



# EMPOWERED REPORT 2023

3rd Edition

Highlighting the challenges and resiliency of young women and girls in the COVID-19 pandemic.



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**Jean  
Augustine**

Centre for Young Women's Empowerment



# THE EMPOWERED REPORT

## PREPARED BY:

### JEAN AUGUSTINE CENTRE FOR YOUNG WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The Jean Augustine Centre for Young Women's Empowerment (JAC) is a non-profit, charitable organization situated in South Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada. The JAC strives to empower girls and young women in the local community. The organization has been providing support to girls and young women since 2014, offering various programs, workshops, and events. In addition, the JAC also provides services that address food insecurity and the hygiene needs of girls and young women.

To ensure that the needs of girls and young women are being met both locally and nationally, the JAC collaborates with various community partners, including the Community Action Groups at the University of Toronto.

We firmly believe that empowering girls and young women can help them improve their lives and leave a positive impact on the world around them.

### COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

The Community Action Groups at the University of Toronto are made up of both undergraduate and graduate students who collaborate to support a community organization in the local area. In weekly meetings, they engage in discussions related to equity and justice, and work on a final project alongside their chosen organization.

The Empowered Report – a research-based report designed to empower girls and young women – was created over the course of a year, during which time students researched, composed, and designed this report for the JAC.

The contributing members who designed, edited, and authored the Empowered Report are listed on the following page.

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# 2023 EMPOWERED REPORT TEAM!





# ABOUT THE JEAN AUGUSTINE CENTRE FOR YOUNG WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

## OUR MISSION

The Jean Augustine Centre for Young Women's Empowerment is committed to building the self-esteem & worth of girls and young women by positively influencing their outlook on life, broadening their horizons, and helping them to empower themselves.

Programming at the Jean Augustine Centre is guided by four program pillars:

- Empowerment
- Civic Engagement
- Financial Literacy
- Academics & STEM

## OUR VISION

To enrich the lives of girls ages 7 to 17 years old through mentorship, empowerment programs, and civic engagement, with opportunities that place special emphasis on personal development and experiential learning .

## OUR VALUES

- **EMPOWERMENT:** *Empowerment* is essential for girls and young women to develop the skills, acquire knowledge, information and the resources they need to achieve a high quality of life and optimum health and wellbeing.
- **MENTORSHIP:** *Mentorship* is long term, centred in community and built around relationships between positive adult role models and young women facing challenges in their social and personal lives.
- **LEADERSHIP:** Embodying responsible *Leadership* with integrity, from a shared vision that inspires and motivates, and with the capacity to grow through change and deliver sustainable outcomes, perfects the ability to enable others to greatness.
- **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:** *Civic Engagement* is working to make a difference in communities. It is essential as girls and young women become empowered that they learn the importance of giving back and helping build thriving communities.

# A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR FOUNDER

## HON. DR. JEAN AUGUSTINE, PC, OONT, CM, CBE

Teacher, Principal, Educator, Community Builder, Mother & Grandmother,  
Founder of JAC



Hon. Dr. Jean Augustine P.C., C.M., O.Ont., C.B.E. is the first African-Canadian woman to be elected to the House of Commons. She was elected in the riding of Etobicoke-Lakeshore in 1993 and sat in Parliament until 2006. During this time, she served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Minister of State and Deputy Speaker.

In 2007, Dr. Jean Augustine was nominated by the Government of Ontario as Fairness Commissioner, a position created to advocate for Canadians with foreign credentials. Dr. Augustine retired from the position of Fairness Commissioner in March 2015.

Among Dr. Augustine's many achievements and honours includes leading the motion that allowed for the placement of the Famous Five statue on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, and the motion that created Black History Month in Canada.

Dr. Augustine has received honorary Doctor of Laws degrees from seven universities. She also has been recognised by having the following named in her honour:

- Jean Augustine Centre for Young Women's Empowerment (Etobicoke-Lakeshore)
- Jean Augustine Girls' Leadership Academy (TDSB)
- Jean Augustine Secondary School (Peel District School Board)
- Jean Augustine Park (Etobicoke-Lakeshore)
- The Jean Augustine Chair in Education (York University)
- Jean Augustine Complex and Jean Augustine District Park (City of Vaughan)



# WHY WE CREATED THIS REPORT

As an organization dedicated to empowering the younger female demographic, our purpose in creating this report was to examine the challenges faced by these individuals during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reports covers various topics such as mental health, self-esteem, body image, safety, barriers to education, physical health and social interaction and explores the way girls and young women demonstrated resilience and adapted to these unprecedented circumstances. **By highlighting the experiences of this group, our goal is to inspire and encourage others facing similar challenges to overcome adversity.** Furthermore, we hope that this report will inform policies and interventions that can better support the needs of this demographic during times of crisis.

## KEY DEFINITIONS

As we begin our report, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by COVID-19, resilience and empowerment. When we refer to **COVID-19**, we are referring to a contagious respiratory illness caused by the novel coronavirus that was first identified in December 2019. Unfortunately, the pandemic reached its peak globally in January 2021. For us, **resilience** in the context of youth empowerment refers to young people's ability to adapt and recover from adversity, stress or trauma. Finally, the backbone of this report is **empowerment**, which is all about the process of increasing one's own power and control over their life circumstances, often through education, advocacy, or other forms of support. For the sake of clarity, it is important to define the age groups we refer to in this report. When we use the term **"girls,"** we are referring to individuals between the ages of 7 and 12. When we use the term **"young women,"** we are referring to individuals aged 13 to 17 years and beyond.

This report primarily assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls and young women across Canada but specifically highlights the experience of participants in South Etobicoke through six domains:

**1. Mental Health**

**2. Self-Esteem and Body Image**

**3. Safety**

**4. Barriers to Education**

**5. Physical Health**

**6. Social Interaction**

Drawing on feedback from participants in the JAC program, the report showcases the ways in which girls and young women demonstrated resilience throughout the pandemic.

