About Plan International UK

Plan International UK is a global children’s charity. We strive to deliver and protect the rights of millions of children – especially girls – across Latin America, Africa and Asia. When you’re a girl, it is even harder to be safe, to be in school, and to be in charge of your body.

Plan International UK believes that girls’ rights are universal; whether in Lagos, Lima or London, it shouldn’t matter where you were born or where you live, you should be safe, free from abuse and have equal rights. This includes in the UK.

Inquiry questions

1. What steps need to be taken to ensure that measures taken by the Government to address the COVID-19 pandemic are human rights compliant?

1.1 Throughout this pandemic, it is more important than ever that the Government successfully protects, respects and fulfils the obligations of the international human rights instruments: securing the population’s health while ensuring people’s other freedoms and needs are met. The Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) details basic civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and freedoms that all humans are entitled to. The UN identified nine instruments as ‘core’ to human rights protection; seven have been ratified by the UK. Through ratification, the UK is obliged in international law to take all appropriate legislative measures to implement them.

1.2 Measures taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic must be proportionate, timebound and measured/monitored against all human rights outcomes. Each piece of responsive legislation passed must be scrutinised by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and, recognising the significant reduction in its capacity in recent years, the Government must ensure EHRC is sufficiently resourced to do this.

1.3 Robust analysis of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on human rights is essential, with particular focus given to marginalised groups, who are protected through specific instruments. This includes girls, who should be protected by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UN Convention on
the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, girls' needs are often invisible in data and policy making: hidden in the gender-neutral category of ‘children’ and in the adult category, ‘women’, with their needs often overlooked and unmet.

1.4 Through more than 80 years’ experience working internationally, we know that health crises have a gendered impact on children and young people. We are already seeing this pattern in the UK, with increases in violence against women and girls, unpaid care work (shouldered by women), exacerbated economic inequality, reduced access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, gendered mental health issues and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making.

1.5 In responding to the health pandemic, the Government should mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic and associated measures on girls’ rights within the relevant frameworks. Rights include: girls’ educational outcomes, girls’ mental and physical health, girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), girls' safety including action on violence against women and girls, girls' living standards and girls’ participation in decisions that affect them.

1.6 Girls across the UK were already facing barriers to their rights, as demonstrated in our 2020 report, *The State of Girls’ Rights in the UK*, and many of these challenges are exacerbated during the pandemic and consequent lockdown. Between 2016-2019, 522 recommendations were made by treaties bodies for improvements in human rights in the UK. All affected girls and over half were directly relevant. It is crucial that the realisation of their rights are not obstructed any more through COVID-19 restrictions.

2. What will the impact of specific measures taken by Government to address the COVID-19 pandemic be on human rights in the UK?

2.1 Our focus in this inquiry response is on girls and young women, due to the unique impact of Coronavirus measures on their rights and their invisibility in data and policy.

2.2 Girls, like all children, have the right to express their views on decisions that affect them, and to have their views given due weight. Yet girls’ voices are being excluded from central decision-making and debate, and many issues that impact them specifically are being side-lined. Before the pandemic, girls and the unique challenges they face were invisible in data, policy and many services because of the gender-neutral category of ‘children’ and the adult-focussed category of ‘women’. Even in current discussions on gender equality during coronavirus, the focus on adult women is leading to the exclusion of girls’ unique experiences and
challenges to their rights. **Government must invest quickly in mechanisms to meaningfully enable the participation of girls and young women.**

2.3 Access to quality, inclusive education is significantly reduced for all children and young people in the UK, but making the decision to reopen should be based on science and reliable data modelling. We are concerned about the impact on pupils who would normally be taking GCSE, AS Level and A Level examinations, including resits, whose futures will now be reliant upon less formal and less fair assessments. Many young people perform better in real examinations than mock ones, and these young people will lose out. **Complete anonymity of assessed work is required** to remove unconscious biases (against the abilities of women and girls, the working class, ethnic minorities and disabled children) – which all humans have – and indeed conscious bias from the process.

2.4 Our new research¹ (referenced throughout) shows the pandemic is affecting girls’ mental health: 40% of girls aged 14-21 state their mental health has worsened. Support services were unable to meet demand prior to the pandemic, with months’ long waiting times, increasing rejection of referrals or lack of access entirely. Now they are under even more pressure. NSPCC’s Childline counsellors delivered 900 coronavirus-related sessions to children worried about the impact of the pandemic in the first week of lockdown alone. Girls are more likely to self-harm, experience depression and experience depressive symptoms related to social media use. Adolescent boys are slightly more likely to commit suicide (through using more violent means), yet suicide attempts and ideation are both slightly higher amongst adolescent girls. **Therefore, a gender analysis and gender-intelligent response is needed.**

2.5 In terms of girls’ reproductive health rights, the Department for Education’s period product access scheme in England is failing to fulfil its purpose due to the closures of schools and other public buildings: those in need of period products cannot access them. **Two fifths (40%) of girls aged 14-21** have to use toilet roll because they cannot always afford period products. In the lockdown period alone, 11% of girls aged 14-21 have not been able to afford period products (Plan International UK, April 2020) and are having to use makeshift products, such as toilet roll (54%), socks (11%), other fabric (8%) or newspaper/paper (6%). Almost a quarter of girls (22%) have been able to afford them but still struggled to access them, mostly because they cannot find them in the shops (64%). Period products are essential, and alongside negative economic impact, period poverty is likely to increase further. **The Government must find a quick solution, such as period product vouchers.**

---

¹ Plan International UK and Opinium, April 2020, representative survey of more than 1,000 girls aged 14-21.
2.6 Too many girls are unable to fulfil their right to public space through fear of being unsafe. Lockdown measures mean only limited time out of the home each day, to exercise or to shop for essential items, but our research shows many girls do not feel safe enough to go out. Furthermore, despite significantly reduced time in public places, 1 in 5 girls (19%) aged 14-21 have experienced public sexual harassment since lockdown (Plan International UK, April 2020).

3. Which groups will be disproportionately affected by measures taken by the Government to address the COVID-19 pandemic?

3.1 Particular groups of girls will experience further disadvantage, combined with their age and gender, through the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath. Girls at risk of child sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, including harmful traditional practices, and girls with poorer rights outcomes resulting from structural issues, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller girls, girls in the youth justice system, girls in the care system and young carers, will be negatively impacted from the reduction in support services. Research and data on the human rights outcomes of these groups, and how they have been affected by Coronavirus and the Government’s measures, is urgently needed.

28/04/2020