

Coming of age in the time of coronavirus: Young lives and families in low- and middle- income countries

May 18 2020, by Dr Gina Crivello



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Approximately 90 percent of the world's 1.2 billion young people (aged 15-24) live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). They are navigating the coronavirus pandemic at a critical period in the life course when they are expected to set the foundations for their adult lives.

Intersecting age, gender and economic vulnerabilities affect their varied experiences and capacities to cope and recover in this crisis. Yet the spread and scale of the coronavirus in LMICs and our understanding of how people at different life stages are being affected, and how, continues to evolve. And while older people and those with underlying health conditions are clearly the most vulnerable to COVID-19, the consequences of economic recession for marginalized youth is likely to be long-lasting.

The recent comparative study of Young Marriage and Parenthood (YMAPS) in four low- and [middle-income countries](#) underscores the need to identify how best to support young people coming of age in challenging settings, and which groups of youth might be particularly vulnerable in times of acute crisis. A collaboration between Young Lives (Ethiopia, India, Peru) and Child Frontiers (Zambia), YMAPS involved 345 individuals, prior to the coronavirus pandemic, including married, cohabiting, divorced and parenting male and [female adolescents](#) and youth (age 15-24), in interviews about their everyday life experiences, relationships and support needs.

The findings from this study indicate that the millions of young people in LMICs are managing the gendered responsibilities of first-time marriage, cohabitation and parenthood, already with limited economic resources and weak safety nets. They will struggle in the face of the global crisis. There is a real risk that the pandemic will exacerbate inequalities within their intimate relationships and family lives and create further social and economic divisions among this generation of youth. To avoid this, the findings from this study point to a range of possible secondary effects that need to be addressed for young people in LMICs in both the acute and recovery phases of the pandemic:

Economic Precarity: Young people faced economic precarity even before the pandemic. Most youth in these settings make their living from

the informal economy, without written contracts, job security or benefits, including access to sick pay and unemployment. Prior to the current crisis, the families who reported the greatest number of economic and environmental shocks were also those with the fewest economic and social resources to cope. For young households, the pressures were already severe, often leading to separation or divorce, and sometimes to violence. We can expect economic recession to destabilize the already fragile livelihoods of young couples and young families in these settings.

Gender Inequality: Despite awareness of gender equality among the younger generation, young people continue to be socially conditioned to take on gender-stereotyped family roles, expecting men to be 'breadwinners' and girls and women to take on nearly all responsibility for unpaid housework and childcare—no matter if they also do paid work.

There are concerns that [gender inequality](#) is becoming further entrenched during the pandemic as women bear the brunt of additional unpaid workloads.

Even before stay-at-home measures were imposed in response to COVID-19, married girls and [young women](#) faced high levels of surveillance by husbands and in-laws, and their contact with childhood friends and family was also mediated by them. Young women in these circumstances found it difficult to seek help when they experienced domestic conflict or violence from their husbands, partners or in-laws. This was unfortunately common, and by several accounts, is already rising significantly in many countries during the pandemic.

Unintended Pregnancies: Young people's aspirations to marry and have children in their 20s were thwarted by [unintended pregnancies](#) in their teen years. Early pregnancies led young people to marry or start living

together even though many felt unprepared to take on these adult responsibilities.

Our research found that, even before the pandemic, adolescents and young people struggled to access modern contraception and contraceptive advice until after the birth of their first child, and safe abortion services were limited.

Access to contraceptives and other sexual and reproductive health services will be compromised in the context of lockdowns and travel restrictions, and in places with less effective health systems, potentially resulting in millions of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions in LMICs. Research on the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa found that school closures contributed to an increase in adolescent pregnancies, and policies prevented pregnant girls from returning to school when they opened; the long-lasting effects on gender inequality are well documented. There are predictions the COVID-19 pandemic will result in an additional 13 million child marriages over the next decade, and an increase in unintended pregnancies.

Priorities to assist young people in marriage and parenthood during & post COVID-19

Our findings point to a range of specific measures at national level that take what young people have told us into account. These might minimize the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on this formative period in their lives. Short- and medium-term responses should do more than avoid exacerbating gender and other inequalities exposed by the pandemic; they should be designed to reduce them. They include:

- Step up child marriage prevention policies and practices after the lockdown to ensure that the numbers do not rise;

- Encourage and support young women and young men to return to school after pregnancy and marriage or cohabitation;
- Take account of married and cohabiting adolescents in poverty alleviation and livelihoods strategies directed at the poorest families;
- Improve protections for informal laborers and ensure that post the [pandemic young people](#) have access to decent work;
- Ensure affordable access to modern contraceptives and sexual and reproductive health rights and services;
- Address the sources of domestic conflict and ensure women can safely get help at all times;
- Promote women's access to safe public spaces, when lockdowns are no longer in place;
- Ensure boys and men's attitudes are more gender equal and that they contribute fairly to the share of unpaid work and caregiving within the home;
- Decrease women's financial dependence by promoting access to education, suitable work opportunities, and quality affordable childcare;
- Strengthen systems supporting young families to confront existing and future risk.

We need to be aware of, and prepare for these measures now, not in several months' time. Otherwise this unprecedented crisis threatens to set back decades of progress and blight the futures of the generation now growing up under the shadow of COVID.

The comparative analysis from the four country "Young Marriage and Parenthood Study" (YMAPS) and international policy recommendations are published on May 15th, and can be found alongside detailed country study findings on the [Young Lives website](#).

More information: Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS):

www.younglives.org.uk/content/...renthood-study-ymaps

Provided by University of Oxford

Citation: Coming of age in the time of coronavirus: Young lives and families in low- and middle-income countries (2020, May 18) retrieved 7 August 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2020-05-age-coronavirus-young-families-low-.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.