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YOUTH!

Youth As Researchers

Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Youth

GLOBAL POLICY BRIEF



unesco
University Chair

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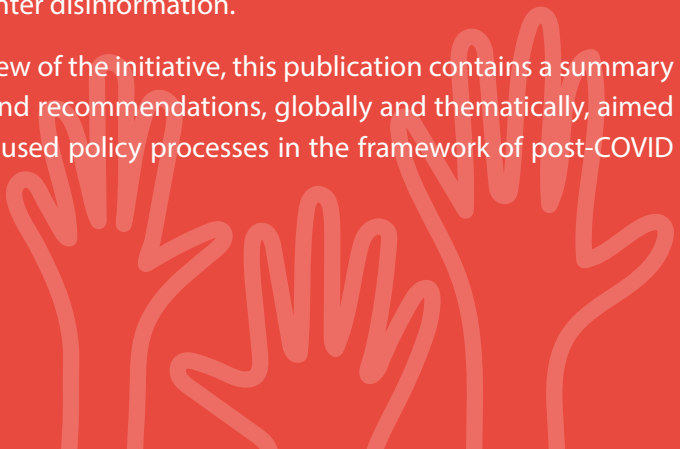
Youth-led research is invaluable to complete scientific research and render the production of knowledge more inclusive and representative of the perspectives, viewpoints and experiences of youth, in all their diversity. It is also a novel approach to informing policy-making and enabling the design and implementation of evidence-based policies and legislation affecting youth.

Youth-led research builds youth capacities and engages youth in producing evidence – with and for other youth – that not only contributes to enriching research agendas but can also have real-life application. Also, through the skills and spaces it provides, it engages population groups that are rarely considered as contributors in relevant scientific research, it increases the visibility of youth perspectives and views, renders them accessible beyond strictly youth communities, and eventually enhances their uptake by decision-makers and development actors.

As such, in line with the Agenda 2030 call to “Leave No-One Behind”, youth-led research opens the space for youth to engage in action, to voice their perspectives on ongoing and emerging challenges and to inform policy-making.

Launched at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO’s “Youth As Researchers on COVID-19” (YAR) is a signature global youth-led research initiative that consolidates evidence from youth across the world on their experiences of, and impactful action during, the global COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to contributing with youth perspectives to inform policy decisions, the goal of the initiative is to promote evidence-based policy-making, and to counter disinformation.

Providing an overview of the initiative, this publication contains a summary of its key findings and recommendations, globally and thematically, aimed to inform youth-focused policy processes in the framework of post-COVID recovery.



FOREWORD



The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that youth face in a number of areas, including for their prospects in life, educational and school-to-work pathways, access to quality employment, mental health, identity building and civic engagement. Added to these, the shrinking civic space in some countries has been constraining youth-led action and engagement in public affairs. Still, the crisis has revealed a window of opportunity due to the positive (re)action of youth to this unprecedented situation. Young people embody the hope for better, innovative and more effective solutions.

In line with the UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers, the “Youth As Researchers (YAR) on COVID-19” is UNESCO’s first ever global youth-led research initiative, designed and implemented with youth, by the UNESCO Social and Human Sciences Sector and the UNESCO Chairs at the National University of Ireland (Galway) and the Pennsylvania State University. It recognizes the need for science-led responses to the pandemic that include young people and invests in better understanding youth issues and channeling youth insights to post-pandemic recovery packages.

The work of the youth-led research teams is among the first original research that confirms observations on trends arising from COVID-19. Covering five domains – learning, well-being, rights, youth-led action, role of technology – this evidence enriches scientific knowledge, by bringing in the youth perspectives which are not well captured in other sources. These suggest that learning experiences and outcomes were perceived as “poor” and disruptions in education were identified as the top stressor (65%) for youth. Even though mental health problems were identified as a major challenge, close to 60% of respondents to the YAR’s survey were not aware of the mental health programs in their country. At work, youth often faced the dual risk of COVID-19 exposure and of losing their jobs due to the pandemic, and in addition young women were challenged by increased childcare and other household responsibilities. As to young entrepreneurs, they lacked financial support and digital literacy for online operations. On the role of technology, there was limited change in online behavior. 79.6% of respondents felt safe online and while 73% reported receiving misinformation, only 4.2% could not identify it as such. Yet, limits in digital literacy, language issues, internet access and costs prevented youth from using technology for actions beyond simply accessing health-related information. This is quite

compelling when compared with the high levels of civic activity (e.g., 74% of respondents in South Asia, 65% of respondents in Brazil reported being active around relief projects). Such levels of civic activity – in spite reported barriers – reveal the inventiveness and solidarity of youth, in the face of adversity.

