

WEBPAGE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA:

International Day of the Girl Child Webinar: Pacific girls and COVID-19

October 15, 2020

The Pacific Girl webinar on adolescent girls and COVID-19 explored the impacts of the pandemic on adolescent girls in the region and the importance of listening to girls and young women in order to develop effective COVID-19 responses.

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

It coincided with International Day of the Girl Child is held 11 October each year. This year's United Nations theme "My voice, our equal future" aimed to amplify girls' voices and stand up for their rights. It is an opportunity to reimagine a better world inspired by adolescent girls – energized and recognized, counted and invested in.

- Panel of specialists on Pacific Island adolescent girls
- Key message
- Issues discussed during the webinar
- A priority issue is disruption to education according to adolescent girls and young women
- Panellists discuss key issues affecting adolescent girls as a result of the pandemic
- Webinar hosted by Pacific Girl through Pacific Women

The webinar featured three panellists from Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Australia along with special pre-recorded messages from prominent women in the region and the new Pacific Girl video with messages of solidarity and encouragement from adolescent girls around the region.. The webinar also featured live performances by two young Tongan women; poetry from Anna Vea and music from Mia Kami ,

The webinar's panellists and online participants commented on the disruption to education and schooling (voted as the key issue via a live poll during the webinar). Other issues discussed that are affecting adolescent girls as a result of the pandemic include access to menstrual hygiene products and sexual health services, feelings of isolation, increased anxiety and loneliness, an increased burden of domestic work and care responsibilities, and feeling unsafe at home. Along with their communities, Pacific Island adolescent girls have also been affected by food shortages and loss of income when jobs in the family were lost.

The booked-out event was hosted on 15 October 2020 at the Pacific Women Support Unit in Suva, Fiji, attracting online participants from around the Pacific and the world. The Pacific Girl program works in six Pacific Island countries to help adolescent girls reach their potential and is funded through the Australian Government's Pacific Women program.

Webinar participants were able to in one of two ways: interactive online participation via Zoom registration or watch via Facebook Live.

Panel of specialists on Pacific Island adolescent girls

The webinar was facilitated by Tara Chetty, Pacific Women Support Unit Partnerships Lead. It commenced with a pre-recorded video in which adolescent girls from the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu spoke about the issues that were affecting them most as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A panel discussion followed with three women who work in different ways to amplify the voices of adolescent girls in the Pacific region.

Roselyn Sidal, a first-year student at the University of the South Pacific, young feminist and gender equality activist with the Fiji Women's Rights Action Movement, shared her personal experience of having to adapt to online university lectures and the impact it had on students like herself. She expressed the concern that when parents and carers restrict the movement of adolescent girls, they are not given the platform they need to raise their voices. She felt that the pandemic may have set back the work that has been done to grow the confidence of adolescent girls and enable them to achieve their aspirations.

Jacqui Joseph, CEO and co-founder of Equal Playing Field in Papua New Guinea, works to foster respectful relationships in schools. She said that the pandemic had increased demand for her organisation's messaging about respect. Ms Joseph also highlighted the need to find effective ways to communicate with adolescent girls and boys to help them understand the changes happening around them. She emphasised the power of using sport as an avenue to connect with adolescents and boost their confidence.

Julie-Anne Guivarra, Australia's Ambassador for Gender Equality, recognised the other panellists as inspiring agents of change and the network of support that women in the Pacific have created for each other. She encouraged adolescent girls to speak out about their experiences to ensure that girls' perspectives are taken into account in COVID-19 responses. She noted the importance of collecting data, finding ways to hear the voices of adolescent girls and learning from previous health crises, such as the Ebola and Zika outbreaks.

Three special guests also provided pre-recorded messages for the webinar, promoting girls' involvement as essential in the recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak. Fijian activist Virisila Buadromo emphasised that it is important for adolescent girls to read about the experiences of others and tell their own stories from their perspectives as girls. Yoshiko Capelle from the Pacific Young Women's Leadership Alliance noted that adolescent girls' voices are important because the government has a responsibility to ensure that every citizen's needs are met. Natasha Stott Despoja AO, Australia's candidate for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women urged adolescent girls to speak up because COVID-19 responses need a specific girl focus.

Key message

The dominant message throughout the webinar was ensuring adolescent voices are heard in COVID-19 responses, and the need for girls' voices being sought and included in response and recovery.

