About the Series

The UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office through its flagship programme for youth, Safeguard Young People (SYP), as part of the response to COVID-19 engaged young people in the region to find out how they were coping with the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The #YouthandCOVID19 project was launched in May with the aim of sharing best practices among the youth and to expose them to the many interventions and responses to COVID-19 that UNFPA and its partners have put in place during this time.

A call to action was shared via the SYP social media platforms and among the youth on the programme’s database whereby young people were invited to share their experiences through documentation of their own diaries. The young people were given guiding questions, which were skillfully crafted to ensure that the diaries covered access to sexual and reproductive health services and commodities, mental health, coping strategies and their hopes for the future, among others.

The diaries are engaging and representative of how the young person in Africa has been dealing with the advent of a pandemic that caught the world by surprise.

If there’s anything to take away from this series it should be the tips and advice that these young people share with us.
In my country, activities continue except that we are called to be careful of COVID-19. As a student, I’m just continuing with my studies, paying attention to the given by health workers and the different ministries.

Though we have no difficulty accessing sexual and reproductive health services, the focus has shifted a bit so I try to give hope to other young people that life goes on.

**I’ll make up for this time**

When all this is over, I will try making up for it by composing poetry targeted at young people warning them to always be careful and never mourn despite the worst things that appear in life, in addition to thanking God.

I’m really worried about the youth and the people of our country but even during this pandemic, I am very grateful for UNFPA and the various ministries and organizations who have not stopped guiding us.My advice to other young people is; be courageous and don’t relax - fight to achieve your dreams because no matter how long Covid-19 lasts, the situation will be normal one day.
"Keep yourself busy, do not stay dormant, learn a new skill during this lockdown, read a book, sensitize someone who may be ignorant on the pandemic"

Currently, my country Zambia is on a partial lockdown. Most of the country’s business activities have continued operating with strict adherence to the Ministry of Health’s safety and health guidelines, no social gathering (only churches are allowed to meet with no more than 50 people), sensitization programmes are ongoing too. Human Resource in most work places has been reduced to essential workers only. During this season, am on a partial lockdown together with my family. It has been hard and alien to me, an experience with no specific day of coming to an end, I keep hoping things and life will get back to normal. I spend 95 per cent of my time indoors, chatting with colleagues online, attending online meetings, looking out for new information on the Internet concerning COVID-19. I also exercise to keep myself fit and in good shape. I haven’t faced any challenges with regards to access to sexual and reproductive health services so far. Our health facilities are still attending to clients who need such services and they have not shifted all the attention to the fight against COVID-19.

Doing my bit for family and friends
As for my family and friends, I keep sensitizing them about the pandemic, and emphasizing the need to wear their masks whenever they find themselves interacting with the public. Of late, my team and I are voluntarily working towards supplementing governments’ efforts in the fight against COVID-19 by raising funds to buy masks and hand sanitizers for our differently abled friends in our community. So that they too can be protected from the pandemic.

As an SRHR/ HIV Anti- retroviral and adherence Youth Facilitator, my job demands for interaction with young people and adolescents, but it is unfortunate that COVID-19 is creating a barrier for me to meet with my team physically.

However, we have resorted to online interactions, though it is a challenge in itself because most of the young people in my area can hardly access a smart phone or secure one for such interactions. So time after time, I call them to find out how they are doing, because sometimes I also run out of airtime to call every single one of them.

I miss the physical interactions with my fellow young people, playing soccer, watching soccer, going freely to church/conferences, just to name but a few. The first thing I will do when all this is over is to visit my friends and family, have a huge party for my young people at work for surviving “the season”. I am really worried about the aftermath of COVID-19 on the society and when it will all come to an end. Even during this pandemic, I am very grateful for God’s provision, protection and giving me life everyday when other people are dying in thousands…..it is a tragedy! My advice to other young people in Africa during this time is “keep yourself busy, do not stay dormant, learn a new skill during this lockdown, read a book, sensitize someone who may be ignorant on the pandemic, pray for one another’s protection. This too shall pass. Above all #StayHomeToStaySafe. You are loved!”

Joshua Sapetu, 27, is an SRHR/ HIV Anti- retroviral and adherence Youth Facilitator
I’m really worried about the safety of others who don’t have access to personal protective equipment, like masks.

The situation here in Namibia is actually not bad as the lockdown was lifted on May 4. I’m coping quite well as I am following the rules and regulations imposed by the authorities, especially because our sexual and reproductive health services haven’t suffered so young people still have access to these.