These insights point to key actions for post-pandemic recovery, such as prioritizing investment in youth mental health; responding to youth needs through tailor-made education and employment policies; addressing the gender divide; and supporting initiatives that leverage the power of youth.

Through its access to policy institutions, UNESCO commits to walk the talk and work with Member States and stakeholders to harness the power of youth. The first step in this direction is the mobilization of a Global Coalition of actors to adapt policies, build capacities, generate knowledge, and scale up youth-led solutions, notably through a Global Grant Scheme to fund youth-led research and initiatives with social impact.

I am extremely grateful to each of the 270 young researchers who have voluntarily engaged throughout the past 2 years, as well as to the UNESCO Chairs, the Steering Committee, the coordinators and the entire UNESCO team behind this initiative. It is all of them, with their hard work and commitment, that allowed the voices and insights of close to 10,000 young people across the world to be reflected in this Global Policy Brief. I hope that the findings, and recommendations presented here will serve as an inspiration for policy-makers and other actors across the world to integrate youth perspectives, views and analyses in policy decisions – because they matter. At UNESCO we are committed to ensure that this is the case.

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Gabriela Ramos

UNESCO Assistant Director-General,
Social and Human Sciences Sector

WHAT IS YOUTH AS RESEARCHERS?

The Youth As Researchers (YAR) initiative is a youth development programme, designed to ensure, support, and advance youth voices. It provides training and mentoring that supports youth to design and conduct social research, with a view to informing policy-making, programme design and future research.

The initiative was first conceived by the UNESCO Chair on Children, Youth and Civic Engagement (Ireland), as a model to engage vulnerable youth in re-designing their own futures. It is premised on the belief that no-one knows better than young people themselves about their problems, and the solutions that will work for them. It gained traction in the current context, as UNESCO's Member States are looking for innovative ways to address the challenges youth are facing. In engaging with the Social and Human Science Sector, and with UNESCO's field offices, the youth-led research agenda delivered a strong message on the need to underpin policy decisions with scientific facts, and to ensure civil society is consulted on the issues at hand.

Through gaining access to knowledge resources, as well as technical research/inquiry skills, data analysis, and interpersonal skills such as critical thinking, strategic thinking, self-efficacy, youth researchers are able to collect and analyze evidence to contribute to policy change and to solutions that work best for their generation.

For settings where youth voices and insights are needed, the YAR initiative has proven exceptional. It provides unique insight by youth into the issues, opportunities, and challenges that they face in their home, communities and across society. Similarly, the initiative is particularly suitable when seeking to build youth capacities, facilitate positive youth development, and advance efforts for youth-driven participatory action research.

For organizations focused primarily on the conduct of rigorous scholarly research (widely generalizable statistical findings, randomized control studies, large multilevel samples), the YAR initiative should be seen only as a possible mechanism for gaining additional grassroots insights and evidence that can be provided by youth. The initiative is not meant to substitute or contest scientific scholar research work and should not be confused with a method where youth undertake research that requires very high-level professional research skills, typically attained through postgraduate education. Still, we hope that findings generated through the YAR initiative will inspire scholars to undertake academic research in previously overlooked areas and, therefore, fill some gaps in the literature.

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUTH

At the dawn of 2022, humanity and societies emerge from a devastating pandemic, while remaining heavily challenged by ongoing crises (socio-economic, political, environmental), conflicts and spread of disinformation.

For youth, in particular, the pandemic has further aggravated the challenges they face, leading to 38% of young people globally being uncertain of their future prospects, with high uncertainty in the jobs and education sectors. 60.5% of total enrolled learners – more than 1.5 billion worldwide – have been affected by school and university closures. One in six young people who were employed before the outbreak stopped working altogether. For those who kept their jobs, working hours fell by nearly a quarter. Youth in lower-income countries are the most exposed, while young women are reporting greater losses in productivity than young men. Young adults (aged 18 to 29) have experienced high levels of distress since the onset of the pandemic. This is particularly the case for youth from low socio-economic backgrounds, and for young women who are identified as the more vulnerable group when it comes to violence since the pandemic.¹

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In spite of these challenges, youth have also been proving their resilience and inventiveness in the face of adversity, by participating in social activism, with a global 31% volunteering, and 27% making donations towards the pandemic response.²

YAR was conceived to give space, capacity and voice to young people to determine the issues they are facing and to undertake research on these to inform local, national, regional or global responses. Following a global survey, young respondents identified five core themes which the YAR initiative would investigate in terms of the pandemic impact on youth:

