



**THE STATE OF GIRLS' RIGHTS  
IN THE UK**

**Early insights into the impact of the coronavirus  
pandemic on girls**

**May 2020**

**The coronavirus outbreak is continuing to sweep the globe, causing the worst health crisis of a generation. First identified in November 2019, it is now severely challenging many of the richest countries in the world, with Europe and North America the current epicentres. Cases are now rising in some of the poorest countries, where health systems are fragile and the ability to mitigate the economic and social consequences is limited. While children's health appears to be less directly impacted by coronavirus than adults, the impact of the pandemic on children, especially girls, will be long-lasting.**

Through more than 80 years' experience working internationally, we know that health crises have a gendered impact on children and young people. We are already seeing this pattern in the UK, with increased reports of violence against women and girls, increased unpaid care work (shouldered by women), exacerbated economic gender inequality, reduced access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and gendered mental health issues.

Girls across the UK were already facing barriers to their rights, and many of these challenges will be exacerbated through the pandemic. Our recent report, *The State of Girls' Rights in the UK* found that between 2016-2019, 522 recommendations were made by international treaties bodies for improvements in human rights in the UK. All affected girls and over half were directly relevant. Concerns were raised in relation to mental health provision, child poverty, violence against women and girls, sexual harassment in education settings, amongst others, with many of these concerns raised by girls themselves<sup>1</sup>.

Robust analysis of the impact of the coronavirus measures on girls' rights is essential. Girls' rights are often invisible in data and policy making, and their needs often overlooked and unmet. When girls are young, they tend to be gender neutralised in services, policy and data as 'children' and subsumed into the adult-focused category of 'women' without consideration for the unique challenges girls and young women face.

This is no different in the current pandemic; girls' voices and experiences have been excluded from decision-making and debate, including in wider discussions about gender inequality, which tend to focus on the impact on adult women.

To start to fill this gap, we conducted a representative survey of more than 1,000 girls aged 14-21 across the UK. This report provides an initial overview and analysis of some of the wider issues facing girls during the pandemic, with recommendations for action. However, much more research into the impact of the pandemic on girls is urgently needed, with specific attention given to girls who are the most marginalised and least heard.

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# KEY STATISTICS

Since lockdown began in the UK:

**1 IN 5**

girls (19%) aged 14-21 have experienced public sexual harassment.

**28%**

feel less safe now than they did before, with regards to going out in public.

The most common reason was feeling that there are fewer people around to help if something happened to them (51%).

**1 IN 4**

girls (25%) have experienced at least one form of abuse, bullying or sexual harassment online.

9% have received unwanted pictures or have been asked to send intimate pictures of themselves.

14% have received negative or abusive comments on social media either from strangers or someone they know.

**11%**

of girls aged 14-21 have not been able to afford period products.

These girls are having to use makeshift products, such as toilet roll (54%), socks (11%), other fabric (8%) and newspaper/paper (6%).

**22%**

of the girls who can afford period products are struggling to access them, mostly because they cannot find them in the shops (64%).

**1 IN 10**

(10%) of girls and young women aged 14-21 have not been able to access their usual form of contraception. This rises to almost 1 in 5 (18%) for 19 year olds.

**66%**

of girls say they are learning less now than they were in education, while 19% say they are learning the same and 15% say they are learning more, signalling that the impact of school closures is affecting girls' education differently.

Violet, 13, East Riding of Yorkshire



# GIRLS' SAFETY AND PUBLIC SPACES

## GIRLS' SAFETY IN PUBLIC

The increase in violence against women and girls during the coronavirus pandemic, including the most serious forms of violence and abuse, has been widely reported, and it must be urgently addressed. This research specifically focused on adolescent girls' and young women's experiences of sexual harassment, which stems from the same harmful societal attitudes towards women and girls. We must work to prevent all forms of violence against women and girls, in times of crisis and beyond. Sending out the message that sexual harassment is not OK is one important element of this.

