

COVID-19 burden of care falling on adolescent girls

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The Pacific Girl program's 'Webinar on Adolescent Girls and COVID-19' provided a space for adolescent girls' voices to be heard. Pictured (left to right) are: Roselyn Sidal, webinar panellist; Mia Kami and Anna Ve'a; and Tara Chetty, Pacific Women Partnerships Lead. Photo credit: Pacific Women

'With our younger siblings not being able to go to school ... we were given the role to take care of them and, at the same time, there were more house chores to do with more activities around the house,' shared Roselyn Sidal, young feminist and gender equality activist with Pacific Girl partner, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement. .

'We had a little more to carry on our shoulders [because of COVID-19],' said Ms Sidal, who is also a first-year student at the University of the South Pacific.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the burden of care on women and girls. In normal circumstances, caring for siblings and children in the community and additional household work often falls on adolescent girls as

they are typically expected to assist their mothers and female relatives undertake the vast majority of unpaid domestic labour and childcare. Since the onset of the pandemic, adolescent girls are saying that this burden has significantly increased.

Pacific Girl partners acted quickly to ensure that adolescent girls' experiences of the pandemic were heard and taken into account in community and national responses. In a rapid assessment by Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 20 per cent of girls and young women surveyed experienced compounded challenges in balancing gender role expectations with education and work during the pandemic. Similarly, the Talitha Project in Tonga reported that girls participating in their activities had challenges balancing domestic and care work with schoolwork while at home.

The Pacific Women Support Unit conducted the Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 Survey in June 2020, to hear from Pacific girls about how they are feeling, what they are doing and how they are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three in five adolescent girls responding said they sometimes or always looked after younger children in their families and communities, while one in six said they could not do their schoolwork as they had to work to help support their family. While a small survey sample, these important findings along with partners' reports of the situation in communities, were promoted through a targeted thematic brief on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls in the Pacific.

Pacific Women also provided a space for adolescent girls' voices through the Pacific Girl Webinar on Adolescent Girls and COVID-19 on 15 October 2020. Panellists from Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Australia discussed the issues facing adolescent girls and how to support them. The webinar featured poetry by Anna Vea and music by Mia Kami (two young Tongan women) and a video with messages of solidarity and encouragement from adolescent girls and gender equality advocates around the region.

'So what happens is now we have shifted a few steps back,' explained Ms Sidal, who participated in the webinar. 'We will have to touch on their [girls'] confidence... and do more in order to move forward,' she said.