



Voices of Youth in West Africa

How are young women and men experiencing and responding to COVID-19?

How can we listen to youth tell their stories?

In July 2020, volunteers from the West Africa CARE Youth Network decided to learn more about what young women and men are experiencing in COVID-19, and how that should shape CARE’s response and our advocacy interests. This team interviewed 128 young people between the ages of 15 and 35¹ in 8 countries. 86 of the young people (67%) were young women. Volunteers used Whatsapp messages, phone calls, and recorded interviews to let young people tell their own stories. With a few guiding questions, and using ONA as a platform to structure and analyze the responses, the team has been able to see regional trends and individual stories that must shape humanitarian response to COVID-19 and recovery efforts in way that include young people—especially young women, meet their needs, and value their voices and leadership.

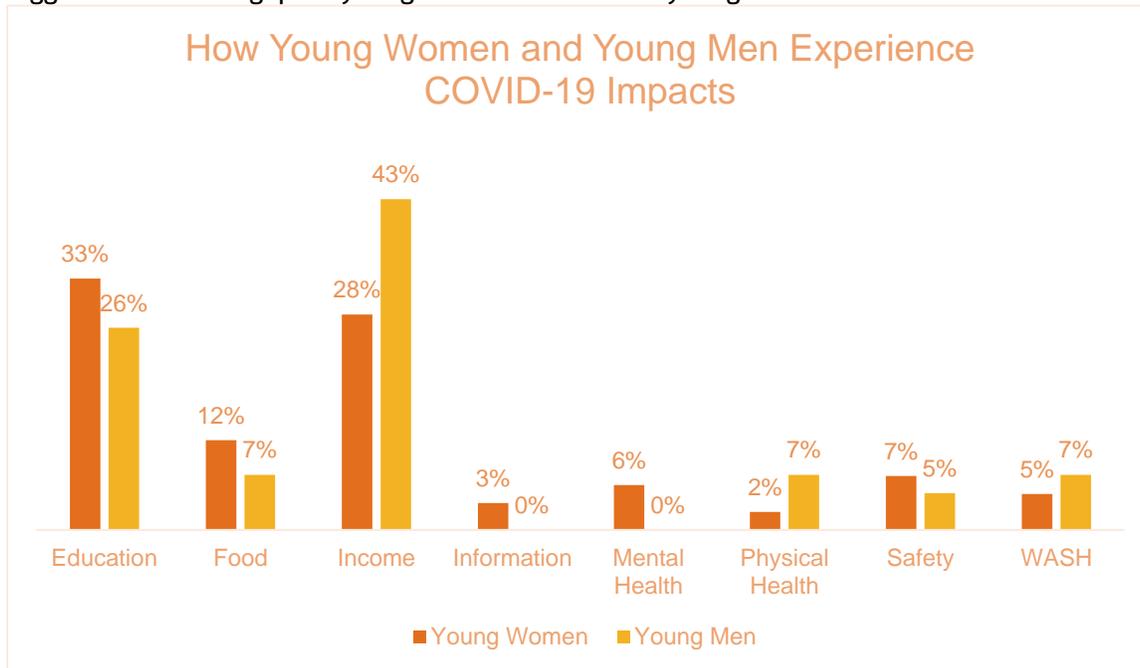
Interviewers had a set of questions from CARE’s [Rapid Gender Analysis toolkit](#), where they asked young people about the biggest impact COVID-19 has in their lives, their biggest need right now, how they are responding to COVID-19, and what are their hopes for the future. Listening to their answers, interviewers categorized the responses based on a pre-set list of options also from the RGA toolkit.

Young women and young men are experiencing different impacts of COVID-19

When speaking about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives, young women and young men prioritize different areas. Young women are more likely to speak to the importance of COVID-19’s impact on **education, food, and safety**. Both young women and young men prioritize impacts on **income**, but for young men, this is a much

¹ This is the legal definition of youth in most of the countries covered in West Africa.

bigger concern. Only young women are raising concerns about **access to information**, implying that this is a bigger obstacle and gap for young women than it is for young men.



Mental Health and Safety

“My biggest dream is to become a motivational speaker and inspire millions of people by awakening them in regards the conversion illness, mental health, and to sensitize the youth to be self-dependent and be more responsible, to be more empowered”.

