



# The Shadow Pandemic:

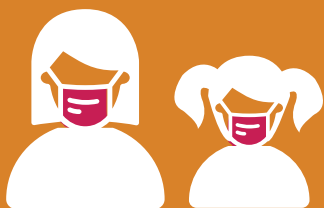
## Addressing gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic

Significant progress has been made in improving the lives of women and girls around the world in recent years. More girls are enrolled in primary and secondary education, the practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) has seen an overall decline, and millions of child marriages have been averted worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, stands to threaten years of progress. School closures, economic stress, and service disruptions are putting women and girls at an increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV). As COVID-19 cases continue to stress communities around the world, a dark shadow pandemic has intensified. Addressing violence against women and girls must be prioritized in all COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

**Only 1 in 8 countries worldwide have taken gender-sensitive actions to protect women and girls from the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>**

**1 IN 8  
COUNTRIES**



### The Lockdown

In the spring of 2020, schools were closed, businesses were shuttered, and essential health services were disrupted globally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders are effective at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 virus, but they also restrict the movement of women and girls. In many cases, social isolation measures have confined women and girls at home with their abusers, while at the same time, first responders — including legal and

health services — have been overwhelmed, shifted priorities, or closed indefinitely. This creates nearly impassable hurdles for those seeking protection from abuse.

Domestic violence is not the only threat girls face during the pandemic. With schools shut down, girls' educational opportunities are diminished, and they are now more vulnerable to harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage and FGM/C. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious delays in the implementation of programs designed to end harmful traditional practices.

**Due to school closures, it is estimated that 20 million girls in low- and middle-income countries, where distance learning opportunities are less accessible, may never return to their classrooms.<sup>2</sup>**

**20 million**

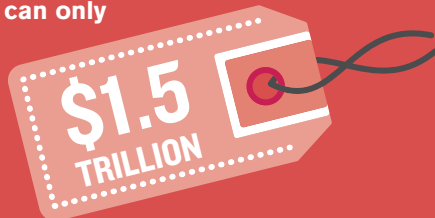


**“COVID-19 has brought other threats. We’ve noticed that the majority of partners are redirecting their funding towards supporting the fight against COVID-19; but the pandemic that we’re going through right now doesn’t mean the situations or precarity for women have somehow gone away. It hasn’t stopped GBV. It hasn’t stopped female genital mutilations, or early marriage, quite the opposite. So, if all the resources are now going to fight COVID-19, what are we going to do?”**

— Woman from civil society organization in Burkina Faso.<sup>3</sup>

## The Devastating Cost of COVID-19

The global cost of violence against women and girls was previously estimated at \$1.5 trillion USD, but this number can only be expected to rise as GBV continues to increase due to the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>



### Domestic and Sexual Violence

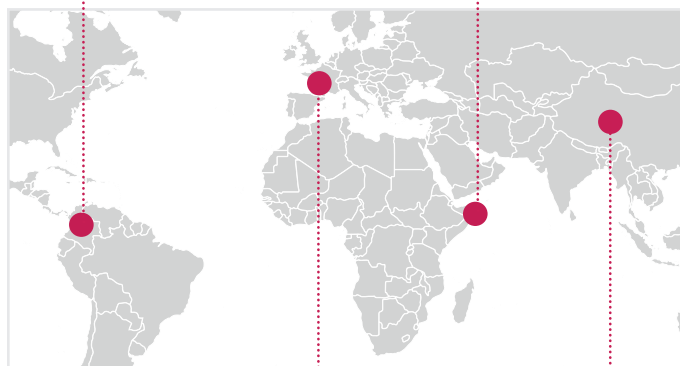
Prior to the pandemic, 1 in 3 women globally experienced physical or sexual violence, predominantly by intimate partners.<sup>5</sup> Data since the start of the outbreak has shown a troubling spike in GBV. Helpline calls have **increased five-fold** in many countries since spring of 2020.<sup>6</sup> Still, the existing data likely does not capture the full scope of the issue. Fewer than 40 percent of women who experience GBV report the crime, often due to fear, stigma, or lack of access to legal or social support.<sup>7</sup>

79%

There has been a 79 percent increase in calls to helplines/hotlines in **Colombia**.

50%

Helplines/hotlines in **Somalia** have reported a 50 percent increase in calls.



In **France**, reports of domestic violence have increased by 30 percent since the beginning of the pandemic.

30%

In **China**, calls reporting domestic violence have increased by 50 percent since the beginning of the pandemic.