# WHY FOCUS ON COVID-19 & RESILIENCE?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on people around the world, particularly girls and young women who have faced unique challenges throughout the crisis. By focusing on the resilience of these individuals, we can gain insight into how they have overcome adversity and developed strategies to adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Understanding their experiences can help inform policies and interventions that better support the needs of the younger female demographic in times of crisis.

Additionally, by emphasizing empowerment, we can help these individuals develop the tools and resources they need not only to survive, but to thrive in the face of adversity. By focusing on COVID-19 and resilience in the context of girls and young women, we can shed light on their experiences and inspire others to overcome challenges they may face in their own lives.

By emphasizing the importance of empowerment, we can equip individuals with the tools and resources they need to navigate adversity and emerge stronger on the other side. Through this report, we hope to contribute to a larger conversation about the importance of resilience and empowerment, particularly within the context of girls and young women, and to inspire others to take action and make a positive impact in their own communities.





# Mental Health and COVID

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on people's mental health worldwide. The pandemic led to social isolation as well as disruptions to existing mental health and support services. Worrying about the health and safety of loved ones and anxiety about cooperating through a crisis were sources of anxiety for many. These factors all contributed to people's declining mental health during the pandemic. According to the World Health Organization, the pandemic caused a 25% increase in anxiety and depression around the globe. Their research suggested that the group of people who were affected the most were young people and women ("COVID-19 Pandemic Triggers 25% Increase in Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Worldwide")

# 25%

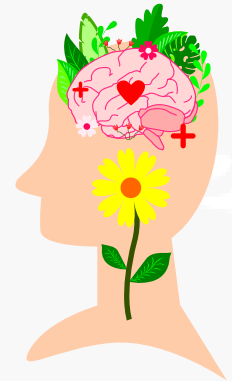
Increase in anxiety and depression globally.



# Mental Health and COVID

Part One

## How The Pandemic Affected Girls' Mental Health



A UK study published in *Economics Letters* focused on how girls' mental health was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to boys'. When analyzed against pre-pandemic data, they found that there was a greater increase in emotional and behavioural difficulties among 10 to 15-year-old girls, compared to boys. The mental well-being of girls was more severely affected, especially among families that had lower household incomes (Mendolia et al.)





# Mental Health and COVID

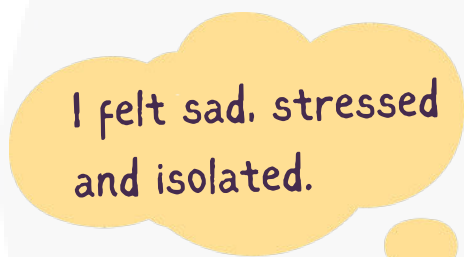
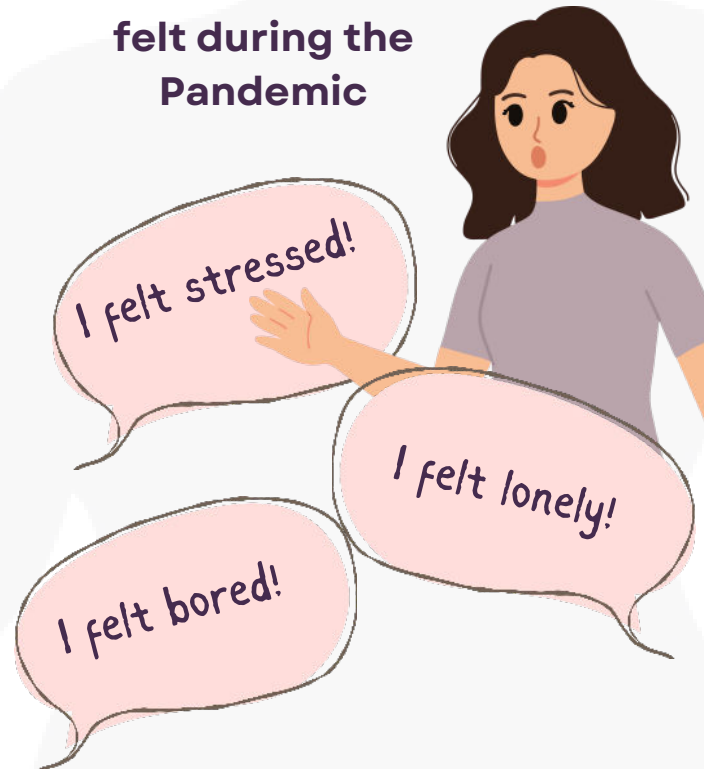
Part One

## How The Pandemic Affected Young Girls' Mental Health (cont.)

The pandemic brought along many challenging situations in girls' lives. In addition, the uncertain nature of living through a pandemic caused a lot of anxiety. Survey data from the JAC on young women from South Etobicoke between the ages of 13 to 17 showed that they felt bored, stressed, and lonely due to the pandemic.

7 to 12-year-old girls also mentioned feeling sad, stressed, and isolated. Statistics Canada found that 15 to 30-year-old females were more likely to feel very or extremely concerned about cooperating during a crisis. 44% of females reported feeling very or extremely worried compared to 30% of males. (Arim et al.)

## How young women from South Etobicoke felt during the Pandemic



## How girls from South Etobicoke felt during the Pandemic



# Mental Health and COVID

## How The Pandemic Affected Young Girls' Mental Health (cont.)

Even though many pandemic measures have been lifted, their effects on mental health still remain. Being forced to wear masks for two years had a serious impact on people's social lives. According to the findings of researchers from the University of Waterloo, people have a harder time recognizing facial and emotional expressions of masked faces. This could easily cause discomfort and confusion when interacting with others. People who have symptoms of social anxiety are especially susceptible to these negative feelings. Therefore, the pandemic led to a decrease in both the quality and the quantity of social interactions, causing social isolation (Moscovitch and Saint).



