



A RAPID ASSESSMENT
IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC (COVID-19) ON YOUNG
WOMEN & GIRLS IN FIJI



1. Introduction

“COVID 19 is a deadly pandemic that kills people if they do not practice safe hygiene. It limits people’s freedom and causes havoc to the world. People have died and family lives have been disrupted by this pandemic. This pandemic has stopped the nation although, from an advantage point, it has allowed people to spend more time with their families and loved ones.” Mother and student at FNU, 39

In January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel Coronavirus, known as COVID-19, a pandemic. COVID-19 became a global crisis, shutting down multiple countries and posing a serious threat to countries with weaker health systems. Fiji recorded 18 positive cases of COVID-19 in total after it confirmed its first patient on 19 March 2020¹. By the end of the first week of June 2020, Fiji declared that it was COVID-19 free².

Following the confirmation of cases in Fiji, the Government put in place restrictive measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Lockdowns were declared in areas where cases were reported including Lautoka City from 19 March, Suva City on 03 April and Soasoa, Labasa. Lockdown meant that only essential business services were running and movement into the area was severely limited. The lockdown lasted 20 days for Lautoka and 14 days for Suva. Soasoa, Labasa was on lockdown for 28 days³.

The Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM), through its Intergenerational Women’s Leadership Programme (IWLP), conducted an online survey to gauge diverse girls and young women’s experiences during this time. The majority of these respondents were adolescent girls (13-15 years of age) and young women (18 - 35 years of age) who are connected to IWLP⁴.

Gender plays a vital role during and post-disasters to indicate how groups of people, particularly women and girls are disproportionately affected. Situations of disasters exacerbate existing gender inequalities and threaten the safety and security of girls and young women.

From this survey, 96% of respondents understood the basic information of COVID-19 through social media platforms and mainstream media (either radio or television). It was found that the constant update provided by the Fiji Government during the pandemic played a very important role in the way that respondents adhered to the advice from authorities.

In this assessment, we aim to present a critical perspective on the lived realities of girls and

¹ Radio NZ. “Fiji PM announces new Covid-19 case, total now 18.” Accessed: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/414686/fiji-pm-announces-new-covid-19-case-total-now-18>

² Boila, S. “ Fijians welcome news of COVID-19 Free Fiji” Accessed : <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/fijians-welcome-news-of-covid19-free-fiji/>

³ Swami, N. "Fiji records 78 per cent recovery rate for COVID-19 cases". Accessed: <https://www.fijitimes.com/fiji-records-78-per-cent-recovery-rate-for-covid-19-cases/>

⁴ The **IWLP program** is targeted at developing and enhancing young women and girls’ leadership and capacity to create positive change in their communities. Since 2003, FWRM has worked with young women and girls in Fiji aged 10 – 25 years and supported the development of similar programmes in the Pacific

young women during the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, girls and young women will also provide guiding approaches in ensuring formal structures are taking heed of their identified priorities.

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2. Methodology

The rapid assessment paper was developed based on the findings of an online survey and phone interviews that were conducted with FWRM's Young Women and Girls' network over several days. The survey was sent to 153 Fiji Young Women's Forum members, 74 Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni (ELFA) members, and 73 FNU Young Women Network members through its facebook groups. The survey was also circulated to 12 GIRLS graduates' and 17 FWRM staff members. The response received from the Rapid Assessment survey provided key insights on the impacts of COVID-19 on young women and girls' lived realities in Fiji.

3. Girls' and Young Women's Experiences of Coping Through the Pandemic

"It's been a little hard coping with sudden changes in life and distancing yourself from others meanwhile social media is of good use which keeps friends and family in touch and helps us in sharing our ideas."

Student at Fiji National University, 20.

Young women and girls face multiple discrimination against their age, gender and abilities on top of other societal prejudices. This is why it is critical to document their lived realities instead of an overlapping focus on people's experiences which can further minimise and overlook the voices of young women and girls. Their perspectives and unique experiences are significant to influence policymakers and substantiate formal actions to be meaningful, effective and responsive to their priorities.