50%

### Child Marriage

Before the pandemic, 1 in 5 girls under the age of 18 were married globally.<sup>8</sup> Economic hardship and increased poverty caused by COVID-19 have resulted in more families choosing to have their daughters married early to ease financial burdens at home. Child marriage forever alters a girl's future, usually halting her education, limiting her ability to make autonomous choices about her life, and putting her at risk for earlier pregnancies. Worryingly, over the next decade, up to **10 million more girls** will be at risk of becoming child brides because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> In 2020 alone, the pandemic put more than 500,000 additional girls at risk of child marriage.<sup>10</sup>



ADDITIONAL CHILD BRIDES  
EXPECTED DUE TO COVID 19 =

10 million

PROJECTED NUMBER  
OF CHILD BRIDES =

100 million



2020



2030

### FGM/C

FGM/C refers to the procedure of partial or total removal of female external genitalia for non-medical reasons. It can cause severe physical harm to women and girls, such as obstetric fistula, complications during childbirth, infertility, infection, painful intercourse, and severe psychological harm. In more than 30 countries worldwide, 200 million girls and women from varying cultural and religious backgrounds have undergone FGM/C.<sup>11</sup> In 2018, it was estimated that 68 million girls would be at risk for FGM/C by 2030.<sup>12</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to increase the prevalence of FGM/C by an extra **2 million** cases over the next decade.<sup>13</sup> School closures and lockdown measures have removed girls from the safety of the public eye and the protection of their teachers, putting them at an increased risk. Other reasons for the projected increase include the lack of access to justice services due to the restricted operations of courts and other legal avenues, as well as the inability of civil society organizations to provide educational outreach services to communities on the dangers of the practice.<sup>14</sup>

68 million  
CASES OF FGM/C  
BY 2030

COVID-19  
PANDEMIC  
BEGINS

70 million  
CASES OF FGM/C  
BY 2030



While GBV is an issue that permeates every country in the world, data shows that women and girls living in low- and middle-income countries are disproportionately impacted. In countries classified as “least developed”, 37 percent of married women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, compared to 22 percent of married women in high-income countries.<sup>15</sup> Previous crises have shown that economic recovery is slower and inequalities are even more dramatic in the least developed countries.<sup>16</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic poses significant risks to long-term equity and social mobility, which will hurt poor, rural women and girls living in low- and middle-income countries the most.

### SDG Goal 5: Gender Equality

The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals have set targets to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual and domestic violence, and to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child marriage and FGM/C, by 2030.<sup>17</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to throw global progress towards reaching these targets off track, creating lasting negative impacts on women and girls that will continue long after COVID-19 case numbers subside.



**ACHIEVE GENDER  
EQUALITY AND EMPOWER  
ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS**

### No Vaccine to End the Shadow Pandemic

Unlike the vaccines being distributed to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, there is no vaccine to stop the shadow pandemic that has grown over the past year. The pervasiveness of GBV is a public health crisis, with serious implications for gender equality, human rights, and sustainable development. A global commitment to protecting women and girls is critical both during the COVID-19 pandemic and long after it ends.

### Strengthen protective legal and policy measures for women and girls

Currently, 1 in 4 countries have no specific laws to protect women from domestic violence.<sup>18</sup> While most countries have laws identifying what age people can legally marry and laws prohibiting FGM/C, the enforcement and prosecution of the legislation is often weak. Protective measures must be implemented in every country to prevent further harm. Strong

messages must be sent by legal bodies that impunity will not be tolerated, and justice actors must ensure that incidents of GBV are given high priority.

**“Violence against women is endemic in every country and culture, causing harm to millions of women and their families, and has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.”**

— Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,  
WHO Director-General.

### Put women at the center of the recovery efforts

Pandemic recovery and solutions must be utilized to root out GBV and move towards a more equitable future. While women make up 70 percent of frontline workers in the health and social sector fighting the pandemic globally, men hold 70 percent of the top-level global health leadership roles.<sup>19,20</sup> Women must be key participants in the decision-making processes at each level of government and society so that the needs and concerns of women and girls are met throughout the pandemic response and recovery.

### Bolster funding for services that aid people who experience violence during COVID-19

Services for women and girls who experience violence must be treated as essential, especially sexual and reproductive health services. GBV can increase the risk of unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections, and other sexual and reproductive health challenges. Ensuring safe, affordable, and equitable access to sexual and reproductive health and rights globally is important in providing women and girls with the autonomy and care they need. Financial support is necessary for organizations providing these essential services to hard-to-reach, remote, and vulnerable populations.

## Endnotes

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