# Mental Health and COVID

## How the COVID-19 Infection Can Hinder Mental Well-Being

According to the National Institutes of Health, contracting COVID-19 may cause several symptoms that affect the brain and mental health. These symptoms include anxiety and depression, psychosis, seizures, and suicidal behaviour. Research suggests that there is an increased likelihood of developing mental illnesses after infection. The impact of the pandemic on children's mental health is unclear. Factors like wearing masks, online education, routine changes, and caregiver absence or loss can impact children's development ("Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic").



**Increased likelihood of developing mental illnesses after infection.**



# Mental Health and COVID

## Staying Resilient and Takeaways

Young women and girls have shown resilience despite all of the unprecedented challenges they faced throughout the pandemic. Going for walks, keeping in touch with loved ones, and taking up new interests and hobbies were powerful strategies during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Building and maintaining deep connections with people around us is extremely important for life satisfaction in general. Reflecting on past experiences and examples of resilience are crucial to building self-trust and staying strong.



To summarize, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the mental health of young women and girls. 10 to -15-year-old girls experienced more emotional and behavioural difficulties compared to boys in the same age group. Contracting COVID-19 also increased the likelihood of experiencing declining mental health. However, there are a number of resources and services that are available in Toronto for young women and girls who are struggling with their mental health.

# Mental Health and COVID

## Resources for Mental Health Support

**CITY OF TORONTO:** At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Toronto started working with 13 organizations to support its residents' mental health. This was done through free telephone, text, and online mental health supports. In April 2021, the City partnered with 18 additional organizations to ensure that people have easier access to these resources. In total, there were 11 partners that supported youth and children.



**[City of Toronto Covid-19 Mental Health Resources](#)**



**The City of Toronto partnered with 18 different organizations to provide mental health resources.**

# Mental Health and COVID

## Resources for Mental Health Support (cont.)

**TORONTO CENTRAL HEALTHLINE:** Another great resource is the Toronto Central Healthline website, which contains information about the available health services in the Toronto region, including Etobicoke. There are tons of services in Etobicoke that focus on the mental health of children and youth.



### [Toronto Central Healthline](https://www.torontohealthline.ca)

**The Mental Health Commission of Canada's Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Supporting Youth program** is an amazing resource. This 10-hour virtual course aims to teach parents how to better support their children who are showing symptoms of worsening mental health.



### [Canada's Mental Health First Aid \(MHFA\)](https://www.mhfa.ca)

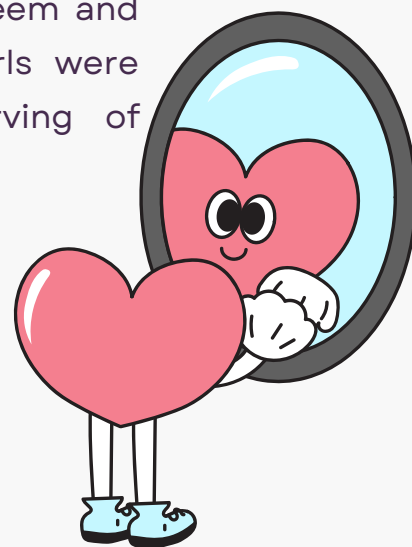


# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way many young women and girls see and understand themselves. As a result of isolation, people's mental health declined significantly. One consequence of this is the changed relationship many females now have with their bodies. With the increased time spent alone, unable to access community support and other important resources, these individuals have faced more exposure to unhealthy and unrealistic beauty standards, leading to disordered eating habits. Both girls and young women have also experienced changes in their relationship with food, which may lead to disordered eating as well (Corno et al).

While lockdowns and social distancing were necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the effects of isolation on the self-esteem and body image of young women and girls were potentially damaging and are deserving of attention.



# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

flawless  
skin

skinny  
waist

**"Young girls face many unrealistic beauty standards, and are constantly targeted by beauty brands hoping to profit off of their insecurities"**



## Introduction (cont.)

Self-esteem can be defined as someone's confidence in themselves, their abilities, their personality, and their appearance. In this section of the report, self-esteem will refer to confidence or lack of confidence about appearance. Body image is a related term, referring more specifically to one's perception of their body, and how they understand it in terms of beauty standards and social expectations (Jessie's Legacy).

The issue of body image can arise within the context of eating disorders and other harmful coping mechanisms when one's body image is negative. In other words, a negative body image can contribute to body dysmorphia, which is a condition where someone will fixate and worry about flaws in their appearance ("Body Dysmorphic Disorder"). While these flaws may not be noticeable to others, they may have strongly affect a person with body dysmorphia (Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)). It is also important to point out that young women and girls face many unrealistic beauty standards, and are constantly targeted by beauty brands hoping to profit off of their insecurities. These issues all go hand in hand, and are influenced by external factors, such as social expectations and how easy it is to access support.

# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

## Impact of Lockdowns on Self-Esteem and Body Image

The lockdowns at the beginning of the pandemic isolated young women and girls from their communities, leading to increased social media use. It was found that there was an increased usage of social network sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and an increase in the number of women who followed accounts focused on appearance (Vall-Roqué et al.). The increased exposure to, and fixation on appearance, can have a number of effects on self-esteem and body image. These individuals may feel that the way they look is not good enough, and worry more about their perceived flaws. This can then cause disordered eating, especially when individuals have a desire to be thinner. On the other hand, overeating or binge eating due to stress and anxiety can also be a result of negative body image, body dysmorphia, and lowered self-esteem.