During a Rapid Assessment conducted in Yemen by CARE international, a young woman was quoted saying *"The woman is the person who has everything thrown on her head and absorbs all the shocks"*⁵. This quote implies how girls and young women take the brunt of the negative impacts of disasters whether it is armed conflict, a pandemic or natural disaster.

The current COVID-19 crisis in Fiji will bring about added burden for girls and young women as learning institutions and organisations change to cater to the learning needs of its students and its organisational functions. At the micro-level, communities and households struggle to find the balance between the "new normal" and survival. The sudden closure of schools, universities, and the workforce and travel restrictions will strain social relations. As families are forced into economic uncertainties, there will be physical and mental health concerns

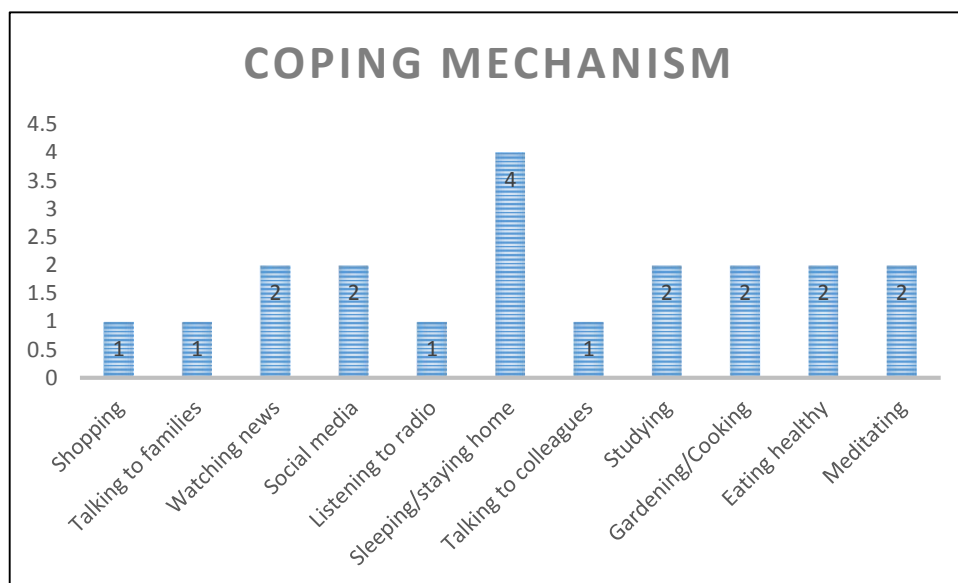
⁵ CARE Int. Empowering Women and girls affected by Crisis (is a quote from community member during a rapid gender analysis in Yamen). Accessed:

https://www.careinternational.org/files/files/Empowering_women_and_girls_affected_by_crises.pdf

reinforced by deeply entrenched traditional, cultural and religious systems of patriarchy. Girls and young women will have an added worry of navigating socio-economic relations in the households while trying to keep up with academic and professional roles.

In essence, the data below reflects the coping mechanisms of girls and young women over this period. This data will be an imperative tool in developing advocacy content to raise awareness on the gendered impacts of the pandemic on girls and young women. This will be targeted towards the media including mainstream media, community media and social media platforms. In addition to this, FWRM as a policy and legislative organisation will also work on this evidence-based work to influence formal structures, policy-related work and national budget submissions.

Figure 1:

