

**To request an interview or for more information, please contact:**

Evelyn Wambui  
Regional Communications and Media Specialist (Nairobi)  
Email: [evelyn.wambui@plan-international.org](mailto:evelyn.wambui@plan-international.org)  
Mobile: +254 793269706

Jaire Somo Moutcheu  
Regional Communication and Media Lead (Dakar)  
Email: [jaire.somo@plan-international.org](mailto:jaire.somo@plan-international.org)  
Mobile: +237 677660377

Zecharias Getahun  
Communications Specialist  
Plan International African Union Liaison Office (Addis Ababa)  
Email: [zecharias.getahun@plan-international.org](mailto:zecharias.getahun@plan-international.org)  
Mobile: +251 987285467

Miranda Atty  
Global Press Officer, Plan International Global Hub (London)  
Email: [miranda.atty@plan-international.org](mailto:miranda.atty@plan-international.org)  
Mobile: +44 7989065738

**About Plan International**
Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children’s rights and equality for girls.

We believe in the power and potential of every child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it’s girls who are most affected. Working together with children, young people, our supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children’s rights from birth until they reach adulthood. And we enable children to prepare for – and respond to – crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

We have been building powerful partnerships for children for over 80 years and are now active in more than 75 countries.

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