**Social media  
usage increased  
during the  
pandemic.**



# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

Part Two

## Impact of Lockdowns on Self-Esteem and Body Image (cont.)

Another unique impact of the lockdowns on young women and girls self-esteem and body image is the increased use of video calling applications such as Zoom, Skype, and FaceTime. As a result of these frequent video calls, some individuals found that they had become self-conscious and critical of their appearance over video calls (Choukas-Bradley et al.). This worsened body dysmorphia and had negative impacts on women's mental health overall, sometimes leading to symptoms of depression.



It (The pandemic) affects both how we see ourselves and how we view the world. It made me think how my future will be now I stop seeing all of my friends and have to adjust to the new environment.

--- Olivia  
(a focus group participant)

In general, many young women and girls experienced a change in their relationships with food. The lockdown caused a number of emotional responses as a result of social isolation and distancing. The disruption in our usual routines and social lives produced feelings ranging from boredom and stress, to loneliness and depression. This can sometimes be linked to disordered eating habits, with young women reporting having eaten out of boredom or to cope with increased anxiety (Corno et al).

# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

## Impact of Lockdowns on Self-Esteem and Body Image (cont.)

Social isolation worsened or triggered disordered eating habits for those with pre-existing eating disorders, and can also be linked to young women and girls developing eating disorders. Social media also played a role in this by encouraging “diet culture,” which is the pressure to follow strict diets and practice restrictive eating habits in order to achieve a certain body shape (Lai).



This also includes exercising and working out in order to lose weight. While following a healthy diet and exercising can be beneficial, the culture on social media has mainly promoted the activities as a way to achieve a skinny figure, rather than to be healthy and strong (Robinson et al.). This can further contribute to disordered eating habits and overall negative self-esteem and body image, which may be associated with various mental health issues, including anxiety and depression.



# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

## Resilience and Community Building



**"Even though social media was part of the problem in creating and encouraging negative body image, there has also been a significant rise in the body positivity movement."**

While the impacts of the pandemic on self-esteem and body image can be long-lasting, young women and girls have taken action and come together to build communities of support and trust in these trying times.

Even though social media was part of the problem in creating and encouraging negative body image, there has also been a significant rise in the body positivity movement. This movement has attempted to shift the focus of body imagery towards health, rather than appearance (Palumbo). Its main goal is to promote inclusiveness of all body types, sizes, shapes, and appearances (Forbes).



# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

Part Two

Resilience and Community Building  
(cont).

Studies show that being exposed to this kind of body positivity content, which can range from simple encouraging messages, to inclusive brand marketing campaigns showcasing different body types, improves body image and mood (Parcell et al.).

In a focus group conducted by the JAC, young women and girls aged 7-17 commented that the pandemic allowed them to take more time to care for themselves, both mentally and physically. Participants in the survey mentioned multiple different coping methods they used to take care of their bodies, from movement – whether that was exercising, dancing, walking, or doing yoga – to practicing positive self-affirmations. As one of the participants put it:

**“I made myself feel good by reminding myself that I’m beautiful and that I’m confident. It also helped that my friends and family were also reminding me.”**

Being able to resist the sometimes overwhelming negativity promoted through social media, and to then turn it into a movement focused on positivity and inclusiveness, shows the resilience and strength of girls in Canada and all around the world.



# Self-Esteem, Body Image and COVID

## Takeaways

Community building and relying on each other for support is crucial during difficult times, when social distancing or quarantining leads to greater vulnerability to external pressures that impact self-esteem and body image. Young women and girls in Canada can be supported through access to essential services and resources to help cope with the effects of isolation. This can include therapy, community groups and activities, and most importantly, increased awareness of social pressures to conform to beauty standards.

Educational campaigns on the negative effects of diet culture, restrictive eating, identifying symptoms of disordered eating, and other related issues, can contribute to building the self-esteem of young women and girls, and ensuring that they are equipped to handle societal pressures around appearance. Ultimately, the focus of any social movement related to our bodies should be centred on health and wellness, with the goal of teaching both young women and girls to care for and love their bodies.



# Safety and COVID

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the safety of young women and girls in Canada became compromised in several ways. Despite feeling safe at home, girls were also fearful of contracting the virus. Our focus group and survey study conducted by the JAC found that while many girls felt secure from following social distancing measures and receiving support from their families, others felt extremely unsafe due to the pandemic's rapid spread and their limited knowledge of the virus and the vaccine.



Moreover, reports across Canada and the world have found that the stay-at-home order that was in effect during quarantine led to an increase in domestic violence incidents involving young women and girls, further threatening their safety. In addition, disruptions caused by the pandemic made it challenging for individuals to access essential services such as education, healthcare and social support from organizations that work to protect their rights and promote their safety. The lack of access to these supports, coupled with the quarantine mandate, has negatively impacted these both young women and girls overall well-being and safety.

# Safety and COVID

## The Shadow Pandemic of Domestic Violence

The shadow pandemic, as coined by The United Nations, has been used to refer to the increase in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic ("Violence against Women during COVID-19"). This increase in domestic violence affected people of all ages and genders, including girls in Canada (Mlambo-Ngcuka). At the start of the pandemic, between March to June 2020, Statistics Canada reported a **12% increase** in calls to police municipalities regarding at-home violence. These organizations noted depressive symptoms for girls who had a direct encounter with violence, and even among those who witnessed it (Stewart et al.). The shadow pandemic of domestic violence has been fuelled by the following:



- The stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic.
- The loss of income and increased job insecurity experienced by many.
- The lockdown measures and social distancing guidelines, which forced many to spend more time at home, in close proximity with their abusers (Pereda and Díaz-Faes).

This has significantly impacted the safety and well-being of both young women and girls in Canada by making it more difficult for them to access the support and services they need to stay safe and healthy (“Gendered Impacts of Coronavirus”).