Time for studies and assignments

I’m currently assisting others by providing them with the information they need to keep themselves safe from COVID-19. School is also going very well actually as I have time for studying and doing assignments. I do miss sporting activities though and the first thing I’ll do once all this is totally over will be to go and play football.

I’m so grateful for being alive and my advice to other young people is just keep doing what you are doing to keep yourselves safe and obey the advice of the authorities.

Karuzerururua Ndjarakana, 22 is a student at International University of Management in Namibia.
“I keep myself busy and informed by doing free online courses on COVID-19”

The situation is not that bad in my country. I thank the frontline workers in the fight against this contagious disease; they are doing their best to stop the spread of COVID-19. I’m under lockdown with my family, so I’m always with them and I’m using this time to get to know them better. Life has never been the same since the lockdown, but I have kept myself busy with researching more on COVID-19 as well as doing free online courses on the virus. I am trying to adapt to the new way of life. In my country, we haven’t experienced any health challenges in line with sexual and reproductive health and rights, as young people are able to access services but not as much as they used to before the lockdown.

Supporting family and friends
I am doing my level best to support my family and friends by talking to them about the best ways they can cope with what’s going on as well as sharing information on the virus.

As a student and volunteer, to ensure that my work continues, I’m accessing lessons on e-learning and with the voluntary work I do with different organizations, I have been working online to reach the community at large. I miss having meaningful discussions with youths at youth-friendly spaces and public ventures in my country and wow, as soon as this ends, I will be very happy. I think the first thing I will do is to have a meaningful youth group discussion with my fellow youths out there. Though I am worried about the people who are getting infected with the virus every day, I am still grateful that the world is working hand in hand through the World Health Organization to curb the pandemic that has affected everyone globally.
“The good thing is that we are free to access sexual and reproductive health products and services, including condoms.”

Laika Lizimu, 26, is part of FutureLife-Now!, a regional programme to address HIV and the associated challenges related to gender and climate change in Zambia.

The situation is tough. The country is facing an economic crisis, with movement restrictions and no unnecessary gatherings. I have been locked down with my family and it is really hectic, because it’s promoting stigma. We are no longer living the life of peace we had been living some years back. The good thing is that we are free to access sexual and reproductive health products and services, including condoms. I have been actively supporting my family, friends and community by sensitizing them about the symptoms, signs and precaution measures of COVID-19.

My work has not stopped
I’m a youth facilitator working with young people in schools, health centres and the community at large. During this lockdown I have not stopped the facilitation work but I am doing it via social media, especially Facebook. I also use SMS and WhatsApp for facilitation in terms of schooling. I am currently upgrading my studies at one of the universities in Zambia. However, I am doing both my work and studies through social media e-learning.

Missing church and outdoor games
I really miss church services, outdoor games and other gatherings like parties because they promote interaction among us as young people. My advice to other young people is that the future for the next generation is now: eat healthy food, do exercises and take a lot of liquids. Even during this pandemic, I am very grateful for the efficient use of media for both work and studies.
"I lost my appetite, lost weight and I started sleeping abnormal hours because I was really stressed."

We are currently in the last two weeks of a 49-day continuous lockdown. No new COVID-19 cases were recorded in the past six days and nothing has changed in my situation as I am still locked down alone. To try and stay safe, I’ve joined an e-support WhatsApp group for young people living with HIV in my district. In this group I’ve managed to obtain facts about COVID-19, HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), emotional support and coping mechanisms. As I gained more knowledge on COVID-19, I realized that I had a problem and I really needed help, and this led me to seek counselling.

This is how I am coping with the pandemic now:

- I am staying connected and maintaining my social networks.
- I am keeping my personal daily routine.
- During times of stress, I pay attention to my own needs and feelings.
- I exercise regularly, keep my regular sleep routine and eat healthy food.
- I seek information updates and practical guidance at specific times from health professionals to avoid listening to or following rumours that make me feel uncomfortable.
- I made sure I have my ARVs for the next six months and I know in advance where and how to get practical help if needed, like requesting medical care (integrated SRHR and HIV youth-friendly services).

There is a lack of access to health-care services, especially on SRHR and commodities such as condoms and contraceptives, psychosocial support and mental health services due to the closure of youth-friendly health facilities in my locality, where I used to access those services and mobility. There is scarcity of transport services to ferry me to the district hospital, which is 20 kilometres away.

However, I have been engaged in sensitizing youth in my rural community on COVID-19 prevention strategies, transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and unintended pregnancies, targeting adolescents and young people, distribution of SRHR commodities (condoms) to sexually active youths, ART adherence monitoring and support, and provision of psychosocial support and mental health services to young people living with HIV in my rural community where we have limited access to the Internet, radio stations and television.

