

# THE PANDEMIC DIARIES

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AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF  
ASIA PACIFIC CHILDREN AND  
YOUTH DURING THE GLOBAL  
COVID-19 CRISIS



Sendai Stakeholders  
Children and Youth  
Group



Global Alliance for  
Disaster Risk Reduction & Resilience  
in the Education Sector



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# FOREWORD

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For the 1.2 billion youth\* in the world today - the largest number in history - the challenges posed by COVID-19 have been particularly daunting. At the end of 2019, one-fifth of global youth were not in employment, education or training, and a quarter were affected by violence or armed conflict. This has without doubt increased due to the pandemic. In addition to COVID-19, children and young people are dealing with climate change, economic inequality, and social and political polarisation, and these challenges are not going away. Globally, children and young people are dealing with the current situation differently, and that is also true of how they are being supported and how they are supporting others around them.

This collection of Pandemic Diaries was produced as part of the UN Major Group for Children and Youth (UNMGCY) 'Asia Pacific Researchers, Practitioners, Policy-Makers in Dialogue with Children and Youth Project'. In this project, a team of UNMGCY Young Researchers and Young Fellows for DRR conducted policy analysis and participatory action research with children and youth in their local communities, with the goal of capturing their perspectives and experiences of disasters throughout the Asia-Pacific.

The 17 diaries in this collection have been written by children and young people from countries across the Asia Pacific region, including Nepal, Fiji, Australia, Bhutan, Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Solomon Islands. With the guidance and support of the UNMGCY Young Fellows, each diary author has documented their personal experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. For some of the authors, this was a daunting prospect and they were not sure where to start, while others knew exactly what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it.

\*For statistical purposes, the UN define youth as aged between 15-24 years

It has been a privilege to work with the Young Researchers, Young Fellows and diary authors on this project. Being part of a process where the lived experiences of children and young people are captured and shared has been a wonderful experience. The process of supporting the children and young people to write their diaries with the Young Fellows has been amazing. The Young Fellows have supported the diary authors with patience, respect, care and encouragement.

Although we started with a list of questions to get the children and young people thinking about writing a diary, all of the diaries are different and are true reflections of the authors unique lived experiences. Working with children and young people is a privilege. We are always truly in awe when we ask children and young people for their views, and they provide us with such amazing stories, in their own words.

The challenges ahead of us all are immense. The world will need to muster all the innovation and energy it can to overcome and move forward from this pandemic. Children and young people today are connected like never before and they are deeply committed to innovation, social progress, and a sustainable future. Investing in these young agents of change is not just essential; it has the potential for a tremendous multiplier effect.

This has been a true learning journey for us all, but the journey is not complete. In fact, it will never end, as each generation will add the stories of their own lived experiences.



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# UNMGCY YOUNG FELLOWS

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The authors of the Pandemic Diaries in this collection were mentored and supported by UNMGCY Young Fellows for Disaster Risk Reduction from across the Asia Pacific.



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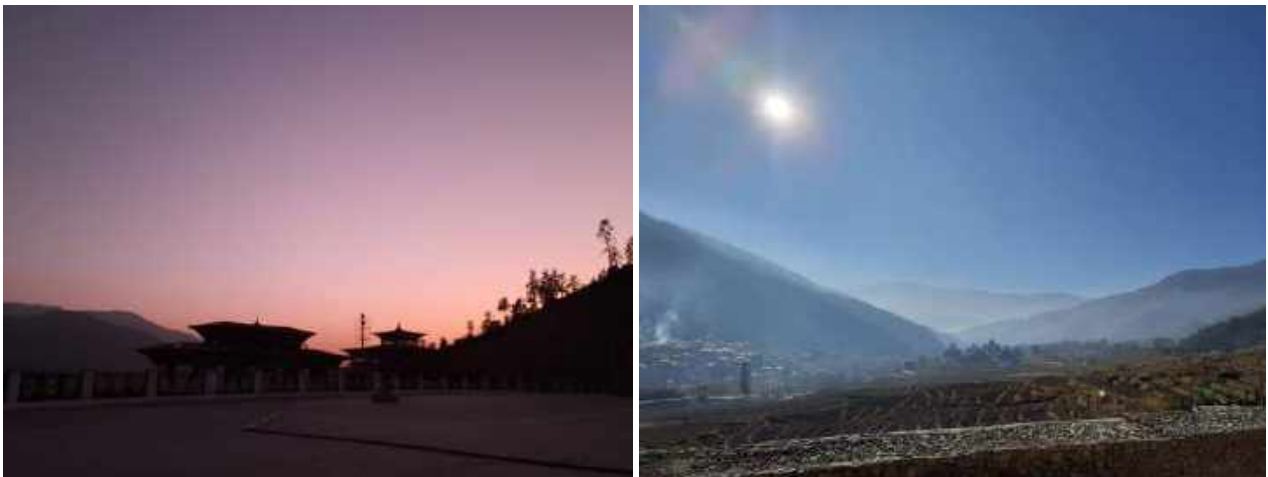
## CHOKI DOLKAR