# Safety and COVID

## Education and Essential Services Disrupted

The pandemic has disrupted access to education and other essential services for many young women and girls, which can harm their overall well-being and safety. These services include domestic violence shelters and helplines, which were facing full-capacity during the pandemic (“Gendered Impacts of Coronavirus”). As a result, it became more difficult for individuals to receive support and services from the organizations that work to protect their rights and safety. This can leave them vulnerable to various risks and challenges, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, exploitation, and neglect (Plan International).

## Helping Young Women and Girls' in Crisis

Many organizations in Canada provide support and services for victims of exploitation and violence, including for young women and girls. For instance, at the start of 2020, the Canadian Women's Organization launched the “Signal for Help”, a one-handed signal victims can use to indicate – via Zoom or other video technologies – that they require assistance (Canadian Women’s Foundation).





# Safety and COVID

Part Three

## Helping Young Women and Girls' in Crisis (cont.)

Ontario also provides women's shelters and transition houses, which offer safe and supportive environments for women and their children who have experienced domestic violence (“COVID-19, Pandemics and Gender”).



**The National Kids Help Phone line saw a 400% increase in phone calls reporting domestic violence during the pandemic.**



In addition, Ontario arranged crisis hotlines and support lines, such as the National Kids Help Phone line, which saw a 400% increase in phone calls reporting domestic violence. This support line continues to offer confidential and non-judgmental support to victims of violence (Katz et al.). Likewise, counseling and therapy services have been established, which can help victims cope with the emotional and psychological effects of abuse.

# Safety and COVID

Part Three

## Safety and Resilience

It is inspiring to see how young women and girls in Canada have shown resilience in the face of unsafe conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the challenges and difficulties they encountered, many individuals have continued to find ways to access the support and services they need to stay safe and healthy. For example, some females have reached out to friends, family members, or organizations that provide support and services for victims of domestic violence.

Furthermore, the JAC's focus group and survey study of young women and girls in South Etobicoke revealed that despite the challenges brought on by the pandemic, the participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and positivity. One participant remarked, *“Although I felt unsafe at times, I always found ways to feel secure and overcome my fears.”* While some participants expressed concerns about the spread of the virus and their limited knowledge of it, the majority of participants reported feeling safer when they followed social distancing measures such as wearing masks and sanitizing their hands. They also mentioned that having the support of their families helped them feel more secure. One girl shared, *“My family has been a great source of support during these challenging times. We always check each other and follow the guidelines provided by Health Canada.”*



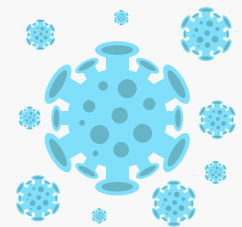
# Safety and COVID

Part Three

## Safety and Resilience (cont).

Overall, it is clear that young women and girls in Canada are resilient and adept at finding ways to cope with the challenges of the pandemic. Our study highlighted their resilience and determination to stay safe during a difficult period. Some girls have reported that the pandemic has *"increased their determination to realize their dreams"*, despite the challenges that have come their way (Goulds et al. 29). These individuals are learning to cope and adapt and are not giving up on their futures. Their positive attitude and proactive approach to staying safe serve as an inspiration to all girls and young women.

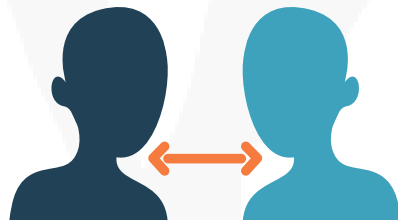
"I feel safe and unsafe at the same time. First, I felt safe because I lived with my parents. But I also felt unsafe because sometimes I needed to go to town, and I was afraid I would be contracted with the virus (COVID-19)" -Wendy



"(I felt safer) knowing that people can get cured after getting COVID" -Pia



"I wear masks and sanitize my hands after every public encounter." -Maya



"Generally I felt safe. As long as I was responsible and followed the guidelines that Health Canada was giving out: wearing masks, vaccines, social distancing, etc."

(Responses from our Focus Group and Survey)



## Takeaway

To alleviate continued experiences with the lingering effects of the shadow pandemic, it is essential to address the root causes of domestic violence and provide support and assistance to young women and girls and other victims. For instance:

Providing education and raising awareness about domestic abuse, including information about the signs and symptoms of domestic violence.

Supporting and strengthening organizations and services that can support and assist victims of domestic violence, including women's shelters, crisis hotlines, legal organizations, and counseling and therapy services.



Implementing policies and programs that address the economic and social factors that can contribute to domestic violence, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare.

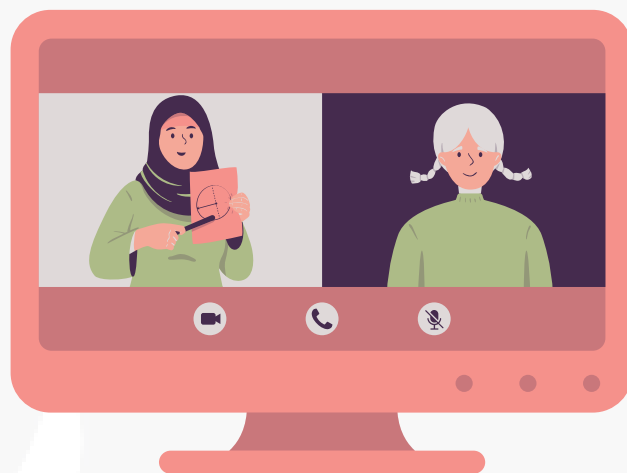
Ensuring that law enforcement and judicial systems are adequately trained and equipped to respond to domestic violence and to protect the rights and safety of victims.

While these are just a few examples of the steps that can be taken to prevent girls from experiencing further violence from pandemics and disasters, individuals, communities, and governments need to work together to address the issue and provide ongoing support and assistance to victims.

