



## Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South Nº 21

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### Teenage pregnancy and child marriage during the pandemic in Africa

Officially, on 29<sup>th</sup> September one million deaths were accounted for covid-19. This deaths' number is certainly shocking, but unfortunately, this is only a small part of all the consequences in terms of mortality and morbidity that the pandemic is having worldwide. These consequences are multidimensional, at different levels and have a higher or lower effect accordingly to the pre-existing individual inequalities. Are thus, those people in the intersection of different inequalities related to gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or geographical region who are the most affected.

In this series of reports we try to shed the light on some of these consequences (BIOCOMSC, 2020). The monopolization of economic and medical resources on one disease has resulted in an increase on the incidence or worsening existing cases of other communicable and non-communicable diseases. Also, pre-existing conditions of gender discrimination have been exacerbated, endangering the health of millions of women and girls. As in times of crisis of all kinds, cases of gender-based violence, the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as teenage pregnancies and child marriages have increased.

The *United Nations* estimates that as a consequence of the increase in poverty and unemployment due to the covid-19, **18 million women are losing access to contraceptive methods**. In fact, a recent survey of the *World Health Organisation* determined that **family planning and contraceptive methods are the most interrupted health services during the pandemic**, affecting 7 out of 10 countries in the world (WHO, 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic, the *United Nations Population Fund* (UNFPA), together with several universities, modelled the potential impact of the pandemic on family planning services. They determined that **6 months of severe impact on health systems in 114 countries with low and medium Human Development Index (HDI) could result in a lack of access to contraception for 47 million women, which in turn would lead to 7 million unwanted pregnancies** (UNFPA, 2020).

Even in the case of pregnancy, the current situation of monopolisation of health services does not allow for good attention to women's pre- and post-natal care. Moreover in 2017, according to *UN Women*, **810 women were dying every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy or childbirth and 94% of these deaths were in countries with low or medium-low HDI** (UN Women, 2020 ).

Beyond the shortages that many countries have experienced from time to time in contraceptives and pre- and post-natal health care services, the confinement measures and the closure of schools have thrown many girls back to their parents' homes, which not always are safe places. According to the *UNFPA*, **gender-based violence during periods of**

**confinement increases by 20% worldwide, meaning that after six months of confinement there would be 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence (UNFPA, 2020).**

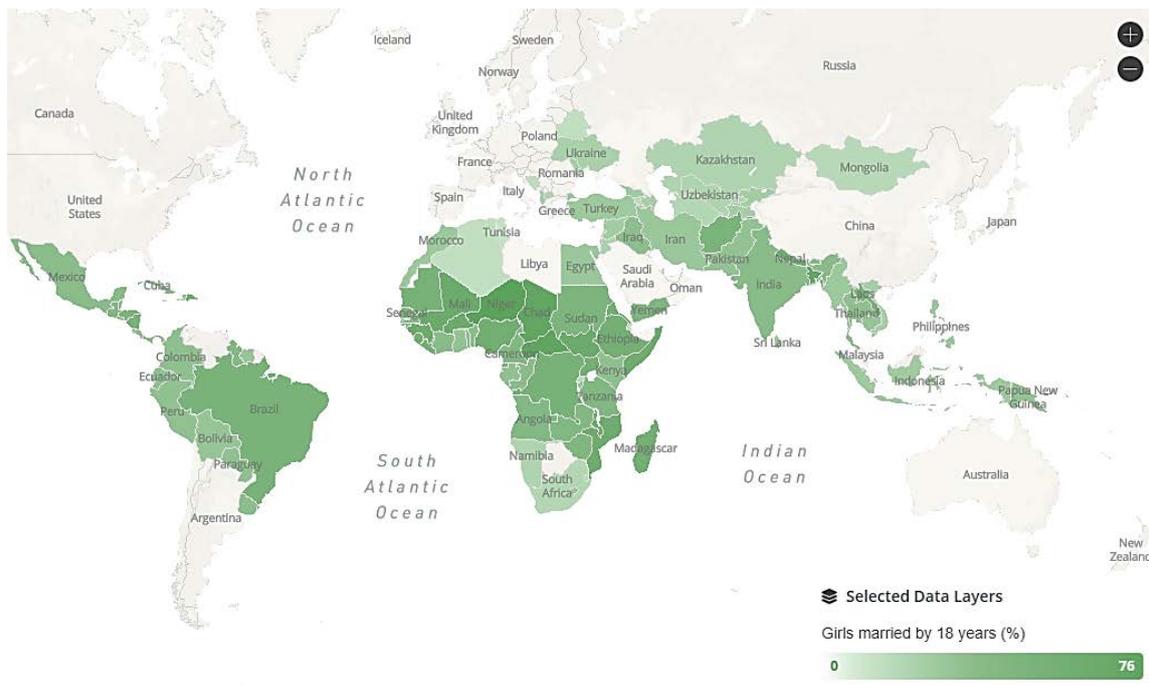
In Sierra Leone, after the pandemic hit the country, NGOs such as *Save the Children* launched a programme to feed vulnerable girls living in informal settlements in the poorest areas of the country. They wanted to avoid the increase on teenage pregnancies that took place **during the Ebola pandemic in 2014**. By then **the number of teenage pregnancies increased by 65% compared to previous years, leaving 14,000 girls pregnant. Most of these girls were forced into transactional sex in exchange for covering their basic food needs.**