Work and school situation

As a student doing a degree in Social Work, I’ve chosen to use this time to complete all my assignments and projects. I am also a Community Adolescent Treatment Supporter from AfriAid Zvandiri, so I am connecting with my clients using my personal mobile phone (texts, calls, WhatsApp) providing psychosocial support, mental health screening, adherence support and monitoring, as well as clinical and non-clinical referrals and TB screening.

The continued lockdown made my life difficult and it increased my mental health problems. My anxiety also rose due to fears about COVID-19, and I was uncertain about the future. I was depressed just because I’m closed in, living in a difficult situation where I feel discriminated against, poorly treated and hopeless about my future.

Luckmore Pamhidzai, 23, is a student and a Community Adolescent Treatment Supporter from AfriAid Zvandiri in Zimbabwe
Marvellous Fungurani

I am currently locked down with my siblings and my parents. The atmosphere is sombre, but manageable. With the lockdown restrictions loosened, everyone is trying to maximize on the little time and freedom they have to ensure families are fed and business is catered for. For some, the lockdown juxtaposed with the economic paralysis still threatens their livelihoods, yet some are maximizing out of the dire situation.

Coping strategies
In times like these, inventing effective coping strategies is hard work. Prayers, innovative, diligent and deliberate practices are a daily routine for me so as to manage this desperate situation. Creation of new networks has helped in terms of mitigating transport challenges; but accessing some areas and services still proves tedious. Availability of sanitary wear in shops is not much of a problem, however, the prices for pads have skyrocketed over the past five months. Access to potable water is the major problem; and being a woman, this poses a threat to my dignity and my femininity.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, I have been helping my family to access potable water, as well as assisting my siblings with school work. I also help the less privileged in my community with food and/or money from time to time.

Part-time Masters student
As a part-time Masters student, at first I struggled with my dissertation as I needed to use the library, visit the sites, and meet with my supervisor and colleagues. However, I had to improve and study online and I benefited a lot from diverse material from journals and various academic sites, as well as YouTube. For work, I used online platforms and social media to communicate with my colleagues and clients as well as executing my duties. I miss going out with my friends and going to church, and visiting the salon.

Once all this is over, I will visit my sister in Durban, South Africa. I’m really worried about what the future holds for us in the face of the economic crisis perpetuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even during this pandemic, I am very grateful for the gift of life; my loved ones are safe, and somehow certain problems in my life were ironically solved during the crisis. Life as it is has been one big oxymoron!

My advice to other young people is: success is not really in doing; success is attracted by the transition of what is happening in our minds, which is a reflection of what we are becoming. What eyes have not seen, what ears have not heard, what the hearts have not conceived, The Lord will do for us. We cannot attract a reality higher than our mental reality. Let us transform our minds, and come out stronger and more innovative than before!
“The first thing I’ll do when all this is over is, wear bright lipstick without having to wear a mask”.

It is expensive to purchase the basics if you do not earn in US dollars in my country, as prices are pegged against this currency and nutritious food is expensive. Most clinics have closed down but on the bright side, most public places give free hand sanitizer and citizens wear masks in public. I am locked down alone but I share a house with two other families.

**Being far from family**

It was difficult at first because I stay in a different city from my family due to work, and travelling to see them is cumbersome, but I have managed to stock up on some food and adopted some coping mechanisms like playing music, reading new books and occupying myself with online initiatives on fighting gender-based violence. I am currently not facing any sexual and reproductive health challenges at this time of COVID-19 as I have opted for celibacy, even though I do understand that sexual and reproductive health goes far beyond that. As a way of aiding the situation, I sometimes give my family money and at the community level, I raise awareness on ending gender-based violence during this pandemic.

**Leveraging the digital space**

As an innovator against gender-based violence, I am at home most of the time so I have learnt to maximize my use of the digital space through Zoom and by posting on my WhatsApp status and in groups to ensure that my work does not stop. I really miss dressing up to eat out and meeting and interacting with the women and girls I have met in my line of work. I miss it because it is a huge part of my life. So, the first thing I’ll do when all this is over is wear bright lipstick without having to wear a mask and I’ll also visit my friends. I’m really worried about not affording basics and losing friends and family to COVID-19. Even during this pandemic, I am very grateful for being alive. My advice to other young people in Africa is: stay positive and continue to learn more and more on stress management.

Rufaro Chakanetsa, 28, is from Zimbabwe and works with Caritas, a Catholic development agency.
“My main worry right now is whether my sanitary [products] will take me through to the end of lockdown.”