23 years old, Thimphu, Bhutan

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### **Pandemic Reflection: Until Sunny Days with Peachy Smiles**

I don't remember exactly but I think it was a Sunday morning. I remember that it was a weekend because it had taken magnanimous willpower planning a day out to break my routine of staying in my room the whole day and avoiding the noise of the crowd. A call at an ungodly hour told me to report to the office and so, I got ready as quickly and as humanly possible for someone who is not familiar with speed. That is how I remember the beginning of the second lockdown. Funny how I had just gone to the Buddha Point with my family the previous day, laughing and taking pictures with my sister. There was no one else around and the sky in the pictures on that day had a tinge of orange and purple so that is how it must have been. These are the two images I have in my head of the day before and a day during the lockdown juxtaposed. The former at dusk with the sky changing colour, our hair flying in the wind, and the latter with blue sky but we were moulded like stone sculptures with a laptop blaring white noise.



Images: Choki Dalkar

We reached the office. Something was brewing, we could feel it in the winter air, in the hushed whispers, in the confused gazes of the people who tried to mask it with indifference. We worked and went back home to pack. The lockdown had been announced and we were going to stay at a designated area from the next day. I left quietly the next morning before my sisters were even awake (my sisters would say otherwise – the part that I left quietly). When I was near the vehicle that had come to pick us up, my mother called after me. She had brought some blankets and coats including a new one she had



recently bought for herself. Mothers, they seem to sense what their child needs before the child does. I told her that I did not want to take too many things but she insisted.

Later, during the tiring days and nights, the blankets and coats brought comfort and warmth that no hotel in the world with their 24-hour heating system could and I could not have been more in awe by a mother's instinct and care.

As the car passed the once traffic-jammed road of the capital, it felt surreal. The road was empty except for a few other cars and without a trace of humans, the buildings looked as dead and deserted as an apocalyptic movie. I realized then; we destroy nature for man-made objects but we breathe life into lifeless things. As much as I shudder at the thought of crowded areas, I would rather have noisy groups of people than the absolute emptiness that now was. This is how I remember the lockdown and there isn't much to it really. Just flashes of scenes, glimpses of emotions. It is like a long period merged as one never-ending memory. I remember sitting in the room, glued to the laptop as the shades of the sky changed.

The hardest part was the feeling of being trapped, everyone was bound within the walls. It was that we did not have a choice. We could not go out into the forest and breathe the mountain air. We could not hug our dear ones when we wanted to hug them the most, for their safety. We could not meet up with friends and laugh our worries away. It just wasn't normal. That was the new normal. Some days were harder than others, where I felt like I was sinking in dark water. And I had a few companions around. I could not imagine how it must have been for those who were completely and truly alone. And even worse, those who were with cruel people. I hope we can be there for them and that they get help from the many services that are available.

One time, someone apparently said that we could not dispose of our sanitary pads in the waste bin, which was outside the conjoined male and female washroom, and I was spitting fire. It wasn't as if we bled blood by choice or that working with cramps and pain was a picnic. Then it occurred to me, in a snap. One of the first thoughts was, how were women who'd run out of pads or tampons managing? It must be difficult to access such services. There must be hundreds of thousands of other issues people were going through. It was then I realized that the pandemic is not merely about preventing deaths and controlling the outbreaks. It is about doing everything we can to prevent the death of a dream and the spark going out in a soul. It is about ensuring that people don't live a nightmare.

The year 2020 began with a lot of hope but all the people were hit hard by the pandemic, some more so than others. It was not so scary in the beginning. We used masks and sanitizers, and measures were put in place everywhere but life went on as usual. After the first lockdown was lifted, although hesitant at first, everything was back to the way it was before, albeit more masks, sanitizers and distancing.

Once again, the streets were filled with people, noise and life. Masks were worn in every possible way but everybody wore one. Shops and businesses that had been closed for days finally opened their doors wide. Every now and then there would be a rumour that there would be another lockdown and people would panic-buy. Some of the toughest things were that people were laid off of work, students could not go to school and they struggled with online classes, while some people did not even have the resources and had to choose between not seeking essential services like medical check-ups/treatments or risk getting the virus.

