

‘Don’t be afraid to interrupt!’ Injecting the voices of adolescent girls’ into the COVID-19 pandemic response

Federated States Of Micronesia Fiji Papua New Guinea Regional
Solomon Islands Tonga Vanuatu

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By Louisa Gibbs, *Pacific Women*.

‘Don’t be afraid to interrupt!’ was a key message shared during the recent ‘COVID-19 and Pacific girls’ webinar, and widely agreed by panellists, online participants and Facebook Live viewers.

‘It’s not going to be very often that someone is going to give [girls] the space to speak, especially if [you] are a girl,’ said Tara Chetty, leader of the [Pacific Girl program](#), and host of the event, together with partners across 6 countries on 15 October 2020.

The social, economic and health impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls has been disproportionately high, with particular impacts on adolescent girls. To understand the specific experiences and needs of Pacific Island adolescent girls during the pandemic, it is important to hear what girls and young women have to say.

In order to highlight the voices of girls and young women the webinar included young women performers and panellists, including a moving poetry performance by Anna Ve’a and a music performance by Mia Kami. The new [Pacific Girl and COVID-19](#) video was also launched at the start of the webinar, featuring messages of solidarity from adolescent girls around the region.

Panellists included Roselyn Sidal, young feminist and gender equality activist with the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement’s (FWRM) Girls Arise program; Jacqui Joseph, co-founder and CEO of Equal Playing Field (EPF) in Papua

New Guinea; and Julie-Ann Guivarra, Australia's Ambassador for Gender Equality.

Three special guests provided pre-recorded messages for the webinar: Fijian activist Virisila Buadromo; Yoshiko Capelle from the Pacific Young Women's Leadership Alliance; and Natasha Stott Despoja AO, Australia's candidate for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The webinar amplified the key concerns of young women and girls, and those working to support them, while discussing ways to support their increased involvement in response and recovery.

Discussions built upon five key issues for adolescent girls, as outlined in [Pacific Women's Thematic Brief on the Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls in the Pacific](#). These issues were based on the 'Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 Survey' findings and other sources. Key issues identified include disrupted education, increased anxiety and loneliness, feeling isolated and unsafe at home and online, increased care burden at home, and disrupted access to menstrual hygiene and sexual health services.

Panellists discuss key issues affecting adolescent girls as a result of the pandemic

Ms Guivarra spoke about dangers of cyber harassment, bullying and violence with the increased use of internet and social media platforms during this period, including for her own 14 year-old daughter. 'This is not something that my generation had to deal with growing up,' she said. 'So, it is vitally important that we are in listening mode – it is time to hear the perspective of girls.'

Ms Joseph noted how important it is to communicate effectively with adolescent girls about these issues. 'There are concerns about how young people are receiving COVID-19 messaging. It needs to be at a level that young people can understand the changes that are taking place. This helps us help young people to unpack what is happening around them.'

Ms Sidal cautioned that momentum to support adolescent girls to achieve their aspirations may have been set back with the onset of the pandemic. 'Some of these girls may be suppressed by their parents and their caretakers, where they will not really be given the space to go out and mingle more and

have their voices heard on such issues that were being raised,' she said. 'So what happens is now we have shifted a few steps back, so in order to move forward, we will have to touch on their confidence... I feel now we may need to work more on girls and do more in order to move forward.'

The panellists see the challenges faced by adolescent girls (and compounded by COVID-19) not as a barrier, but as a call to action, to ensure adolescent girls across the Pacific continue to thrive and lead. And there is no shortage of adolescent girls in the region ready to take on this task. 'We are the future of the world,' shared 'Anamalia from Tonga. 'And if you are discussing the future – I think our opinions are very much needed.'

The webinar was hosted by the Pacific Girl program and its partners, and broadcast across the Pacific and the world as part of International Day of the Girl Child activities.

The partners are Chuuk Women's Council, Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Equal Playing Field, Talitha Project, Tonga, CARE in Vanuatu and Young Women's Christian Association of Solomon Islands.

To learn more about what the panellists had to say about the changes brought by COVID-19 to adolescent girls in the Pacific and the importance of listening, then:

- Watch the video recording: <https://youtu.be/8Na6QZa4NLk>
- Read more about the webinar and its panellists, speakers and performers along with the key issues discussed: <https://pacificwomen.org/news/webinar-pacific-girls-and-covid-19/>