

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON WORLD POPULATION DAY

11 July 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic affects everyone, everywhere, but it does not affect everyone equally. It is deepening existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly for women and girls.

With many countries on lockdown and health systems struggling to cope, sexual and reproductive health services are being sidelined and gender-based violence is on the rise. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) projects that if lockdown measures continue for six months with major disruptions to health services, 47 million women in low- and middle-income countries may not be able to access modern contraceptives, resulting in 7 million unintended pregnancies. Some 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence can also be expected.

Every year, millions of girls are subjected to practices that harm them physically and emotionally, robbing them of their right to reach their full potential. According to the *State of World Population 2020*, recently released by UNFPA, more than 4 million girls will be subjected to female genital mutilation and 12 million forced to marry this year. Lockdowns stemming from the pandemic are expected to make matters even worse.

Decades of experience and research show that bottom-up, grassroots approaches aimed at addressing gender-biased norms and attitudes, can bring change. Through international declarations and agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the international community has committed to ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health care, eliminating the unmet need for contraception, and ending all forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful practices, by 2030. We cannot allow the pandemic to reverse progress we have made towards these goals.

On this World Population Day, let us act to safeguard sexual and reproductive health care, protect the health and rights of women and girls, and end gender-based violence. The pandemic has made our jobs much harder, but we must prevail.