LEARNING – Changes in education during the pandemic and how young people have been impacted and have adapted

WELL-BEING – New social norms, anxiety about the pandemic and access to services have made youth well-being a key concern

YOUTH-LED ACTION – Supporting their communities through the pandemic has resulted in many young people leading volunteer efforts

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY – With a strong shift to doing everything online, young people have needed technical skills and innovation to adapt

RIGHTS – Balancing community protection and freedom has left young people across the world unable to exercise their rights, with especially tough impacts on marginalized youth

With over 6,000 applications, the YAR initiative has engaged approximately 270 young people, from over 70 countries, as researchers, and close to 10,000 youth in support to the research teams. Considering the sanitary restrictions imposed by the pandemic, YAR mechanisms and processes were migrated entirely online from the training platform to virtual mentoring and online survey tools for data collection. While working together online has been a challenge for young people due to connectivity issues and differing time zones, it has also enabled them to meet and work with people from other countries which resulted in rich cultural exchanges.

The work of these young people over the course of 18 months has uncovered valuable insights on youth perspectives, but also important gaps that need to be further addressed. While overwhelmingly recognizing the value of youth-led research as a means to channel youth voices into decision-making, a majority of young respondents, also perceived that there are limited avenues for youth engagement in public life and decision-making at all levels. Major gaps identified by young respondents include the lack of data to understand the “double burden” of the pandemic on young women; unavailability of mental health support, exacerbated by stigma; insufficient technology education and training; as well as the limited funding and capacity-building opportunities for young innovators, entrepreneurs and informal youth-led grassroots initiatives. Young respondents also reported significant disruptions in education, poor quality of learning experiences and outcomes, all of which combine to increase levels of stress and anxiety.

Beyond these challenges, YAR researchers also identified positive grounds on which to build. Prime among these is the increased civic activity of young people, much of which has been directly aimed at spreading awareness about COVID-19 and supporting community safety. In addition, young respondents self-reported high digital literacy and a general feeling of on-line safety and ability to identify misinformation.

Building on their findings, the work of the teams resulted in a set of key recommendations to be taken up by decision-makers in the context of pandemic recovery efforts. The Global Policy Brief provides the #Global10 interdisciplinary recommendations emerging from across all the youth-led research teams (pages 7-8), as well as a more in-depth look at the theme-specific findings and recommendations under each of the thematic areas addressed by the initiative (pages 9-17).

The #GLOBAL10



YAR Recommendations addressed to Heads of State and Government and concerned Ministers

1 Establish and sustain **multi-stakeholder, intergenerational and inclusive partnerships to address the impact of the pandemic on and with youth**, notably for youth mental health, learning, livelihoods and access to technology.

Focus on: Partnerships at national, regional and local level, bringing together educational institutions, the private sector (particularly tech companies), the media, community organizations, academics and other civil society actors.

2 Publicly commit to and strengthen the right to participation of young people in all aspects of public life, particularly through formal, accessible, gender-sensitive, inclusive and safe spaces that allow youth to engage and influence decision-making, legislation, and public policies and programmes.

Focus on: inter alia, the establishment of youth advisory/policy positions/groups to Heads of Government, relevant ministers and within Parliaments; tailored capacity development opportunities for youth participation; and frameworks that support safe youth volunteerism.

3 Establish consistent and inclusive **institutional frameworks and funding mechanisms** to build capacities, support, upscale and ensure the **policy uptake of youth-led research**, as a means to guarantee inclusive policy-making and channel youth perspectives in public debate.

Focus on: Opportunities and spaces enabling young researchers to meaningfully engage with parliamentarians and government representatives should be foreseen.

4 Prioritize **targeted legislation and actions to recognize and address the exacerbated challenges that young women** have faced, often as caretakers and/or through giving up their careers, in the face of the pandemic.

Focus on: Multi-institutional collaboration and community-based cultural support to raise awareness about and identify relevant solutions.

5 Increase **public and private investment in supporting and upscaling youth-led innovation and entrepreneurship** for post-pandemic recovery.

Focus on: Tailored legislation and policies supporting young innovators; financial support and streamlining of access to credits and loans for young entrepreneurs; legal recognition and registration of informal youth-led initiatives; tailored capacity-building for young entrepreneurs; innovative partnerships with Internet Service Providers.



The 10 key global recommendations (and their respective foci) have emerged from the cross-section of the work of all youth-led research teams, under the YAR Initiative. Theme-specific findings and cross-regional recommendations, as well as the regional research foci are outlined in the following pages.