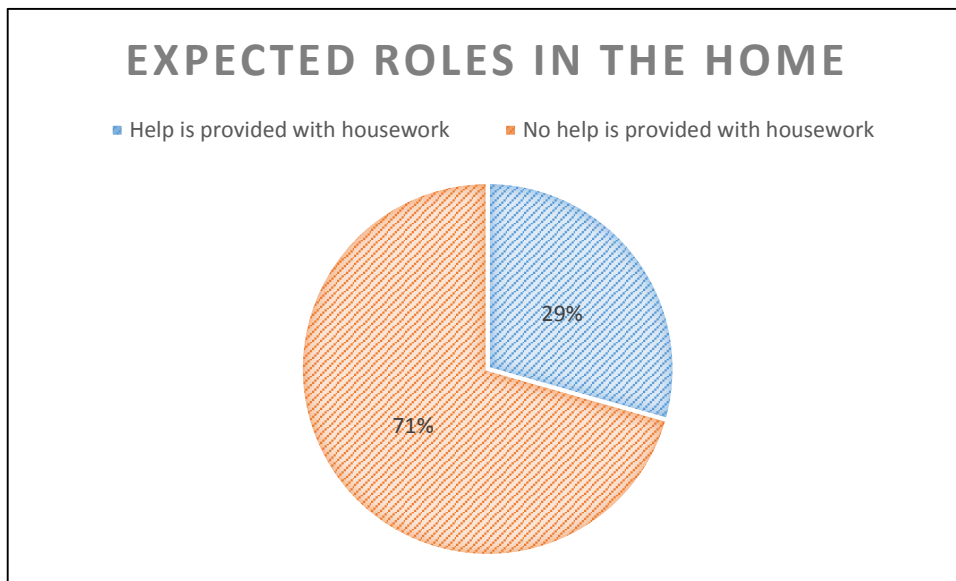


The figure above showed some coping mechanisms shared by the girls and young women during the pandemic. 22% of respondents preferred sleeping or staying at home to cope with the pandemic. 11% of respondents preferred meditating, gardening/cooking, studying, eating healthy or accessing social media.

3.1 Girls and Young Women's experiences at home

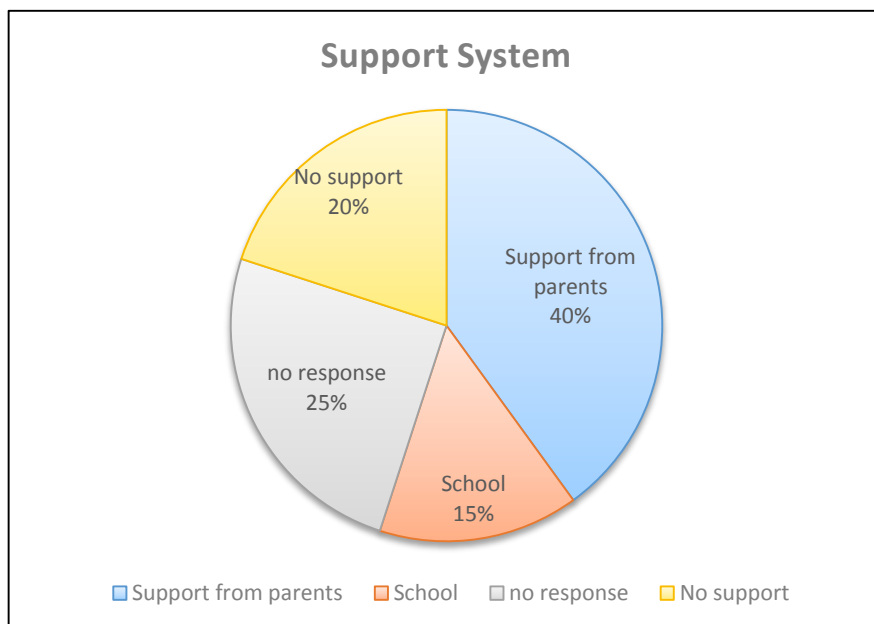
The respondents also shared their experiences in the home, meeting gender role expectations and other responsibilities such as work and study. This data sheds light on the lack of autonomy and decision girls and young women are faced with whilst confined in their homes.

Figure 2:



According to the figure above, 71% of respondents indicated that they are expected to do more household work compared to the males in their home. On the other hand, 29% of the respondents highlighted that housework is shared equally amongst family members.

Figure 3:



20% of the respondents who were staying at work and studying at home also shared their frustrations and exhaustion in managing professional and paid work and unpaid care work at the home of these, 40% of respondents felt they had the full support of parents/carers/partners. For tertiary students, 15% of respondents felt that support from individual institution lecturers' were sufficient. On the other hand, 20% felt they had no support at all while 25% did not provide any response.