Sharon Fadzai Muchena

After COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, the government of Zimbabwe issued a number of statutory instruments in March this year. One of these imposed a curfew and bans on public gatherings. Zimbabwe has joined other countries in a total lockdown. Today is day 40 and I am locked down with my family (my mom, dad and siblings). For the first two weeks, doing the same routine and seeing the same people ended up being monotonous for me. So I decided to look for something that would occupy my mind. I’m learning Bemba, which is a Zambian language, as well as trying out new recipes. I’m also now on different virtual social groups, which discuss different topics every day with regards to gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, among other things. My main worry right now is whether my sanitary [products] will take me through to the end of lockdown.

I’m my brother’s tutor and my grandma’s nurse

I have a brother in Form 1 (Grade 8) and since the lockdown he has not been going to school or attending extra lessons. I have become resourceful since I’m the one who is taking him through all his 10 subjects. I have also helped him with doing laundry and his day-to-day chores. My grandmother is 78 years old and requires constant nursing. I always check if she has taken her medication and if she has bathed. I have also helped those who I connect with virtually with data analysis and tools development. I’m currently studying towards a Master’s Degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Zimbabwe and I am in my final semester. The lockdown has affected my mobility and connectivity as a student. I am restricted regarding visiting other students and my supervisor, who are crucial as think tanks and supporters of my project. To cope with that, I have opted for online learning, although it is cumbersome to access the online libraries from home, such as JSTOR as well as Francis and Taylor.

Missing physical social connections

I really miss physical social connections - this is important for my studies and for my spiritual, religious and overall health and wellbeing. As soon as all this is over, I’m going for my driving test, which I missed due to the lockdown. I’m really worried about the possible skyrocketing of the cost of food and basic needs. I am worried about the safety and wellbeing of my family, friends, Zimbabwe in general and the world at large. I’m also worried about the economy going down, affecting human rights and development. I’m worried about the abuse of human rights and gender-based violence going up. Regardless of all this, I’m grateful for life, family and friends. My advice to fellow young people is this: all our plans and dreams seem to be shattered or delayed due to the lockdown but just remember, all this will pass. Dreams have no expiry date!

Sharon Fadzai Muchena, 28, is part of the Zimbabwe Red Cross Society.
The situation is just bad with this pandemic; we are currently on lockdown and business has been hard hit. It has also affected my relationships in both negative and positive ways. I am currently locked down alone as I stay and work far from my family. Personally, the first three months were hard as I had no idea how to navigate my way through a life of being alone. I am administrative staff so I go to work but I also applied for a Master’s programme to advance my career. However, I discovered new hobbies and started to see the lockdown as a blessing, an opportunity for self development, (and I am) doing a number of courses online. I even started an online campaign against gender-based violence (GBV) for and by adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), She Awakens Movement. I have also invested in my mental health, fitness, and building my networks, while staying up-to-date with COVID-19 updates. Luckily for me, I am not facing any challenges with accessing sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services as I am a peer educator and an advocate for SRHR for AGYW. My worry is how the COVID-19 restrictions have shrunk channels of communication and service provision for school going AGYW, and how reduced income has heightened period poverty, a key determinant of SRHR among AGYW.

Being there for others
I’ve also been volunteering in community outreach programmes on advancing gender equality, fighting gender-based violence (GBV), mental health and SRHR. In terms of my family, I have been checking up on them and providing support from time to time, mentoring and tutoring my younger sisters through online platforms. I must say though, I really miss going to community awareness/outreach programmes in marginalized areas. I also miss going to the movies and going on dates with my girls, so the first thing I will do when this is all over will be to visit my family and go on movie dates with my friends.

Losing relatives and relationships
I’m really worried about losing relatives and friends to COVID-19, and losing relationships due to the “distance” created by COVID-19. However, even during this pandemic, I am very grateful for life, health, people and the strength to do more every day, even when things are hard. My advice to other young people in Africa is: Hang in there. Be optimistic. Develop yourself and find ways to achieve the things you are passionate about. Create the future you want today in your youthful days and enjoy it tomorrow with the future generation!

Sharon Musonza, 24, is a member of the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe.
Life under lockdown is very challenging, as we are all trying to adapt to new ways of doing things. As a university student, the lockdown has halted my studies, so I am trying to use this time to do more research and catch up on subjects I have been struggling with. I am getting more tutorials through free online courses and YouTube videos. Of course, this is quite expensive because data here is very costly, especially for us students who live on an allowance.