– Young Man, Nigeria

Young men report that their mental health has been less impacted COVID19 than young women. This is evident in their concerns towards mental health during the pandemic as they feel that their role is to act as agents to improve the mental health wellbeing of themselves and their communities. Young women’s concerns on mental health are that they are under a lot of stress, having to deal with food insecurity and caring for family members. While men feel empowered to deal with the stressors that have come along with COVID19, young women feel that the pressure to improve their own and/or their family’s situation is more than they can handle. However, when it comes to their needs, women seem to prioritize the wellbeing of the family before their own, even though they report that their mental health is more affected than that of their

male peers. A majority already feel the pressure to contribute to supporting their families, whether married or unmarried. Despite the added stress of contracting COVID19, young women are having to work past the worry and prioritise working to support the family. As one young woman working as a migrant worker in an eatery put it, “I can't visit my parents in Mali. This is a big stress for me because my mother is sick. I came to Niger to be able to work and support myself and help my parent who are in charge of my 12 brothers and sisters. My father is currently in Togo for work too. Knowing that the Coronavirus is out in the world scares me because we have to be vigilant not to be contaminated and it is part of our daily activities. In Mali, it is difficult to find work now with the insecurity, this is the reason why I am in Niamey to help my family.”- Young woman, Niger.

Issues of food, health, education, and safety intertwine for most young people, as this example from Sierra Leone demonstrates: “It is eminent that schools will soon reopen as the Government have started lifting some restrictions. I enjoy participating in our meetings because it build our strength in taking major decisions as girls especially issues affecting our health and above all solidarity and support we provide to each other, I am really missing my friends.”

It’s also important to note that young women are worried not just about their own education, but also their

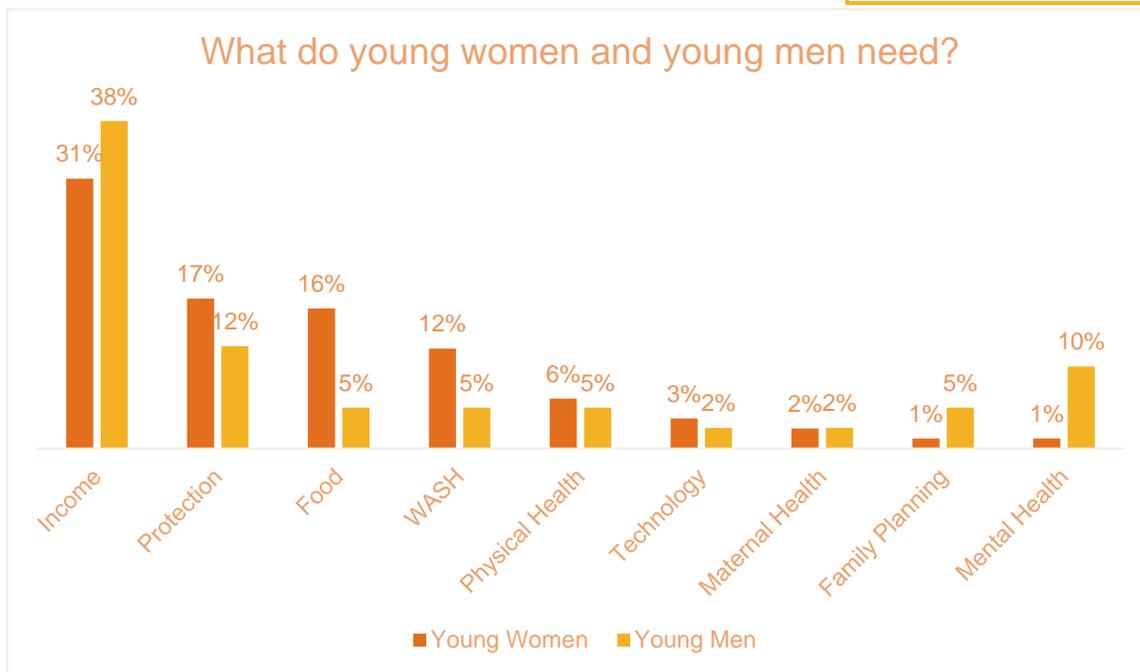
children’s education. As one woman in Cameroon said, “My two children are supposed to be schooling with my help, but I have to find a way to earn a living. I used to have a hair salon but no one is coming, I have lost all my clients.” This clearly demonstrates how school closures, economic impacts, and the unpaid care burden link and compound effects of COVID-19.