“Full-time at home with the children proved to be more challenging. As much as I try to engage with home-schooling it's pretty tough. After a day with work, I literally move onto school work (Uni) and most of the time I don't have anyone to help with the children or with me having to spend some time on activities. I have been trying to dedicate an hour in the day and evening to complete some tasks.” Working Mom and Student, 34.

As aforementioned, families facing uncertain economic crises due to unexpected loss of paid employment can experience stress and aggravated tensions within family relationships that escalate the risk of gender based violence. In a joint press release on 5th May, 2020, by the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation (MWCPA), Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), Medical Services Pacific (MSP) and the UN Women, the Honourable Minister Vuniwaqa from the MWCPA highlighted that for April, there were a total of 527 calls to the national domestic violence helpline, where 54% were calls related to domestic violence-related and 30% related to the COVID-19⁶. This is an increase from the pre-social restrictions months due to COVID-19 and is concerning. 29% of the respondents felt more bored at home and restricted with movement beyond their home boundaries.

While Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is expected to rise and the Minister herself has acknowledged it, there is a level of accountability needed from parents/carers and the community to provide support. There should be a firmer approach in ensuring studies are not disrupted so girls have time to focus on worksheets from school. Implementing systems of support at home is essential such as creating a timetable for chores and studies and opening up communication between parents and children, to ensure everyone in the house is being responsible and supportive towards each other. For example, using breakfast or morning devotion time to discuss the day or week routine in an inclusive process brings about a sense of ownership to the work and improves household work distribution.

Open communication between parents/carers and children may also provide a healthy channel of expressing parents' financial burdens. In this way, the stress created by the lockdowns, restrictions of movements and economic strain can be shared and a sense of reassurance. This may lessen stress and triggers of VAWG in the household and may even be a safe space where parents/carers can pick up on how children are coping and provide support accordingly.

WE RECOMMEND that government strengthen media advocacy and visibility on challenging Gender Roles in the homes during the COVID-19 period. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MEHA) should provide some guidelines for parents/carers in teaching the curriculum or the type of support needed for children studying from home. This may include a teaching aid kit for parents/carers that contain specific resources to support parents and students engaging in distance learning. This kit may also contain key contact

⁶ Fiji MWCPA (2020). “ Responding to Gender Based Violence and Child Welfare calls during COVID19 “
<https://www.facebook.com/Ministry-of-Women-Children-and-Poverty-Alleviation-Fiji-323584101328302/>

details of teachers' such as phone numbers/email address to better support their students. Additionally, a list of retired teachers compiled by MEHA may be helpful to engage as volunteers in these unusual times of distance learning and ease the burden on current teachers.

3.2 Girls and Young Women's Academic and Professional Experiences

The shut- down of academic institutions and the restrictions of movement as a result of the COVID-19 situation has resulted in girls and young women adapting to a new working and learning technique. Utilising the "online" culture, most of these academic institutions and organisations have left students and employees "working" and/or "studying" from home.

Tertiary young Women's Experiences:

The ILO (2018) reported that in the Asia -Pacific region, 80% of the unpaid care work is left to women⁷. This can worsen with the pandemic restrictions of movement as states try to contain the spread of the virus. Revealed in this assessment, young women who are students and working professionals are highlighting the challenges of playing multiple roles of unpaid household work, keeping up with assignments and assessments while also maintaining professional commitments.

"Yes, for online studies it's a bit challenging given the internet speed however other than that I think it's good that schools are still continuing and that we haven't been stopped from learning. Yes, my parents have installed home Wi-Fi to help me cope with the problems I was facing with the internet speed so I now don't have much of a barrier." -Student at the University of the South Pacific, 20.

Overall, 65% of the respondents studying at universities highlight the challenges of studying online and staying home during the pandemic. The challenges include accessing laptops and/or the Internet and negotiating unpaid care work and time to manage academic responsibilities.