We haven’t experienced many health challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, but many young people have stopped going to the health facilities to access these services because, due to measures introduced, it takes a very long time to get services and we are [too] impatient to stay in lines all day. Other factors that have been inhibiting young people from accessing SRH services are the closure of the youth-friendly service centres, scarcity of transport due to the lockdown, and also because of the current general fear of going to the hospitals.

Empowering young people with information
Through the UNFPA-supported radio show Don’t Get it Twisted, which I co-host every Wednesday on Yarona FM, a youthful radio station, I share information with young people on how they can protect themselves, protect others and contribute to the fight against COVID-19. I also sensitize them on sexual and reproductive health issues, like the importance of continuing to use contraception during the lockdown to avert transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, and unintended pregnancies, where to access SRH commodities, and how to take care of their mental health during these challenging times.

Since Botswana registered quite a big increase in gender-based violence (GBV) cases during the lockdown, we have also been sharing information on where to report GBV, [how to find] shelters in case a GBV survivor wants a safe space, numbers to call for psychosocial support and information to sensitize men and boys on fighting GBV. My advice to other young people is to continue accessing SRH services and using contraception, to avoid contracting sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies. I also urge young people to take the coronavirus seriously and to continue observing the lockdown protocols and follow the health regulations.
“I am worried that I might run out of sanitary products in these 28 days of lockdown, and I am not sure if they are considered essentials, just in case I need to apply for a permit to re-stock.”

Tshepang Malope

Today is day 15 and I am locked down with my family – my grandparents, mother, siblings and aunts. My routine has changed drastically and this has been very hard for me as I am not used to spending so much time at home [being] idle. Our school has not yet provided us with information on how our lessons will proceed online, so I have devised my own learning plan. Studying at home has proven to be very difficult as there are a lot of distractions. My routine has become so monotonous for me, so I decided to do something that would occupy my mind. I have a younger brother and sister who are both in primary school. Since lockdown, they have been provided with lots of work to do at home, but without a teacher’s guidance they find it very difficult. I have therefore decided to tutor them. This has proved to be very helpful and refreshing for all of us, and it has brought us closer as siblings. I have made our learning sessions fun by incorporating videos and games. I’m also now on different virtual social groups, which discuss different topics every day with regards to gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, among other things. My main worry right now is whether my sanitary products will take me through to the end of lockdown.

Supporting my family through COVID-19

Another thing that has been giving me sleepless nights is the fact that both my grandparents have underlying conditions, with my grandfather having chronic asthma and my grandmother suffering from diabetes, conditions which, coupled with old age, make them even more vulnerable to becoming severely ill if they contract the virus. I ensure that my family stays informed of all updates regarding how to protect themselves and following the government regulations and protocols. I follow the government of Botswana, Ministry of Health and Wellness and World Health Organization Facebook pages for live updates, because I know that’s where I can get authentic information. Then I share this information with my family, as they rely mostly on me for all the updates. Before joining these groups on Facebook, I used to get lots of distorted information from my friends and classmates. This used to give me so much anxiety.

Missing physical and social connections

As a university student, I thrive on social interaction with my classmates and I miss hanging out and having lively discussions on various issues. We try to continue these discussions virtually but it’s just not the same. Some of us are on lockdown in remote areas where Internet networks are poor and besides that, data is very expensive for us students. I really can’t wait for the day when we will go back to how things were before COVID-19. Regardless of all this, I am grateful that my country has taken all these measures to help in preventing the spread of this virus. I believe if we all follow the government’s measures and protocols, we will manage to beat this and come out even more united as a nation. I urge all young people to help where they can, especially with vulnerable people like the elderly and those with disabilities, because this is a very difficult situation, especially for them. So we have to assist where we can to ensure that no one is left behind in accessing authentic information.

Tshepang Malope, 19, is a student from Gabane in Botswana
**Detailed Questionnaire**

- Email Address
- Full Name
- Age
- Organization
- WhatsApp number (Optional)
- What is the situation like in your country and who are you currently locked down with?
- How are you personally coping with the current situation?
- Are you facing any sexual and reproductive health challenges at this time of COVID-19 and related restrictions? E.g accessing condoms and services or information (please elaborate)
- How are you assisting others (family and/or community) during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- If you are in school or employed – and now at home due to COVID-19 – how are you ensuring that your work continues? (please indicate studies and/or job)
- What activities do you miss the most during this time and why?
- What’s the first thing you will do when all this is over?
- I’m really worried about...
- Even during this pandemic, I am very grateful for...
- What advice can you give to other young people in Africa during this time?
COVID-19
LOCKDOWN
AFRICA

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