# Barriers to Education and COVID

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, young women and girls faced numerous challenges, with one notable issue being barriers to their education. In 2020, more than one billion students' educations were impacted by the pandemic globally ("Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond"). As schools halted in-person learning, students could only resort to online learning. Some students could not receive a proper online education due to limited access to the internet and the required technology (How Covid-19 Impacts Women and Girls).



**Young women and girls faced barriers to education.**



# Barriers to Education and COVID

## Barriers to Education

Transitioning to online learning posed many drawbacks for students during the pandemic, especially among those from impoverished families. For example, they were no longer able to receive nourishing meals at school which subjected them to inadequate nutrition ("Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond"). With respect to young women and girls, they had to put their education aside to take on more household work and had a greater likelihood of becoming vulnerable to different types of violence, including child marriage (Sheppard et al.). Their chances of returning to school were also significantly reduced when compared to young men and boys ("Malala Fund Releases Report on Girls' Education and Covid-19"). These circumstances reveal that females faced many barriers to their education as a result of the pandemic.



**Young women and girls were more susceptible to domestic violence.**

# Barriers to Education and COVID

## Resilience and the Importance of Education



In spite of these circumstances, many young women and girls still demonstrated resilience. They did not allow the hardships that accompanied the pandemic to prevent them from learning or resuming their education. In countries around the world, some students took initiative by establishing libraries where students could continue studying to stay on top of their schoolwork, while others provided school supplies to those who may not have been able to afford them (Yousafzai). However, these individuals should not bear the burden of taking matters into their own hands. Governments should do more to provide sufficient funds and resources to educational institutions, to make sure students still have the opportunity to proceed with their education without disruption (Yousafzai).

Moreover, many young women and girls have voiced their opinions when it comes to their own education. They have expressed how receiving an education safeguards them from being exposed to violence, diminishes damaging gender stereotypes and roles, and provides them with a chance to feel optimistic about their prospects (“Malala Fund Releases Report on Girls' Education and Covid-19”).



# Barriers to Education and COVID

## Takeaway

Aside from distributing ample funds and resources to schools on account of the pandemic, governments must also strive to ensure that students will not continue to be discriminated against in educational settings (“Malala Fund Releases Report on Girls' Education and Covid-19”). For instance, state and local policies can assist in addressing the marginalization young women and girls face, and create favourable conditions for working toward substantial change (“Malala Fund Releases Report on Girls' Education and Covid-19”). Overall, the resilience that young women and girls have displayed during this time of crisis reveals how important it is to remove the barriers that hinder their paths to obtaining a proper education.

**Young women and girls continue to stay resilient despite constant marginalization in educational settings.**



# Physical Health and COVID

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly reduced the possibilities for young women and girls to achieve the recommended exercise allocations for their age groups, as well as the social aspect of communal exercise events. There are innumerable benefits to physical activity, including better sleep, lower stress, and greater mental stability (Violant-Holz et al.). However, young women and girls – especially those residing in urban areas – were less likely to achieve common developmental milestones for their age, as compared to pre-pandemic years. This results in overall reduced well-being for this demographic.

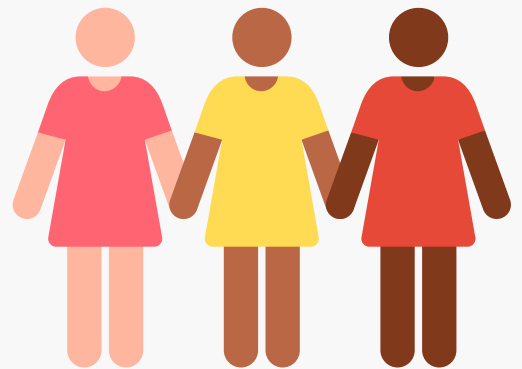
**Physical activity has innumerable benefits, which have been restricted for young women and girls during the pandemic.**



# Physical Health and COVID

## Unfair Difficulties

Young women and girls with disabilities and other needs were increasingly isolated, as their individualized needs were not accommodated, from a physical health standpoint (Mitchell and Smith). Systemic racism was also exacerbated in the healthcare field, as hospitals and healthcare providers became increasingly physically overwhelmed throughout the pandemic.

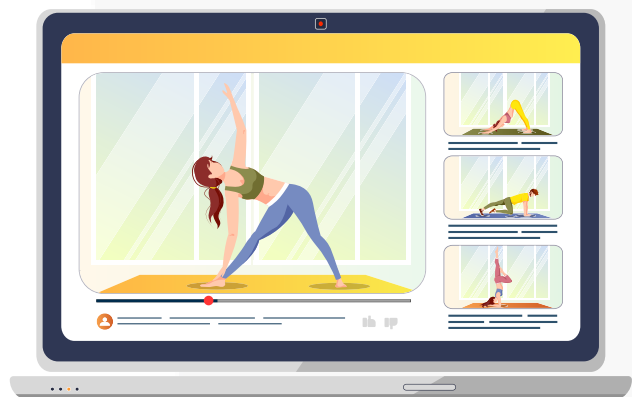
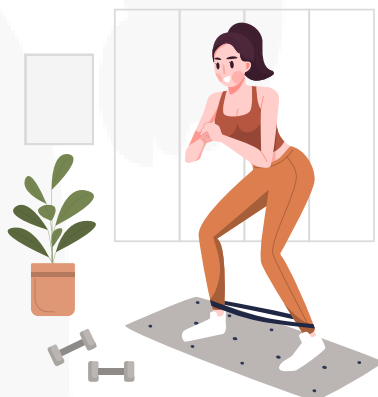




# Physical Health and COVID

## Adaptations of Physical Activity in COVID

Young women and girls are less likely to continue with childhood sporting hobbies as they enter adolescence and adulthood, and with reduced sporting opportunities during the pandemic, this margin has the possibility to grow much larger (Pfister). Opportunities such as home work-out classes, or sharing work-out videos over social media can encourage individuals to become involved in physical activity, through media they are well-acquainted with. This shift to offering exercise classes over media, such as Zoom, is a great step towards engaging young women and girls in routinely organized activity, from the comfort of their own homes. By organizing dedicated physical activity events, a community of individuals can share a common interest, stay healthy and mentally stimulated, and potentially continue pursuing a childhood sporting passion (Fitzgerald et al.).