In some ways, for some of us, the physical distancing was more comforting than not. However, social distancing was the price no one wanted to pay and shouldn't have to. We are social beings, or so they say. No one should be left alone though. When the second lockdown occurred however, it was different. The stakes were higher as it was a community transmission. We had expected it, how could we stop a disease that had spread around the globe? It still felt unreal until it happened.

The second lockdown lasted for around forty days; the days never seemed to end. For a lot of people, the lockdown and pandemic meant endless holidays and they were bored out of their skulls. For countless others, it was worse than just boredom. Many people just wanted to open their windows, just wanted to sit on their balcony, just wanted to take a walk; they wouldn't meet anyone, they swore. But to what ends. On the other hand, for a lot of other people, the pandemic meant endless days without holidays. There were those who were working day and night, in the frigid cold. It has taken a toll on all of us. Some days I would imagine myself running past the gate, past the city, along the river as fast and far as I could. But these were all pointless anyway. We could not escape the pandemic; the only option was to face it and get through. The days never seemed to end and the nights slipped away too fast.

We kept going though. Everyone kept going. If we were to tell the children about this pandemic, how would we describe it? Would we tell them about the deaths or the days we lived without onions and chilies because they had become too pricey and scarce? Would we tell them how students travelled to another district for their education and how people did not have work? Would we also tell them about the triumph of the country? Defaulters were caught and heroes arose. Acts of violence and cruelty were reported and those of kindness

and bravery flooded in. Seeing our King, the leaders and people around me work selflessly awe-inspired me. We were always motivated and encouraged in different ways for which we will be grateful forever. Thinking of my dear ones and keeping in touch with them gave me the strength to continue on each day. We tried, thinking that we were doing it for our people and that it might help, even if only a little.



Image: Choki Dalkar

The best that we can do in the worst of times is to learn and grow from it. And learn we must from this pandemic for it has shown us how fragile our lives are, how precious moments and our dear ones are. How it is a privilege to walk among the trees with our hair flying in the breeze. How we cannot take things for granted and how not taking care of our ecosystem is not an option. How injustices and inequality that lurk, must be addressed. How resilient we are. How each one of us can do our part, and lend a helping hand. Living through this pandemic, I am convinced that people are innately good. Each one of us has a spark within us.

The people all around the world are hit hard by the pandemic but the resilience and kindness of humanity warm our hearts each day. So, until we see sunny days and peachy smiles again, I hope we hang on.



## ATKIA SAMIA RAHMAN

21 years old, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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My name is Atkia Samia Rahman. I am an undergraduate student, social development volunteer and an art enthusiast. I live in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. I have tried to share my experience of the Covid -19 pandemic and the journey that awaits in this diary.

March 17th, 2020 was the last time that I got to meet my friends before the restrictions started here in Bangladesh. And I still remember how everything changed from that day. It felt like we were in a completely different world and we had no idea what was happening around us. We were very scared. There was a lot of information going around, along with rumors, so every time we received information, we had to take a step back and analyze the entire situation.

Our Government declared restrictions that we had to follow through. Though we did not have lockdowns in our area, particularly where I lived, my family has been very strict regarding the restrictions. We stayed at home and did not go out unless there was an emergency. In Bangladesh, we have restrictions like "No mask no service". Everywhere we go, whether it is to a bank or any office, a mask is mandatory. Though we are all advised to maintain social distancing it's hard to maintain this for several reasons. For one, Bangladesh is a densely populated country and another thing would be the lack of awareness regarding the seriousness of the Covid -19. In the villages, people still think that Covid-19 is a myth and it does not exist for real. People do not wear masks or maintain social distancing in most rural areas. In the urban areas, people are now more aware than they were at the beginning of the pandemic, but even now many people roam around without wearing masks.

Due to Covid-19 all the schools and educational institutions have been closed down. Online classes are being held at the moment. My classes were canceled while I was in the middle of my semester. I was so frustrated and hopeless during that time. Then the classes resumed online after a few months. Since we were not acquainted with online classes before, it was a bit hard to catch up at first, considering all the network issues we had and the lack of proper devices. Luckily, my classes are always recorded, so I can get back to them if I have missed anything during the class.