This was echoed in special messages pre-recorded by prominent guests. 'It is important to tell stories in the way we experience it,' emphasised Fijian activist Virisila Buadromo. 'Girls' voices are important because the government has a responsibility to ensure that every citizen's needs are met,' shared Yoshiko Capelle from the Pacific Young Women's Leadership Alliance. 'COVID-19 responses need a specific girl focus. We need to hear from you,' urged Natasha Stott Despoja AO, Australia's candidate for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

Panellist, Ms Guivarra, encouraged adolescent girls to speak up and 'not to be afraid to interrupt.' She added: 'Never doubt the contribution you can make at a young age to change your communities. You can absolutely do that. If you have done the research, you have the evidence, you have a valid point to make – make it!'

Issues discussed during the webinar

Schools in the majority of Pacific Island countries were closed for a period of time since the end of March 2020. Adolescent girls have been more affected by these closures than boys, as they have less access to the internet and to online learning equipment such as computers, tables and smartphones. Many girls are reporting poor grades and high stress as a result of limited access to education during lockdown periods.

Adolescent girls have taken on a higher burden of care than male siblings at home during the pandemic. They are looking after younger siblings who are not at school and undertaking more household chores. This is limiting the time they have for schooling and social interactions with friends.

Increased stress in the home, especially from the loss of family income as a result of the pandemic, has increased the risk of violence toward adolescent girls. Adolescent girls spoke of feeling like they are most at risk of experiencing increased violence due to their age and gender, compared to other groups in society.

Many adolescent girls are well versed in using social media and have relied on it to keep in touch with friends during periods of separation. However, their reliance on social media and internet platforms has also put them at a greater risk of online harassment, bullying and violence.

Isolation and social distancing measures have a particularly negative effect on adolescent girls', due to their age and developmental stage. In particular, loss of peer support, particularly through school networks, is causing loneliness and anxiety for adolescent girls.

Webinar discussions built on the findings of the 'Pacific Girl Speak Out: COVID-19 Survey' and other sources, summarised in the Thematic Brief – Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls in the Pacific. This Thematic Brief provides information and analysis on emerging impacts of COVID-19 on adolescent girls in the Pacific.

A priority issue is disruption to education according to adolescent girls and young women

A significant problem for adolescent girls has been disruption to their education due to school closures during lockdown periods. It is one of the key effects COVID-19 is having on adolescent girls outlined in detail in the Thematic Brief.

Indeed, in a survey of the webinar's attendees, 44% identified disruption to education as the issue requiring the most urgent attention to support adolescent girls during the pandemic.

'What happened for us girls in tertiary school, most of our classes were based online,' shared panellist Roselyn Sidal, a first-year student at the University of the South Pacific, young feminist and gender equality activist with the Fiji Women's Rights Movement. 'This was a difficulty for us because most of us were not having equal access to the internet and also to the gadgets and this affected our grades for sure,' she said.

'Also, we had a little more to carry on our shoulder with our younger siblings not being able to go to school, they were at home with us,' Ms Sidal continued. 'So, 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.'

Panellist Jacqui Joseph noted that school closures also put vulnerable girls at risk of further harm. 'Especially for children who are living in abusive homes or children who are going through various abuses, it became very clear that at times when they were away from school, it meant that they were in more vulnerable situations,' she said.

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 raise their voices and achieve their aspirations may have been affected 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 these challenges faced by adolescent girls 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.’

Webinar hosted by Pacific Girl through Pacific Women

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.

The Pacific Girl Webinar on Adolescent Girls and COVID-19 in the Pacific was hosted by the Pacific Women program.

Through a 10-year commitment, Pacific Women connects more than 170 gender equality initiatives funded by the Australian Government and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries. Providing technical, knowledge sharing and convening support to the portfolio of partners is Pacific Women’s Support Unit, working to improve the long-term impact of gender equality projects in the Pacific.

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Photo:



Caption: Those wanting to join the ‘Pacific girls and COVID-19’ webinar can register online or watch the event on Facebook Live.

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Background:

Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*) connects more than 170 gender equality initiatives funded by Australia and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries, including [country]. It is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality. Providing technical, knowledge sharing and convening support to the portfolio of partners is *Pacific Women’s* Support Unit.

Pacific Girl \$4.5 million program supports projects with civil society partner organisations in six Pacific Island countries [including country] and is managed under the Australian Government’s Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*) program. These partner organisations are equipping

adolescent girls to make informed decisions, while engaging with the boys, parents, carers and communities in their lives to build more supportive environments.

Summary: Pacific Girl projects

Countries	Civil society partner	Project
Federated States of Micronesia	Chuuk Women's Council	Young Women's Empowerment Program
Fiji	Fiji Women's Rights Movement's (FWRM)	Girls Arise
Papua New Guinea	Equal Playing Field (EPF)	Safe Schools, Strong Communities
Solomon Islands	Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in partnership with CARE International	Girls Rise Up!
Tonga	Talitha Project	My Body! My Rights!
Vanuatu	CARE Vanuatu	'Laef blo mi, vois blo mi'