"Even though online learning is difficult for me because I did not understand a lot of new things in the lectures. Also, online learning requires data so that we can access it on our website. Sometimes it is difficult for me since there is poor network connection in the village and I don't have a laptop to type my school work." - Student at the Fiji National University, 20

This assessment could only be carried out with girls and young women who are privileged to have access to online tools. Bearing this limitation, it would also be fair to note that there are gaps in the current provisions of taking "education online". While there seems to be a process of "on-going learning", the reality would be that not every student would have access to academic resources online. This is taking into account the geographical locations of Fiji's rural and maritime islands that may have young women struggling with network reception to keep up with this pivot in learning online. For example, some students have left Suva to go back home to ease the economic burden of living on campus. Tertiary institutions should conduct a needs assessment of the institutions' "online learning strategy" at such times. These findings

⁷ ILO (2018). " Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work ". Geneva. Accessed: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/dcomm/publ/documents/publication/wcms_633135.pdf

can inform its disaster preparedness and/or emergency strategies and ensure strategies are reflective of its students' needs, as it has taken an inclusive approach.

Moreover, while there is focus on recognising the needs of students scattered across the country there should be a specific focus on the needs of students living with disabilities who will also be accessing this online structure of studying. Specifically, there should be a note on how young women with disabilities are supported as they are facing double the challenges. The introduction of a diverse learning tool for online learning methodology which caters to students with disabilities and the multiple disabilities that exist. This could also be a core component of the disasters and/or emergency strategy, as tertiary institutions need to strengthen and equally facilitate students with special needs during this time of crises.

In addition to these, findings also revealed the limitations of “free access to academic sites” that were offered by universities. Knowing that tertiary students are required to do a lot of research where most of this would be online, young women have noted that additional costs to doing this research outside these university websites have been a challenge.

These limitations, in turn, require for in-depth research on the diverse experiences that are representative of all Fijian girls and young women during the COVID-19 situation.

WE RECOMMEND

- The MWCPA should work in partnership with the MEHA and CSOs such as FWRM to conduct large scale research on the *Impacts of COVID-19 on Young Women and Girls in Fiji* that is representative of all Fijian young women and girls⁸.
- For universities to continue to work with network providers to provide free access to the internet beyond the institution's Moodle access for research purposes and not limit student's access to these services.
- Alternatively the University to work with stakeholders to assist in providing access to laptops whether in special programmes or with student schemes as Campuses are limiting student's movements.
- There is also a call for all universities to provide and maintain professional counselling services for students who are most at risk. This is to counter the emotional and mental burnout of living through a pandemic, personal challenges and keeping up with academic responsibilities.
- Again, efficient and effective means of doing this could be identified in the mentioned assessment that will inform disaster preparedness and/or emergency strategies.

⁸ Include all young women and girls living in outer islands, highlands, boarding schools and day scholars including girls/young women with disability.

Sharing these updated approaches within the disaster preparedness and/or emergency strategies should be a priority. Similar to the emergency drills conducted on campus for disasters like tsunamis and fire drills, tertiary institutes should take a gentle approach in sharing these approaches to its students and staff. In these imminent times, utilising students' mobile phones, radio and television ads would also be a good option. Messages of support and affirmation may take the load off students and create a safer space for effective learning.

Lastly, for the state, the consultative process of meaningful engagement with young women participation in supplementary/national budget processes should be made a priority and one way this can be done is through collaborative work with universities.

Girls in Primary School Experiences:

Millions of children are kept out of school in areas where conflicts and disasters are common. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in an Education in Emergencies (EiE) study say that school-age children are twice as likely to not attend school during crises⁹. Consequently, this number is likely to be doubled for girls as there is an increased burden for girls to carry out household duties and perform academically.