Girls have the right to safety in public spaces, but they regularly receive

unwanted attention from men and boys when they are out and about, and this is continuing throughout the health pandemic. Despite significantly reduced time in public places, one in five girls (19%) aged 14-21 have experienced public sexual harassment since lockdown alone. One quarter (26%) did not tell anyone about the experience, for a variety of reasons, such as believing they would not be taken seriously (26%), and thinking it would not be seen as a priority during the coronavirus pandemic (23%).

The UK Government now recognises sexual harassment in public as a form of gender-based violence. Sexual harassment includes a range of

**“ I haven't really been going out for walks because I'm isolating with someone who is in the high risk category. When I have though, it's usually at night, as that's when the fewest people seem to be out. Despite us being in a global pandemic, I still got a catcall last night. The worrying thing is that when walking out and about at night, there are fewer people around to help if anything potentially goes wrong. ”**

Josie, 22

behaviours, such as being followed, receiving unwanted sexual comments, staring, unwanted sexual physical contact, sexual exposure (for example, ‘flashing’) and ‘upskirting’ (being filmed or photographed underneath a skirt without consent).

Girls have already told us that they do not feel they have enough safe space and facilities in their local areas<sup>2</sup>. The pandemic is changing girls’ perceptions of their safety in public. Despite being able to exercise or go outside once a day, in reality, our research shows that too many girls are avoiding public spaces for fear of being unsafe. 28% feel less

safe now than they did before. When asked why, 52% said they feel there are fewer people around to help if something happened to them and 43% feel there are fewer places they could go to if they needed to get away from someone or a situation.

Lockdown measures allow for some time out of the home each day to exercise or shop for essential items, and girls need to be able to feel safe during this time. Better consideration of how to make girls feel safer in their local areas during the lockdown would help to create safer spaces for girls, now and in the future.

## GIRLS’ SAFETY ONLINE

As a result of the measures taken to address coronavirus, girls have more time to spend online and on social media. The relationship between social media and girls’ safety, as well as their mental health and wellbeing, is complex. 40% of girls surveyed felt their mental health had worsened during the lockdown. We asked these girls what was causing the decline. Spending more time on social media (37%) and more time on the internet (36%) were fairly common factors, while one in four girls (24%) felt the pressure from social media to do something useful with their time was affecting their mental health.

While social media can offer social connection and help tackle feelings of loneliness, it is not always a safe and happy place for girls. Depressive symptoms linked to social media use are higher among girls<sup>3</sup> and are connected to disrupted sleep (young people sleeping close to their phones, checking

regularly throughout the night and screen exposure at night time affecting melatonin production and circadian rhythm)<sup>4</sup>.

During the lockdown period alone, one in four girls (25%) have experienced at least one form of abuse, bullying or sexual harassment online. Broken down into specific behaviours, 9% have received unwanted pictures or have been asked to send intimate pictures of themselves. 14% have received negative or abusive comments on social media either from strangers or someone they know.

The online world can be an inspiring and empowering place for young people, but it is far from gender-neutral. We know that negative experiences online can lead girls to silence themselves online or stop using platforms altogether<sup>5</sup>. Girls should have an equal right to take up digital spaces, throughout this pandemic and beyond.

A group of young women are sitting together, looking thoughtful. The woman in the foreground has short, curly brown hair and is wearing a black t-shirt. She is looking off to the side with a serious expression. Behind her, three other women are visible, slightly out of focus. One is wearing a blue denim jacket, another a yellow shirt, and the third a white shirt. They are all looking in the same direction as the woman in the foreground.

Olamide, 17,  
Rochelle, 16,  
Matilda, 17 and  
Esther, 17, London

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

“

I feel safest in my bed. This was how I used to spend one day a week, what I used to call my bad days, now, it's every day.

”

Girls Shout Out participant<sup>6</sup>



The health pandemic is having a critical impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Our survey found that 40% of girls have experienced a deterioration in their mental health. The most common reasons include not being able to meet up with friends or family (75%), followed by feelings of loneliness (62%).