Young Women and Young Men are Expressing Different Needs in COVID-19

When we ask young women and young men what they need, we get very different answers. These answers need to inform our responses to ensure that humanitarian responses are reaching people in the ways that are most helpful to them. **Food, WASH, and protection** are all areas that young women prioritize that young men do not prioritize as strongly. Both young women and young men prioritize income, but young men prioritize this more strongly. Young men are also more likely to prioritize **mental health and family planning** as something they need.

“We were having three meals a day, it has been reduced to one meal. Most of my peers are engaged in commercial sex to support their family with food and other domestic necessities, psychologically that is painful and I wouldn’t like reflecting my mind to that”.

– Young Woman, Sierra Leone



Income is a major concern for young women and young men, while food is a major concern for many young women, especially. As a 28-year-old mother of three in Nigeria says, “Our biggest worry is that there is not enough food to eat. We rely on the market and food stuff are highly costly in the market.” Income and food concerns are tightly linked for young women. Another young woman worries that with her brothers newly unemployed, the family won’t be able to eat if their incomes rise. In Cameroon, one young woman says, “Economically it’s quite difficult. The rise in food prices, food products, has affected us enormously.”

For many young women, this is clearly connected to their need to care for their children. For example, a 23-year old widow in Nigeria says, “As the head of the family, I sometimes have to buy my goods on credit, sell and pay back so I can collect more. But it’s been really difficult in recent months. The business is not working well and making it difficult to manage the family well, including food.” She is keen to have her children educated and is

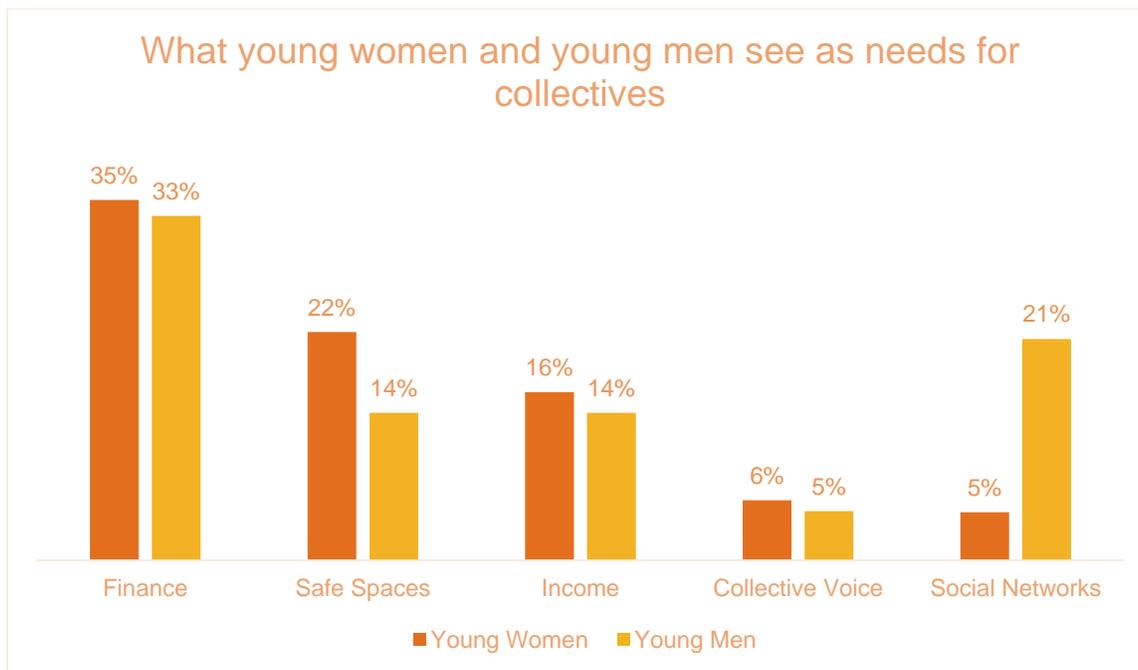
worried that recent months the kids have been staying out of school.