6 Engage with young people to design, implement and monitor a **hybrid educational model that delivers high-quality innovative education accessible to all** young people.

Focus on: Provision of tools and training for educators to deliver quality online learning; media campaigns encouraging guardians to support virtual learning; regular model assessments and updates to cater to young people's learning needs, particularly those of young women, and to ensure maximum efficiency and accessibility.

7 Develop **legal and institutional frameworks** to ensure **safe and low-cost access to digital tools**, provide **financial support**, and encourage **public-private partnerships** and **youth inclusion in policy-making**, in order to mitigate future risks on the continuity of education.

Focus on: Guarantee of affordable and easy-to-access internet connectivity for all young people; financial support - through scholarships, awards and subsidies-for young people in rural and marginalized communities to rent/purchase electronic devices and software for learning.

8 Mobilize and set-up multi-stakeholder alliances to invest in building **digital literacy and digital green skills** on a universal and equal basis, and in collaboration with young innovators, as a means to address the digital divide and promote digital equality.

9 Provide incentives to educational, particularly higher-education, institutions to **establish remote and in-person mental health counseling platforms** and modalities.

Focus on: Students' ability to interact online, informally and anonymously, with professors, educators, counselors or medical specialists to discuss academic or psychological problems experienced during online learning.

10 Adopt and implement legislative and policy measures that ensure the **integration of gender-sensitive and rights-based education about sexual and reproductive health in school curricula**, with specific provisions for crisis situations.

Focus on: Development of contingency plans for the delivery of sexual and reproductive health counselling/services during crises, as a means to understand and address related barriers experienced during the pandemic.

Topics



Learning



Well-being



Rights




Role of Technology



Youth-led Action

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Europe and North America



North American Youth Team 

North American Regional Team 1 

North American Regional Team 2 

Europe Youth Team 

Europe Regional Team 1 

Europe Regional Team 2  

Latin America and the Caribbean

Haiti Team 1 

Haiti Team 2 

Brazil Team  

Latin America Youth Team 1 

Latin America Youth Team 2 

Africa

Southern and Eastern Africa Team 

Central Africa Team 

Nigeria Team 



Global Teams

- Global SIDS Team
- Global Evaluation Team
- Global Gender Team
- Global Rights Team
- Global Learning Team
- Global Technology Team
- Global Well-being Team
- Global Youth Action Team

Arab States

- Arab States Regional Team 1
- Arab States Regional Team 2

Asia and the Pacific

- South Asia Team
- Southeast Asia Team
- East Asia Team
- Viet Nam Team 1
- Viet Nam Team 2
- Philippines Team
- Pakistan Team 1
- Pakistan Team 2
- Asia-Pacific Youth Team 1
- Asia-Pacific Youth Team 2
- Asia-Pacific Regional Team

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LEARNING

The scale of the education crisis created by COVID-19 is well known and has exacerbated existing disparities in accessing quality education. 60.5% of total enrolled learners – more than 1.5 billion worldwide – have been affected by school and university closures. It is expected that the number of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) will see an increase worldwide. Online learning has grown, yet with important differences between regions of the world and within societies (e.g. while, worldwide, 31% of total enrolled learners in primary and secondary education are unable to access remote learning, this percentage rises to 49% in Eastern and Southern Africa).³ Even those who are connected are showing signs of fatigue and sociological impact due to lack of socialization with their peers, so important for youth development.⁴

Unsurprisingly, learning was identified as the number one challenge. As reported during the YAR initiative, from total closure, to switching to online classes, students have had numerous challenges to overcome, from internet access and family finances to quality of online teaching. Teachers are also faced with the challenge of rapidly adapting to virtual classrooms, ensuring that the learning outcomes are achieved with different resources and teaching styles. For students approaching graduation, the transition from education to work is uncertain and many students have experienced increased levels of stress and anxiety.

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Key findings

Two global studies, one of which was composed of youth researchers from Small Island Developing States (SIDS)⁵, focused on the perceptions of students and young teachers and on how the changes have impacted their learning experiences. Sub-regional and national studies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean explored the effectiveness of online learning and impacts on learning.

- Access to stable and affordable internet and devices is an issue reported in all regions. The majority of students and about half of the teachers' respondents reported having an unstable internet connection while 18.9% students and 24.5% teachers experienced power outages. Class interruptions were also attributed to external conditions, such as background noise or being asked for help with the housework approximately two to three times per week. Female respondents also noted having difficulty concentrating at home due to increased household tasks.
- Poor quality of learning experiences and outcomes is a major concern. More than half of the students reported that the quality of learning declined considerably since the start of the



pandemic. In the Global YAR study on Learning, only 6.1% of the teachers respondents report that all learning outcomes were attained.