Other common reasons relate to coronavirus itself, as well as worrying about school and the impact of the pandemic on their futures, including: worrying about family/someone in the household catching coronavirus (51%), worrying about their future because of coronavirus (50%), feeling they have no purpose (43%), worrying about catching coronavirus themselves (43%), not being able to attend school (41%) and an increase in social media usage (37%).

Throughout this crisis, some people will experience the loss of loved ones to the coronavirus, placing families and individuals in very challenging, upsetting emotional states. At a time when mental health provision and youth services are insufficient, our *State of Girls' Rights in the UK 2020* report found that it seems to be girls and women picking up a

larger share of the emotional labour. The traditional gender role of girls as 'carers' is embedded in our culture, and girls have told us they want the emotional labour and burdens to be shared with the boys in their lives. During the pandemic, when mental health is worsening, relieving girls of this pressure is more important than ever.

Mental health support services were unable to meet demand prior to the pandemic, with waiting times of months<sup>7</sup>, increasing rejection of referrals or lack of access entirely<sup>8</sup>. Now they are under even more pressure. NSPCC's Childline counsellors delivered 900 coronavirus-related sessions to children worried about the impact of the pandemic in the first week of lockdown alone<sup>9</sup>.

A gender analysis and gender-aware response is needed, because girls are more likely to self-harm, experience depression and also experience depressive symptoms related to social media use<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, while rates are relatively low compared to other mental health issues, adolescent boys are more likely to commit suicide (through using more violent means), yet suicide attempts and ideation are both slightly higher amongst adolescent girls<sup>11</sup>.

**“ It's taken away the purpose from my life to progress. I'm stuck in an even bigger limbo and afraid I'll never get well enough to work. I ... just want to sleep this nightmare away. ”**

Girls Shout Out participant

# SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR)

## MENSTRUATION

Government-led period product access schemes are currently unable to fulfil their purpose due to the closures of schools and other public buildings. Therefore, many in need of period products cannot access them. Before the pandemic, two fifths (40%) of girls aged 14-21 had experienced having to use toilet roll because they could not afford period products<sup>12</sup>. In the relatively short lockdown period alone, 11% of girls aged 14-21 have not been able to afford period products. These girls are having to use makeshift products, such as toilet roll (54%), socks (11%), other fabric (8%) and newspaper/paper (6%).

Almost a quarter of girls (22%) have been able to afford them but still struggled to access period products, mostly because they cannot find them in the shops (64%), or because their usual source, such as a food bank, health centre or school, is either low on products or closed (21%).

Period products are essential, and as the economic impact of the coronavirus response starts to manifest, period poverty is likely to rise. Additionally, although mandatory Relationships and Sex Education will not come into force before September 2020 (which includes menstruation education), many girls who would have had this as part of their current school provision may not receive menstruation education this year.

The strong progress made on tackling period poverty across the UK this year must not be undone. The Government must find a quick solution to increase access to period products while the access scheme slows down, and our *Let's Talk. Period* learning briefings (2020) shows that uniting products with education is key to effectively addressing period poverty<sup>13</sup>.

## CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION

The lockdown period is also impacting girls' and young women's access to contraception. Our survey found that one in 10 (10%) girls and young women aged 14-21 have not been able to access their usual form of contraception. However, this differs according to age: while 87% of 14 year olds say this is not applicable, and 4% are not able to access their usual form of contraception, only 41% of 19 year olds say this is not applicable and 18% – almost one in five girls – cannot access their usual contraception. This is not applicable to the majority (57%) of girls surveyed at this time, and 33% told us they have still been able to access their usual contraception, however, the impact on those who cannot access it, or are unclear whether it is an essential reason to leave the house, must be understood.