# Physical Health and COVID

## Physical Activity to Stay Motivated

Many young women and girls pandemic testimonies stressed the need for physical activity in their daily routines in order to stay motivated with school work and social activities. Adding physical activity to their routine helped students reduce overwhelming emotions associated with isolation, and allowed them to stay active and connect with friends, as their exercise routines were commonly shared on social media with peers. According to a survey conducted by the JAC of young women and girls, half of the girls aged 7-12 stayed active by walking or biking around their neighbourhoods, while almost all the young women aged 13-17, said YouTube workout videos kept them active. Incorporating a physical activity element into a weekly routine has been a great springboard for keeping young women and girls engaged and connected with each other.



"I did a lot of zoom dance classes during the lockdown and am still doing zoom dance once a week now."

-Pia

(A focus group participant)

# Physical Health and COVID

## Takeaway

Since physical distancing restrictions have been gradually reduced over the last three years, young women and girls have had the opportunity to re-engage with in-person social and physical activities, or to continue with hybrid classes through the internet.

- A combination of resources can assist young women and girls with lower self-confidence in their physical abilities, or those with special accommodation needs.
- By adapting exercise and physical activity to isolation requirements, young women and girls have options for how to maintain their physical health, from engaging in activities at home, to engaging with others around the city.
- Physical health resources have become more accessible in nature and more personalized to the needs of specific audiences. This has been a great step forward in helping young women and girls keep their bodies moving, thus improving their mental and emotional health.



**Due to reduced COVID restrictions, young women and girls now have more opportunities to engage in physical activities.**

# Social Interaction and COVID

## Introduction

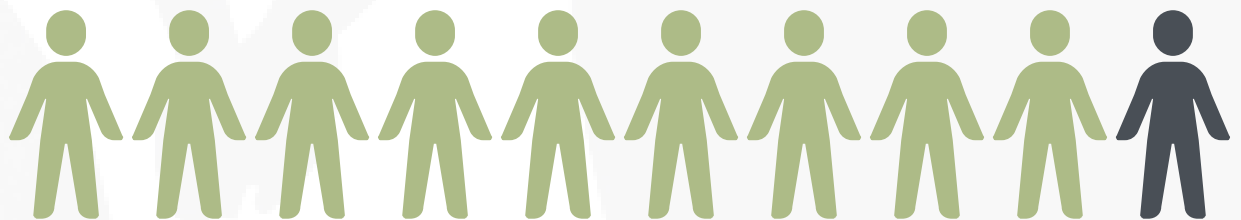
Social interaction was one of the most affected areas in people's lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of infection prevention measures such as lockdowns and social distancing, in-person contact decreased, and online communication prospered. This section describes changes in social interaction caused by the pandemic, the consequences of those changes on young women and girls, and possible strategies to maintain effective social interaction during and after the pandemic.



# Social Interaction and COVID

## Changes in Social Interaction

A survey of Canadians regarding the effects of COVID found that around 90% of participants reported impacts on their social connections, with 40% experiencing negative consequences such as decreased communication and restricted in-person contact (Lowe et al. 80). The pandemic also led to changes in the types of interaction people engaged in. Lockdown limited people's interactions to their closest contacts, which has resulted in greater local and less diverse connections. Online communication has developed as an important method of information exchange, but there has been reduced spontaneous interactions and conventional forms of communication such as handshakes and hugs.



**90% of participants reported impacts on their social connections.**

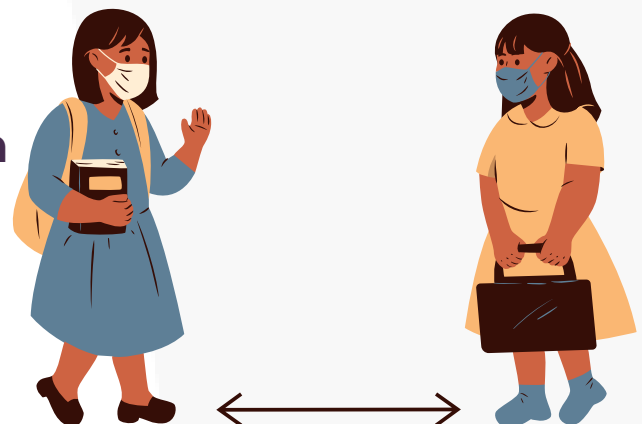


# Social Interaction and COVID

## Consequences of the Changes in Social Interaction

The lack of social interaction caused by the pandemic has affected people's mental health. Young women and girls, as well as individuals with lower incomes, have been more likely to suffer from mental health issues such as depression. Conversely, it has been suggested that frequent in-person contact is associated with lower levels of depression and loneliness. One of the possible ways to reduce depressive symptoms is touch, which has many positive effects on health, including stress reduction. Although many young women and girls turned to online communication to maintain and develop their social connections, virtual communication cannot replace in-person interactions. Virtual communication methods may be vulnerable to technological difficulties and can be challenging for individuals who are not familiar with the technology. Meanwhile, some researchers say interactive, synchronous online communication – not passive use of social media – can contribute to people's sense of connection (Bavel et al. 466).