- Teacher-student relationships and student well-being have also been gravely affected. Both students (43.6%) and teachers (53.1%) agree that their relationships worsened, while students (44%) reported deterioration of student-student relationships as well. Many students reported learning during the pandemic to be stressful and fatiguing, while levels of optimism about the future remained medium to high among respondents.
- In SIDS (per the SIDS study), the most frequently reported changes were decrease in teaching time (students: 66.9%; teachers: 70.2%) and learning resources (students: 94.8%; teachers: 62.1%). 69.4% of teachers and 65.3% of students considered online education to have slightly to moderately helped them achieve their teaching or learning goals, with flexibility of the format and protection against COVID-19 as strengths, and insufficient motivation and poor adaptation of courses as weaknesses.

Theme-specific cross-regional recommendations

1. Introduce schemes to support more affordable and reliable online access to learning through loan schemes, financial subsidies and equipment banks, particularly benefiting young women, as well as low income and vulnerable students.
2. Upskill students and teachers for better delivery of online, hybrid and alternative education. This would include use of new technology but also pedagogical strategies for quality learning.
3. Strengthen cooperation with international organizations and NGOs to provide students with tools needed for online learning (for example, tablets/laptops), particularly in countries of ongoing conflict.
4. Develop student support systems by improving counselling and mentoring, and providing online extracurricular spaces to encourage and build social networks amongst students.

WELL-BEING

Amid growing concern that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in mental health and psychosocial problems including depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress and poor sleep quality, *Nature* reported significant changes in mental health status in a global study with 400,000 participants. Psychological distress was the most widely reported affecting 50% of participants.⁶ This is particularly true when it comes to youth, considering the close association between positive youth development outcomes, socialization and (peer) social influence.⁷ Indeed, the seclusion, lack of contact with peers, and for many, the loss of emotional and financial security, disrupted not only their daily lives (e.g. their education) but also proper development processes that take place during adolescence, such as reinforcing autonomy and building self-esteem. This has resulted in youth facing an increased risk of suffering from depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders, as well as an increase in the rates of youth suicide as they were unable to cope with those various stressors.⁸ At the same time, data from 171 countries⁹ suggest a global shortfall in investment in mental health and that the increased attention given to mental health in recent years has yet to result in a scale-up of quality mental services that is aligned with needs.

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Often intimately linked with young people's studies and work lives, both of which have undergone abrupt and significant disruptions, wellbeing (particularly mental wellbeing) was a key concern for YAR teams from all regions. Critical concerns of the researchers included access to mental health services, quality of these services, given restrictions in place and stigma experienced by recipients.

Key findings

This thematic area yielded the most of studies under the YAR initiative (12 studies out of 34). A global study focused on the impact of COVID-19 on youth well-being. Sub-regional and national studies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean explored a variety of wellbeing aspects, namely the impact on mental health created by the transition to virtual learning, isolation, the media portrayal of youth and the variation of information sources; the link between emotional wellbeing and use of social media; the impact of the pandemic on life satisfaction; as well as habits and attitudes towards physical activities pre- and post-pandemic.

- Access to mental health services was hampered due to the pandemic, and stigma remained a key barrier affecting young people's decision to seek support. More than a quarter of the respondents needed mental health support from the government (26.2%). However, close to 60% of respondents were not aware of any national mental health policy in their country.



60% of those who needed mental health support lived in a country where there was no such policy in place as far as they knew.

- In all regions, levels of stress and anxiety have risen since the start of the pandemic. Key stressors relate to education (65.4%), mental health (64.4%) and social life (61.4%), followed closely by income (nearly 50%) and financial stability. Specific issues such as gender-based violence, lack of family support and online bullying have exacerbated these stressors for some.
- Social media and online communities have played an important role in youth social and mental health, both positive and negative.

Theme-specific cross-regional recommendations

Access and quality of youth-focused mental health services were seen as critical needs to better support youth including the following specific recommendations:

1. Integrate community-based interventions that promote services and reduce stigma into government policies and programmes, as a means to increase mental health awareness, address mental health illiteracy and break down cultural barriers.
2. Strengthen collaboration between Ministries of Health and Ministries of Education/ Universities to develop and implement low-cost, student-focused mental health services.
3. Introduce university online motivation and counselling sessions for students, including by promoting peer-counseling and student engagement related to improving youth mental health.
4. Expand access to information from trusted international/government bodies through improved social media presence promoting mental wellness, exercise and social connection.