Not all girls and women take contraception to prevent pregnancies; some take it to manage severely painful or heavy periods and some may need to alter their prescription to manage other negative side effects. Girls and women may have increased needs and reduced access to essential and time sensitive services, due to a rise in sexual activity and/or an inability to prevent unintended or

unwanted pregnancies. In addition, some women and indeed some girls may be experiencing sexual abuse, exploitation and rape, which may be increasing along with other forms of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence during the pandemic.

Adolescent girls were already facing stigma in accessing sexual health services, and not all are perceived to be adolescent-friendly. Throughout the pandemic, sexual health services must be widely communicated as essential, so that girls and young women know their rights and feel comfortable accessing the services they need. Furthermore, the lower age limit applied to data collection of teenage conception rates (and repeat abortions) which is currently 15 years, must be removed, in order to get a clearer picture of how the issue affects younger adolescent girls.

A positive development is the temporary introduction of abortion guidance, which now enables women and girls to access abortions during lockdown, by allowing both sets of early abortion pills to be taken at home. This helps to protect their reproductive rights and autonomy over their body.

# EDUCATION

Access to quality, inclusive education has been significantly reduced for all children and young people in the UK, to protect the right to life and to healthcare. Making the decision to reopen schools, colleges and universities should be based on science and reliable data modelling of different measures and outcomes.

School closures will result in an unequal level of education. At the time of writing it seems clear that the school system will not be fully operational before September, leaving girls out of full time school for six months<sup>14</sup>. While 15% of the girls in education state they are learning more now than they were in school, and 19% say they are learning the same, the majority (66%) say they are learning less, signalling that access to education is already becoming unequal.

Some children, including those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, will face significant challenges during this time and many are already falling behind. A new report by the Children's Commissioner for England<sup>15</sup> shows that children who live in noisy or overcrowded homes or temporary accommodation, who do not have access to the internet or a personal computer, or who have parents/carers who are less able to support them to learn, will be further disadvantaged.

Closures also deprive children and young people of protective environments and access to sources of lifesaving information and psychosocial support. Evidence suggests many vulnerable

children in the UK, such as those who rely on free school meals, are not turning up to school during the lockdown.

Children with disabilities will face significant barriers if distance learning materials are inaccessible, including children with autism and those with hearing or visual impairments. Similarly, children from minority or ethnic groups or refugees and migrants may be locked out of distance learning due to linguistic or cultural barriers.

Interventions are needed to prevent a negative impact on pupils' future opportunities, particularly those who would normally be taking GCSE, AS level and A level examinations, whose futures are now reliant upon less formal assessments. Many young people perform better in real examinations than in mock ones, and these young people will lose out on the opportunity to take final examinations. Complete anonymity of assessed work is required to remove unconscious bias (against the abilities of women and girls, ethnic minorities and disabled children) – which all humans have – and indeed conscious bias from the process.

Some local authorities are not allowing teachers to provide online lessons whilst some are, creating unequal and uneven access in different regions. As the UK enters an economic downturn, all children, including the most vulnerable, face the risk of fewer resources allocated to the education system.

## GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Our *State of Girls' Rights in the UK* report uncovered a shocking range of issues facing girls in the education system, before the pandemic<sup>16</sup>. Despite outperforming boys in attainment, subject choices are still highly gendered, affecting girls' career choices and leading to the overrepresentation of women in lower paid sectors. Issues related to sexism in school sports, sexist language in the classroom, gender-based violence, and racism

within the education system all arose for girls.

The coronavirus pandemic is unlike any crisis the UK has experienced in the past century. However, it also presents an opportunity to reassess and reconfigure the education system. Now, more than ever, we have the opportunity to strengthen critical elements of education policy, addressing past weaknesses and ensuring a more equitable future for both girls and boys.

From top: Dona, 17,  
Eva, 17, Eliza, 17, Liverpool



# PARTICIPATION AND VOICE

Girls, like all children, have the right to express their views on decisions that affect them, and to have their views given due weight. Before the pandemic, girls told us they did not feel heard by decision-makers. They did not feel their views were taken seriously and they did not feel represented by parliaments<sup>17</sup>.