A key part of the picture here is the tradeoffs young women are having to make to get enough food for themselves and their families. For example, one young woman in Cameroon says now she has had to stop saving for her education to help feed the family. An 18-year old woman in Nigeria tells a similar story, “I am proud of how I go out to earn, frying okra and get some small money to buy food for the household – I am worried how the family is surviving for the past 3 months and its difficult in getting enough food. My dream is to go school and achieve something better in order to support the household.”

How are young women and young men experiencing the changes to their collective life in COVID-19?

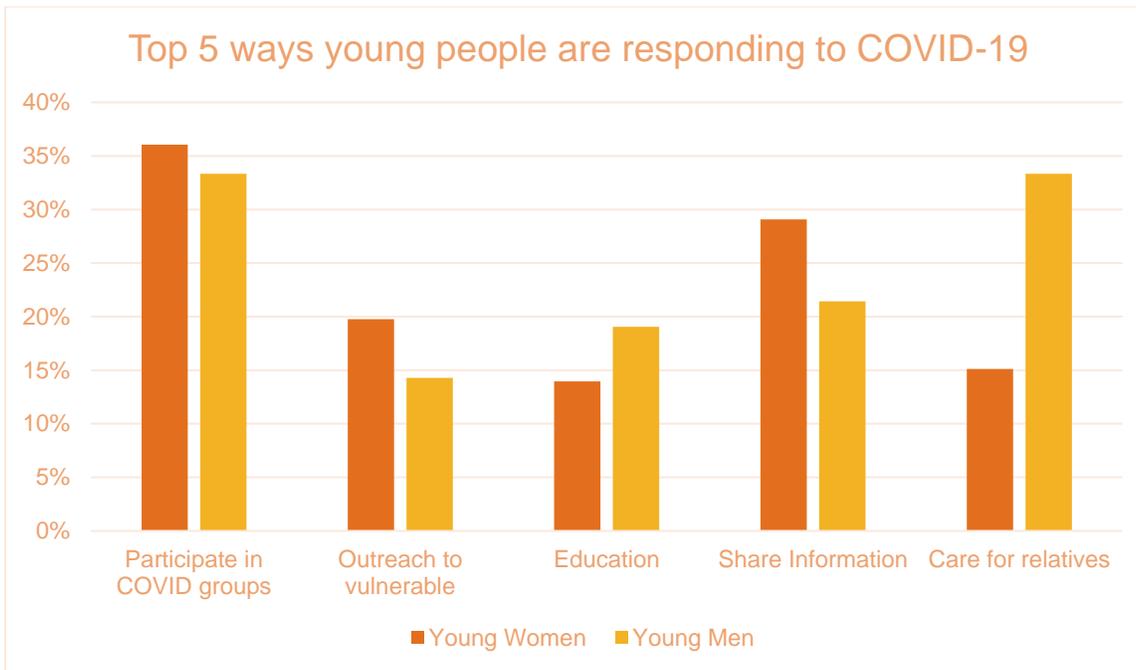
Working in groups—savings groups, community associations, youth groups—are a critical part of life in West Africa. These groups form informal safety nets, service providers when formal social services do not function, and ways to lift members’ voices to change their families, communities, and governments. COVID-19 has massively changed what is possible with these groups and how they interact.

Young women are much more likely to feel the lack of **safe spaces (such as university and school clubs)**, and young men are more likely to feel the lack of **social networks** and the loss of their social life. To a large extent, this reflects traditional social norms where young girls become very isolated during and after puberty, and there are many societal pressures that keep young women and home and control their mobility. In that context, young women are not missing an active social life, because it is less likely to be part of their experience at this age. In contrast, young men often see their social networks expand in adolescence, and an active social life outside their immediate family is something that COVID-19 affects dramatically.



How are Young Women and Young Men Responding to COVID-19?

Young women and young men have the same 5 most common ways to respond to COVID-19, but young women are more likely to be reaching out to poorer people in their communities and sharing information about COVID-19 with others. Young men are more likely to report that they are caring for relatives.