YOUTH-LED ACTION

A silver lining in the pandemic has been the way that communities have banded together to support those in need. In this context, young people have also been proving their resilience, inventiveness and innovation in the face of adversity. Youth have been participating in social activism, with a global 31% volunteering, and 27% making donations towards the pandemic response. Youth-led action ranged from simply providing human contact in a world that has isolated many, to provision of inaccessible services or protection from external risks. A meta-analysis of impacts of the pandemic on youth found that youth have changed the way they approach civic action through innovation and adaptation, especially in digital engagement.¹⁰ In addition, a number of storytelling and communication initiatives throughout the pandemic have been showcasing how young people have been engaging, online and on site, to provide responses to various challenges.

Key findings

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This group of studies examines how youth have stepped up to be part of these solutions in their communities and how this has played a part in coping with the pandemic, and in providing sustainable solutions. A global study explored how youth-led community initiatives have been (or not) able to address challenges of transitioning to online digital spaces for effective learning and improved youth livelihood amidst the pandemic. Sub-regional and national studies in all five regions of the world explored several areas relevant to youth civic action, namely, (1) the transition to digital action (Arab-States); (2) the impact of the pandemic on young entrepreneurs (Central Africa); (3) the responses provided by young leaders and young volunteers during the pandemic (Asia-Pacific); (4) the perception of the social identity of youth as understood through interactions in online versus physical space (Europe and North America); and (5) the online action and strategies employed by youth in response to the crisis (Brazil).

- Overall survey responses point to significant civic activity by young people, much of which was directly aimed at spreading awareness about COVID-19 and supporting community safety through provision of protective gear or relief materials. To state some examples, 73.5% of the respondents of the sub-regional study for South Asia and 65% of the respondents of the national study in Brazil were engaged in social projects for COVID alleviation. In the Arab States, motivations for civic action included altruism, desire to enhance their careers, networking with like-minded young people, while also strengthening skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving.



- At the same time, funding resources and securing volunteers were the most needed interventions to sustain the capacity for youth-led organizations to have impact. The critical need for capacity building of youth organizations on digital literacy was also revealed.
- In the Central Africa study, young entrepreneurs indicated that their businesses had declined significantly, with some even closing down. 66% reported the impact of their livelihoods to be severe, while 13% considered it catastrophic with limited to no additional support from government and private institutions
- On volunteer initiatives, the South Asia study reveals that while 83.2% of young volunteers believe they have gained skills through volunteering, they identified as main barriers to volunteering were remuneration and lack of safety and security measures, while 37% of youth volunteers agreed to have experienced trauma during volunteering.
- On ways to support and promote the work of youth-led initiatives, the necessity for more learning opportunities that correspond to the operational needs of youth-led initiatives, was highlighted, as well as the need for recognition and meaningful networking opportunities with partners, government and funding agencies as a means to secure funding and win-win partnerships.

Theme-specific cross-regional recommendations

1. Improve support to youth-led initiatives, enterprises, innovations and organizations, through funding in the form of grants, scholarships or vouchers, as well as through novel financing mechanisms, provision of technical advice and awareness-raising.
2. Strengthen recognition of youth-led initiatives, enterprises and actions through, inter alia, formal registration, certificates, awards, grants and other incentives, so as to enable youth to access related support mechanisms and other opportunities in the formal system.
3. Enhance avenues for young people to connect, network and partner with policy-makers, government and funding agencies and relevant partners.
4. Create safe spaces and all-inclusive policies for youth volunteerism and provide psychological counselling and psycho-social interventions for youth volunteers dealing with trauma.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Young people were already keen users of technology before the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the pandemic and subsequent stay-at-home mandates, online learning, and social distancing requirements have increased reliance on digital media for most aspects of the lives of youth (e.g., entertainment, socialization, education), with research suggesting a net increase in screen time among youth during the pandemic.¹¹ And although young people tend to be proficient in technology, important gaps in capacity, access, and expectations for youth regarding technology were revealed. This diverging level of digital literacy and related capacity amongst young people hence affected differentially (facilitated or hampered) their transition to virtual modalities in many ways. At the same time, the systems in place were not designed for a world with social isolation and using technology revealed to have both positive and negative outcomes. Notably, recent research has revealed the association between pandemic-related stressors and psychopathology, with reduced stressors for youths with limited passive screen time and with lower news media consumption related to the pandemic.¹²

Key findings

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A global study explored the insights that the global youth responses to the pandemic provide in terms of how to harness technologies for enhanced resilience to systemic crises. Global, sub-regional and national studies addressing other thematic areas (learning, civic action, well-being) have also discussed the role of technology, the digital divide and the access to verified information, as well as how digital solutions have developed in a range of areas such as agriculture, education, health and business.