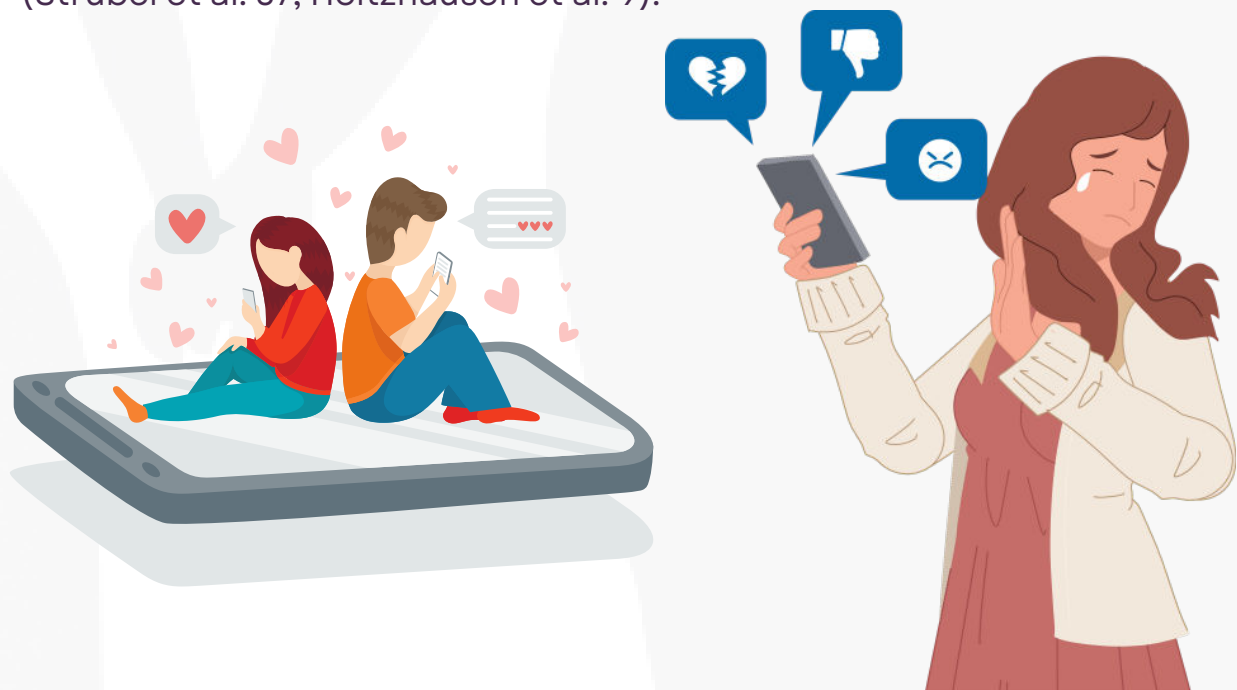
**Virtual communication cannot replace in-person interactions.**



# Social Interaction and COVID

## Consequences of the Changes in Social Interaction (cont.)

The use of online dating sites and applications has been increasing among young women aged 18 years and older, who utilize them as a means of online communication. However, while dating apps would make it easier to interact and form connections with others, they come with some risks and negative effects. For example, young women are likely to be harassed, including being contacted after rejection and being sent unwanted messages or images of a sexually explicit nature. Additionally, some research has shown that dating apps can affect users' mental health by leading them to feel less satisfied with their appearance and more susceptible to making comparisons to others (Strubel et al. 37; Holtzhausen et al. 9).



# Social Interaction and COVID

## Measures for Effective Social Interaction

Measures to prevent infection, such as distancing and lockdown, have restricted social interaction. However, physical distancing does not always lead to loneliness (Luchetti et al. 904; Okabe-Miyamoto and Lyubomirsky 141). It is possible to identify modes of communication in which people are able to feel a sense of connection, even when keeping their distance from each other. According to a survey conducted on Canadians (Ellis et al. 183), spending time with family or friends correlated with lower levels of loneliness. It has also been demonstrated that individuals who helped others improved their feelings of social connection. As such, effective measures for increasing social connectivity include seeking opportunities for supporting activities and maintaining relationships with friends or family.

Part Six



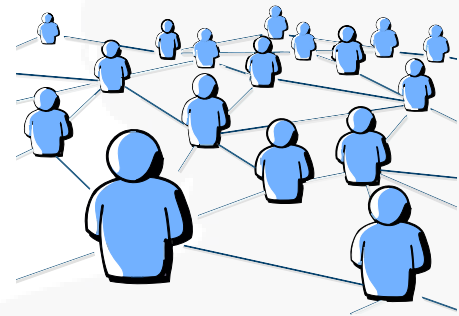
**Individuals who helped others improved their feelings of social connection.**



# Social Interaction and COVID

Part Six

## Measures for Effective Social Interaction (cont.)



In addition, it has been shown that social media plays an important role in social connection, especially for women (Okabe-Miyamoto and Lyubomirsky 144). The JAC conducted a survey which asked young women and girls aged 7-17 in South Etobicoke about how important social media was in helping them connect with friends and family during the pandemic. Most of the respondents agreed that social media was very important for helping them stay connected with friends because it allowed them to remain in touch with their friends and the surrounding communities. One participant said, *“social media was important since interaction made me closer to the people who are far from me”*. As mentioned previously, given that the intense use of social media can be linked with low self-esteem, users of social media and dating apps must be educated on how to use such technologies appropriately, and rules should be implemented to protect young women and girls from the negative consequences of online interaction (Vogel et al. 216; Stapleton et al. 148). It is also important to support people who are not familiar with or who do not have access to digital technologies.

"I got new friends from social media"  
- Valerie

**Responses from the JAC focus group and survey.**

"Social media was important since interaction made me closer to the people who are far from me"

# Social Interaction and COVID

## Takeaway

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions have affected the ways in which young women and girls make social connections. Excessive use of digital technologies can have negative consequences on mental health conditions and healthy relationships. However, potential negative effects can be reduced by maintaining social connection through close relationships and raising awareness of potential risks of social media use. Since there are some groups of people who are particularly subject to the loss of social connection, such as young women and girls, it is necessary to focus on protecting these vulnerable groups.



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