While there is a comprehensive structure on EiE for MEHA through the Education in Emergencies and School Safety Policy (EiE Policy), this should also be updated to include pandemics and added clauses on crisis time learning for staff, students and the school community (parents/carers) that will follow the Comprehensive Safety School (CSS) Framework and relevant global frameworks/local policies¹⁰. Importantly, this should be a structure that is well funded by the state through its National Budget allocation for the MEHA, where girls are part of the consultative processes. A good starting point would be the process under the CSS Framework, pillar 3, that is adopted by the EiE policy where students and parents/carers are consulted in the development of school based disaster risk management plans. Girls should be part of this process where girls will give in their input on a safer school plan that is relevant and meaningful for girls¹¹. The same process can be done as a school community for submissions to the National Budget processes that will ensure equal opportunity for girls and women to participate in.

In Fiji, the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MEHA) have set up distance learning systems to ensure the safety of children and education continuity in the country. For instance, the MEHA has a portal on the ministry's information system (FEMIS) for supplementary school worksheets for the different school grades¹². Initially, these worksheets required

⁹ UNESCO. "Education in Emergencies" Accessed: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies>

¹⁰ This policy requires student input, parents/carers input and also periodic sharing of Disaster plans/drills with students and parents/carers; MEHA (2014). "EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES AND SCHOOL SAFETY POLICY" Accessed: http://www.education.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EiE_Policy.pdf

¹¹ UNISDR (2017). "Comprehensive School Safety. A global framework in support of The Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector and The Worldwide Initiative for Safe Schools ." Accessed: https://www.preventionweb.net/files/55548_cssframework2017.pdf

¹² Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS). "MEHA Supplementary Resources" . Accessed: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/17r6_WuOLvO9HwUrcsNiKbQT6jFbjTlJm

parents/carers to access via FEMIS, download and print. Acknowledging the “new normal” the world is currently adapting to, the same can be said for the MEHA that later introduced an approach where the ministry would print out these worksheets for parents to pick up from school. This would lessen the burden for parents/carers.

*"I really miss classroom sessions because teachers are there to explain and yes I'm doing good, but sometimes I find difficulty in understanding some work. Yes from my parents and siblings, we doing good but sometimes I try really hard to understand their explanation. At the moment I'm not really sure." -
Student at Stella Maris Primary School, 12.*

However, recognising the financial crisis that most families would be going through and the risk of travelling during this period where contact with others is not encouraged, there are few recommendations that the ministry may take on. This will take into account the easy distribution of worksheets that will not require parents/carers to travel to school to pick worksheets.

WE RECOMMEND

- For MEHA to utilise MEHA vehicles/school buses to drop these off to children at their homes. This will reduce the added burden of parents/carers (especially parents'/carers of the most vulnerable, marginalised children and of children with disability) in financing travels to school and the risks for children who would have to travel to school for these.

Frankly, there is also the uncertainty of the transition process of students in primary to high school. From the survey, 30% of the respondents, who are Year 8 students are worried about not being able to attend high schools of their preferences due to the uncertainty of scheduled examinations. Notably, these are students who have been keen on attending High School of their choice. With the current switch in the primary curriculum, there is uncertainty on how progress from Primary to Secondary School will look.

*"... Also not too sure if I can attend my first school of choice for high school. My mother said the teachers told her that we might not be able to and that's not very nice. I have been wanting to go to ACS all this time. I worked hard at school and I am good at sports too. Our recent U16 trip to New Zealand for the Fiji Netball tour was also cancelled. I just wish this all ends. But for now, I got my workbook from school with my mum. I am also happy that the GIRLS called me, something different than just staying home and doing housework" -
Student at Stella Maris Primary School, 13.*

WE RECOMMEND

- MEHA should put in place a fair exam system for Year 8 students to allow for final year Primary school students a chance at gaining entrance into the school of choice. This should be made known to both staff, parents/carers and students through newsletter via the FEMIS, radio and Television.

Coupled with the aim of quality education continuity, should be the mental and emotional wellbeing of students. Noting the likelihood of girls not having access to education and the increase in VAWG during this period, girl respondents have also indicated the need for

ongoing counselling support for peers.

WE RECOMMEND

- MEHA with the Child Services Unit that sits under the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation (MWCPA) must work on recruiting professional counsellors dedicated to providing counselling for children through the National Child Helpline. These counsellors may also work with the MEHA to contact students periodically to check-in and follow up.