Through their participation in groups, young women feel strongly that they have a social responsibility to raise awareness around COVID-19 to protect the whole community. As one woman in Sierra Leone says, “I have been raising awareness among the people I work with, going out and telling children to wash their hands, protect themselves. It's mandatory for us, to do what we can to raise awareness on COVID.”

This work is also a source of pride for young women, and they are starting to see change. Another young woman in Sierra Leone says, “people have started using face mask, the tailors in the community have started selling out face mask to communities. They are proud of me because they earlier rejected the use of face mask with the notion that Coronavirus does not exist. They are proud of the role I played in convincing them to use face mask.”

“I struggle to ensure that my children have something to eat at least twice per day. That made me proud. I have also been privileged to support friends and individual within my reach.”

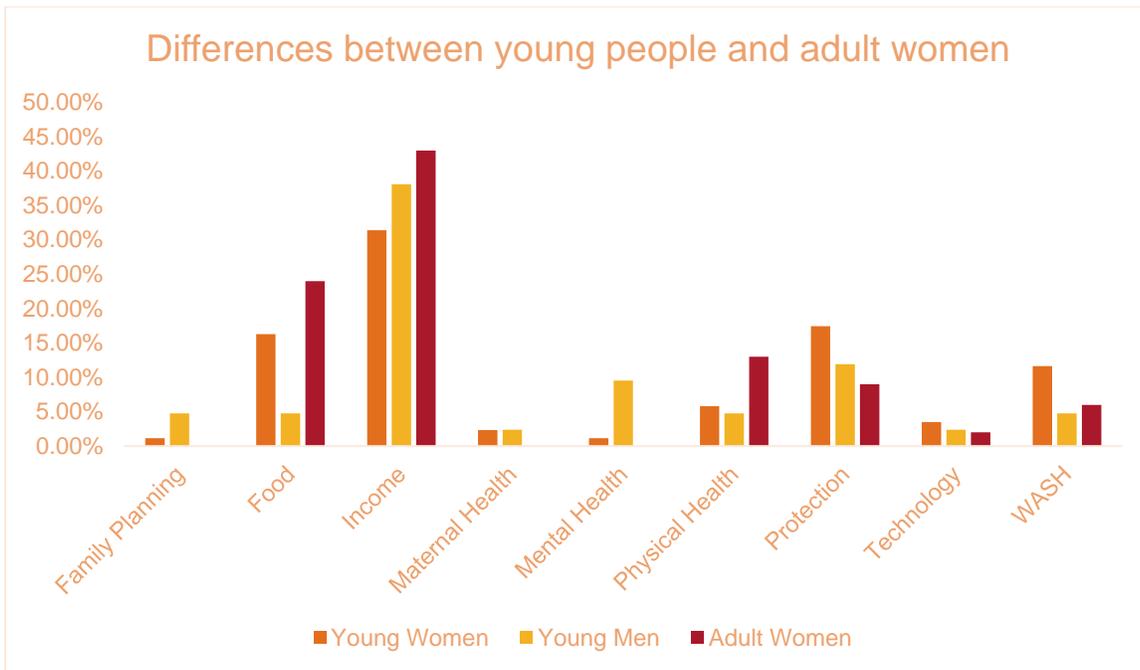
-Young woman, Nigeria

When they speak about caring for their families, young men are generally referring to financial support. They speak about paying school fees for their siblings, or stretching their income to pay for food for other family members. No young man referred to unpaid care responsibilities as part of their response to COVID-19.

What are the differences between young women and adult women?

Comparing the data from this exercise with the Voices of Tanti WA, which asked the same questions of 58 adult women in the same countries in June of 2020, we see important differences between what young people and adult women experience in COVID-19.

Adult women are more concerned with **food, income, and physical health** than young people (either young women or young men). When they speak about physical health, adult women are primarily referring to risks of COVID-19 or lack of access to health services. Adult women are also less concerned with **protection or family planning** than young people are.



What are we doing with this data?

CARE is using these findings to re-shape our local, national, and regional responses to better meet young people’s needs—especially young women. That includes reviewing the regional COVID-19 response strategy to make it more youth focused. Teams of the CARE Youth Network are also analyzing the country-specific data in their own context to propose recommendations to CARE’s leadership, as well as local and national partners. They are using the findings on social media to promote youth voices and experiences as an essential part of COVID-19 relief and recovery.