Throughout the pandemic, girls' voices have been excluded from central decision-making and debate, and many issues that uniquely impact them have been side-lined. Girls' sense of invisibility

is exacerbated when they do not see their gender represented in Parliament and during Government press conferences on coronavirus.

Girls and the unique challenges they face were already invisible in data, policy and many services because of the gender-neutral category of 'children' and the adult-focused category of 'women'. Current discussions on gender inequality in the midst of the pandemic have also focused on adult women, with very little regard to the unique challenges facing girls.

Clare, 18,  
County Armagh



# RECOMMENDATIONS

It is more important than ever that the Government successfully protects, respects and fulfils the obligations of the international human rights instruments: securing the population's health and right to life, while ensuring people's other needs are met. Specific attention must be paid to the needs of girls and young women, who are protected by additional treaties and yet are the least heard in decision-making processes.

## 1 RECOGNISE THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

- While children's health appears to be less directly impacted by the coronavirus than older adults, it must be recognised by decision-makers worldwide that the outbreak will deeply affect the environment in which children grow and develop.

## 2 PROTECT GIRLS' RIGHTS:

- New Government measures to address the health pandemic must be proportionate, timebound and balanced against all other human rights.
- Each piece of responsive legislation passed must be scrutinised by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and, noting the significant reduction in its capacity in recent years, the Government must ensure EHRC is sufficiently resourced to do this.

# 3

## SUPPORT LOCAL GIRLS' ORGANISATIONS:

- Support and funding for local girls' and women's organisations must be prioritised, particularly those that work with the most marginalised communities. These include gender-based violence prevention and response organisations and sexual and reproductive health services. These organisations are critical to reaching vulnerable groups, such as those experiencing gender-based violence, during the pandemic.

# 4

## ENABLE GIRLS' PARTICIPATION:

- Government must urgently invest in mechanisms to enable the meaningful participation of girls and young women at this time, particularly marginalised girls. Decision making and planning processes must incorporate the views and experiences of girls and young women, and respond to their needs.
- Government should take the time to specifically address children with coronavirus updates, using age-appropriate language and focusing on the issues that directly impact them – particularly girls and young women. This includes information and advice that is fully accessible to children of different ages.

# 5

## PROTECT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR):

- Governments must continue to increase access to period products by adapting their access schemes to the new context.
- Period products and sexual health services must be widely communicated as 'essential' items and services, so that girls know they can continue to access them.
- The lower age limit applied to data collection of teenage conception rates, which is currently 15 years, must be removed.
- Where possible, SRHR services should be adapted to be accessible to all. This includes updating policy and legal guidance and switching to remote forms of provision such as self-administered methods and tele-consultations. Those involved in the delivery of remote provision should be equipped to identify and mitigate the risks of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse. This should include access to clear information on safe referral practices and guidance on the use of online platforms, mobile devices and other measures to mitigate any increased risks.



# 6

## SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH:

- Mental health issues affect girls and boys differently, therefore a gender and age lens must be applied to data analysis, policy and services in response to the significant impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health.
- Psychosocial support should be included in distance learning.

# 7

## SECURE EDUCATION:

- Continued prioritisation of additional educational support and interventions are required to ensure the gap between the disadvantaged and advantaged does not grow.
- Interventions and programmes designed to address gender inequality, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programmes, should continue through remote learning.
- The Government should scale up its support to non-formal learning, investing in both technology-based and non-technological, including not-for-profit, solutions that reach every child, including the most marginalised girls.
- Access to education and the impact of the pandemic on attainment outcomes must continue to be measured and disaggregated by identity characteristics, to ensure certain groups do not fall further behind.
- While schools are closed, there is an opportunity to start to reconfigure the education system. The Government and local authorities should review education and school policies to better respond to girls' needs, and to tackle the embedded cultural sexism and racism that affects girls' education experience, including in the curriculum.