- Youth accessed COVID-19 information largely through social media (65.3%) and several times a week. 51.9% of respondents used technology in order to access health-related information.
- Self-reported digital literacy amongst youth is high (62.5%) though 70.3% asserted that better technology education and training is needed.
- Respondents particularly reported that internet access and costs (44.4%), the ability to understand and use technology (33.3%) and language (22.2%) were among the key barriers that prevented young people from leveraging the potential of technology for actions or services that go beyond simply accessing health-related information.



Findings overall demonstrated limited change in online behavior during the pandemic, with 79.6% indicating they felt completely or moderately safe. Although 72.9% reported receiving misinformation, only 4.2% indicated they could not identify it as such.

Theme-specific cross-regional recommendations

1. Increase support and investment in national policies that target youth digital skills development.
2. Further encourage, including through targeted funding, technology education and training through accessible online courses and local skills programmes.
3. Explore options to lower the cost of technology, particularly for young innovators, including lease-to-own and subscription options.
4. Collaborate with media organizations and youth to combat disinformation and fake news.

RIGHTS

Management of a global pandemic requires a very delicate balance between restricting rights to protect the population whilst ensuring that all measures taken are respectful of human dignity, non-discriminatory and of limited duration. After education, health and employment, limitations on individual rights and access to information were significant concerns for youth, with around 30% of those surveyed in 2020 expressing this concern.¹³ Freedom of expression, freedom of movement and the rights to work and to quality health care are areas that have been more significantly restricted.¹⁴ Employment and the right to work are also considered an area of particular risk, placing young people, often with lower skills and less experience, the first to have their livelihoods impacted.

In addition, exploring the intersectionality of gender and youth reveals particular challenges created for those whose voices need to be heard in these times of crisis. The gendered impact on the right to work during the pandemic is not sufficiently explored. Also, as governments and international organizations focus on their COVID-19 crisis decision-making within dramatically changing global and national health governance contexts, the social and political determinants of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) are also changing. SRHR are among the most complex, sensitive, controversial, but important issues in human rights law and the obstacles preventing individuals from achieving sexual and reproductive health are often interrelated and entrenched.

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Key findings

The studies were quite diverse under this topic. A global study on the impact of COVID-19 focused on how young people exercise their SRHR. Sub-regional and national studies in Asia (Pakistan) and North America explored the gendered impact of COVID-19 in terms of the right to work:

Sexual and reproductive health (global)

- 36.16% of young respondents did not receive any information on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) during the pandemic.
- The services which young people could only access with significant delays (greater than 75% of the cases) were related to abortion care, antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care, and contraception. More than 50% of respondents also experienced delays with accessing treatment and antiretroviral medication for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually



transmitted infections (STIs) during the pandemic, as well as prevention and management of reproductive cancers.

- Five key barriers were identified in accessing SRHR information or services during the pandemic: dissemination of poor-quality information, not based on evidence; closure of SRH clinics frequented by youth; internet restrictions limiting the information flow among youth; prevailing stigma surrounding SRHR; limited economic flexibility of youth to access SRH services.

Impact on women's right to work

- In spite of the limited sample size, one study in North America reveals that a majority of women respondents (81%) worked in jobs that were medium to high risk of COVID-19 exposure. Women were also overrepresented in high risk and medium risk sectors of the employment force, which were more likely to experience closures related to Covid-19. Therefore, women both faced higher risks of being exposed to the virus and losing their jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Of those who had childcare responsibilities, the majority indicated that these increased from 6-10+ hours, with three respondents indicating 16-21+ extra hours per week. The qualitative results from those who had childcare increases demonstrate the significant impacts for women within a household.
- The respondents also demonstrate the cumulative impact of having virtual schooling, and how public health restrictions and guidelines have increased unpaid labor responsibilities of women within the home.
- As the Pakistan national study reveals, a significant number of women in Pakistan who turned to working from home during the pandemic experienced benefits such as increased family time, but also increased stress from irregular working hours and lack of ICTs resources.