In Uganda and Kenya, experts and the respective Ministries of Health have echoed the teenage pregnancies that have resulted from girls living with people who have abused them or used sex as a bargaining chip to cover their basic needs. In the case of Uganda, to reduce this situation they have created a Child Protection Committee with the collaboration of international organisations such as *World Vision* in areas with a higher incidence.

In Namibia, the Minister of Health and Social Services asked its population to reduce their sexual activity given the lack of contraceptive supplies that the country faced during the closure of borders. He also expressed concern about teenage girls being pregnant as a result of both the closure of schools and youth spaces as well as the economic need.

**Another consequence of the economic hardship which many families find themselves in in times of crisis, as *Girls Not Brides* reports, is the increase in child marriages.** The organization, which englobes more than 1,400 associations working to end child marriage, estimates that **12 million girls under the age of 18 are married each year worldwide; almost 1 girl every 3 seconds. In Central and Western Sub-Saharan Africa there are 6 of the 10 countries where this practice is most prevalent<sup>1</sup>, 40%, i.e. 4 out of 10 girls are married before the age of 18. Niger is the country with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world: 3 out of 4 girls are married before the age of 18 and 1 out of 3 before the age of 15 (UNICEF, 2020).** The following map shows through the degradation of the green colour the prevalence of child marriage, from grey to darker green, representing Niger the darkest green with 76% prevalence. As can be seen, most of the darker green countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of child marriage is the percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married or formally joined before age 18 (UNICEF, 2017)



**Figure 1.** Prevalence of child marriage in the world Legend: 0 to 76% from grey to dark green  
Source: Girls not Brides, 2020.

According to the *UN*, **due to the current pandemic the numbers of child marriages will worsen worldwide**. It is expected that in the next decade there will be 13 million additional child marriages, with 4 million taking place in the next two years (UN, 2020).

This practice is rooted in gender inequality, patriarchal structures, as well as poverty, lack of education and economic insecurity, which are exacerbated during periods of crisis. In addition, it is worth mentioning that in many areas of Africa, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is still practiced on girls before they get married.

Ethiopia, according to *Girls Not Brides*, is the 15th country in the world with the highest rate of child marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2020). Although according to Article 648 of its Criminal Code this practice is criminalised, the country has a total of 15 million girls married as minors. Over the past two decades, the country has reduced the number of child marriages from 60% of all marriages in 2005 to 40% nowadays, with the goal of being eradicated by 2025. However, according to experts, this trend is being reversed due to the confinement and closure of schools which in recent years had played the role of tracer of cases of child marriages and mediators with the national legality.

In Kenya, the closure of schools meant for many girls the closure of their safe space where they went after escaping from their families and the FGM or forced marriage. Several schools have expressed in the *Daily Nation* newspaper their concern about the possible non-return to school of many girls and teenagers after it reopens especially safe boarding schools.

In South Sudan, country where 45% of its population is under 18, 3.1 million children cannot go to school because 60% of them are destroyed by a long on-going conflict (World Vision, 2020). According to *UNICEF*, South Sudan is the sixth country in the world with a higher prevalence in child marriage: 52% women in the country were married before 18 and 9% before 15 (UNICEF, 2017). Furthermore, although the South Sudanese legislation notes that no citizen under 18 should be subjected to negative and painful cultural practices that affect their health, well-being or dignity, according to the *Support Peace Development Initiative* between April and August there have been 1,500 cases of either teenage pregnancy or child marriage in the country.

In order to reverse this situation, several groups of women activists have been carrying out during the confinement awareness raising campaigns on areas with high incidence of child marriage and teenage pregnancy. In these campaigns they have both stressed the importance of girls' education and also demystified rumours that girls should be married before the end of the pandemic. Indeed, there have been cases where the family has forced girls to marry and become pregnant due to their economic adversities and with the hope that the husband pays for the girl's school fees.

**In conclusion, it is necessary especially during crisis times to protect all girls' rights by ensuring a safe space for their good development. This means necessarily enjoying full primary and secondary education and not being forced directly or indirectly to have sex or get married. The cycle of poverty that young childbearing implies must be broken and these girls must have their fundamental right to health, education and security guaranteed.**

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*The research group BIOCOS-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.*

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>