# 8

## SECURE GIRLS' SAFETY IN PUBLIC AND ONLINE:

- Girls must be able to report sexual harassment and abuse when it happens – both in public and online – and be supported and taken seriously throughout the process.
- Police forces, in partnership with businesses, community groups and public bodies, should make clear, accessible information available about what behaviours would be considered a police matter or constitute a criminal offence, alongside information about what to do if someone wants to report an incident – including online.
- Society must send a clear message that street harassment is not OK, and the wider public, including men and boys, must be educated and empowered to feel able to call out street harassment.

# 9

## MEASURE THE ONGOING IMPACT ON GIRLS:

- More research into the immediate and longer-term impact of the pandemic on girls and their rights is needed. This includes educational outcomes, health, SRHR, girls' safety and gender-based violence, and participation. Analysis must be intersectional.
- Specific research on the impact on marginalised girls is needed, including those who already face some of the poorest rights outcomes: girls in the youth justice system, girls in the care system, young carers, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller girls and girls at risk of exploitation, violence and abuse.

# PLAN INTERNATIONAL UK'S PROGRAMME RESPONSES

## GIRLS SHOUT OUT

Girls have the right to be online and express their views safely, but what should be an empowering space can quickly become threatening. Not only are girls facing immense pressure in the digital world, they are also more at risk of sexual harassment and abuse.

Supported by The Body Shop UK, Girls Shout Out brings together girls and young women aged 13-25 to share their experiences and make their voices heard. From body image to street harassment, periods and mental health, girls can have the vital conversations on the issues that matter to them and access the support they need. In a national lockdown, this space for girls is more vital than ever.

By providing a safe, closed space on existing social media channels, we are enabling girls to share their thoughts, feelings and ideas for change. Girls Shout Out provides this much-needed safe space.

Girls can join Girls Shout Out on Instagram or Facebook.

 [/girlsshoutoutuk](https://www.instagram.com/girlsshoutoutuk)

 [/groups/girlsshoutoutUK](https://www.facebook.com/groups/girlsshoutoutUK)

## I CAN, I AM

Education, extracurricular activities and social interactions have changed drastically for girls, and for an undefined amount of time, during a critical stage in their development. Research from Harvard University found that without a 'resilience education intervention' during disasters, young people can feel the negative effects of stress and trauma for up to five years afterwards<sup>18</sup>.

Plan International UK and youth leadership awarding body, SLQ, have teamed up to deliver the I Can, I Am learning programme to support teachers and girls across the UK. The programme will provide a personal skills development package to girls. Teachers from across 200 schools will disseminate home learning resources to their students, within which are 10 challenges, each linked to the development of a critical skill in the areas of communication, self-belief, teamwork, self-management and problem solving.

Through the development of local community action projects, girls will be given the tools they need to build their resilience and foster a sense of belonging and purpose, both during and in the aftermath of coronavirus.

We are currently seeking funding for this programme. For inquiries please contact Nikki Giant at [nikki.giant@plan-uk.org](mailto:nikki.giant@plan-uk.org)

# APPENDIX

## Girls' Rights frameworks

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) details basic civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and freedoms that all humans are entitled to. The UN identified nine instruments as 'core' to human rights protection; seven of these have been ratified by the UK.

While there are no treaties that focus solely on girls, there are some key international treaties that are particularly relevant to girls, both as children and as young women:

- The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the key convention when considering the protection of the rights of children. It applies to all children, irrespective of race, religion, sex or abilities.
- The 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) calls on the international community to undertake measures to end gender discrimination in all its forms.

The UK has ratified both of these and is therefore obliged in international law to take all appropriate legislative measures to implement them. In Wales, the convention has been further implemented; it is incorporated into legislation. In Scotland, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 places specific duties on Scottish ministers to keep under consideration whether steps can be taken to give further effect to the UNCRC.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is Great Britain's national human rights institution and is responsible for safeguarding and enforcing the laws that protect human rights. Human rights laws in Northern Ireland are protected and upheld by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

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