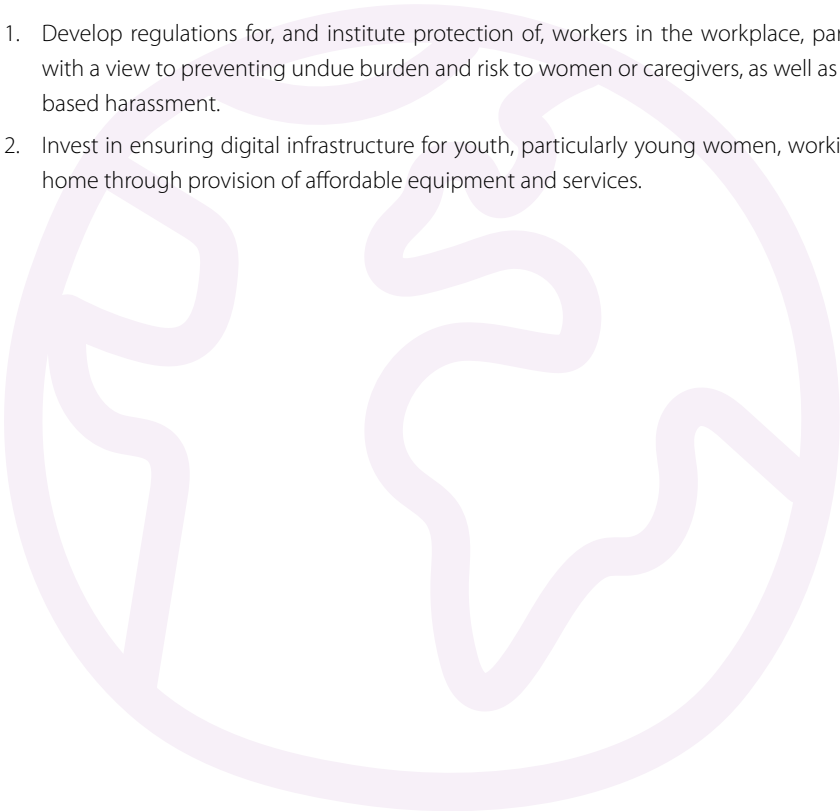
Theme-specific cross-regional recommendations

Sexual and reproductive health (global)

1. Improve access, including virtual access to sexual and reproductive health services and information to strengthen understanding of sexual and reproductive health.
2. Adapt contingency plans for health emergencies to ensure that they do not significantly impact the essential services of SRH by allocating budgetary resources to SRH clinical service delivery.
3. Invest in training healthcare providers on youth/adolescent SRHR to combat related taboos and stigma.

Impact on women's right to work

1. Develop regulations for, and institute protection of, workers in the workplace, particularly with a view to preventing undue burden and risk to women or caregivers, as well as gender-based harassment.
2. Invest in ensuring digital infrastructure for youth, particularly young women, working from home through provision of affordable equipment and services.



Endnotes

- 1 All data and projections are sourced from the following sources:
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 - ILO. 2020. “Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being.” https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf
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- 3 UNICEF. 2020. “COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures?” <https://data.unicef.org/resources/remote-learning-reachability-factsheet/>
- 4 Data and projections are sourced from the following sources:
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 - ILO. 2020. “Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being.” https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf
- 5 The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) include the following states: Antigua and Barbuda; Bahamas; Bahrain; Barbados; Belize; Cabo Verde; Comoros; Cuba; Dominica; Dominican Republic; Fiji; Grenada; Guinea-Bissau; Guyana; Haiti; Jamaica; Kiribati; Maldives; Marshall Islands; Federated States of Micronesia; Mauritius; Nauru; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Samoa; São Tomé and Príncipe; Singapore; St. Kitts and Nevis; St. Lucia; St. Vincent and the Grenadines; Seychelles; Solomon Islands; Suriname; Timor-Leste; Tonga; Trinidad and Tobago; Tuvalu; Vanuatu. United Nations. 2022. “List of SIDS.” <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/list-sids>
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- 7 Telzer, Eva H. et al. 2018. “Social Influence on Positive Youth Development: A Developmental Neuroscience Perspective”. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* 54: 215-258.
- 8 Murthy, Padmini and Amy Ansehl. 2021. “COVID-19 Crisis and Mental Health Challenges Among Youth: An Opinion Piece.” <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/covid-19-crisis-and-mental-health-challenges-among-youth-opinion-piece>
- 9 WHO. 2021. “WHO report highlights global shortfall in investment in mental health.” <https://www.who.int/news/item/08-10-2021-who-report-highlights-global-shortfall-in-investment-in-mental-health>
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- 14 OHCHR Rights and COVID-19, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/Youth_and_COVID-19.aspx



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