The first time I stepped out of the house, and only onto our road, was after 3 months. It was Eid-ul-Fitr and I was so sad that I cried all day not being able to meet my friends and my elder sister who lived on the other side of the city. My family allowed me to go outside to breathe in the air but while wearing a mask and gloves. It felt so weird to be out under the sky, to see people, cars and shops. I had never felt something like this before.

Recently, I was watching a documentary on a certain culture where the woman said that what we see becomes a part of our reality. I can now understand the true meaning of it. It feels like the pandemic is our reality now. And it has become a part of our lives even if we don't want it. Every time we have groceries or anything from outside brought to our home, we spray it or wash it with water. We even spray ourselves. I avoid crowded places; I am now so accustomed to Zoom meetings that the thought of offline meetings sparks social anxiety in me.

The pandemic has been really hard for me and I am still struggling to go through it every day. I have had anxiety disorder and severe depression for the past 4 years. In the beginning, it was really hard for me when I had to spend every day at home with the uncertainty and fear of Covid-19. I was not able to reach out to anyone, although my family has been extremely supportive. I remember spending night after night crying, being sleep deprived, and going through constant anxiety attacks and panic attacks. It felt like this pandemic is the end of the world. I was scared, frustrated and sometimes I felt numb.

2020 has been the hardest year of my life so far. I tried to pursue all the hobbies that I once thought I would not be able to do. I learned how to play the ukulele, learned glass painting, learned calligraphy, I learned to bake brownies, but at one point I ran out of hobbies. It felt like time was never-ending. I also felt grateful for being able to stay at home because so many people in our country could not afford to do that. They had to go out for work every day even at the cost of their lives. My father and my elder sisters had to continue their work offline after maintaining work from home for a few months. I had been very anxious about their health. At one point I thought I had some Covid symptoms in my body and I was sent into isolation. But thankfully I tested negative. I was so scared to take the test. I was more anxious about my parents, my grandmother, and my loved ones, more than my life. Even till 2021, we did not allow anyone in our house since anybody can be a risk to my family members. After the elderly people of my house got vaccinated, we only then allowed some family members to visit us. I mostly meet my friends through video calls and social media. Though I miss being with them physically like we used to do before, it is nice to stay connected through social media as well. As we are all going through a tough time, we try to be there for each other as much as we can.

Along with my academic studies, I am also affiliated with organizations where I work as a volunteer. So, I had the opportunity to work remotely from home and had to deal with some fieldwork as well. Most days I struggle whenever the thought of a pandemic hits me, but then again life is moving forward at its own pace and some things aren't in my control. I realize that I can only work on the things that are in my control. I had been working to support underprivileged people and children. I am trying to focus on the bright side of life, but even then I feel hopeless at times. Maintaining my classes and my work has become really challenging at this point. I always thought that if I could get more time at home, I would have been more productive. But now that I am always at home, I have realized that productivity is a relative term.

During this pandemic, I watched many TV series and movies, I also got to spend a lot of time with my family. It is really nice that everyone now shares the household chores. Above all, I got to see relationships and people evolve. It has been an experience. I saw myself grow as a person, as a daughter, as a sister, as a friend, and as a social worker. There have been times that I wanted to give up on everything but I had to stand up by myself and be grounded. I have realized that the only way I can be at peace is if I make peace with myself inside my heart. It is a tough journey but I am looking forward to it.

It has been a year already. I see the updates of Covid-19 in the newspaper and on the television every day. The pandemic has been so terrifying, especially with the news of close acquaintances getting infected with the virus. I have lost a dear friend of mine as well and it is still so hard to believe that she is no more.

So many things have changed within the past year, from wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and carrying hand sanitizers everywhere. I miss going to concerts, having street food, having a busy day fighting through Dhaka's traffic, meeting my favorite people, going on a tour around the country with friends, having basic hangouts, doing classes physically, celebrating festivals - everything has changed. Sometimes I have nightmares in my sleep that I forgot to wear a mask.

Bangladesh has already started providing the first dose of vaccines which feels very positive right now. But new strains of the virus have been detected and the rate of people getting infected is getting higher every day. The number of cases has started increasing again. The GO's, NGOs, INGOs - everyone is trying to create more awareness regarding Covid-19. I believe that every battle has an end, this too shall end as well. I am sure we will fight this virus soon, and win.

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# KRITIKA

## 16 years old, Kathmandu, Nepal

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### **About me**

My name is Kritika. I am 16 years old and I am from Kathmandu, Nepal. I have been living here for the past 5 years. As Kathmandu is the capital city of Nepal, it has more facilities than other cities. The area where I am living is a little bit crowded. We have access to every facility in my local area so that may be the reason that people get attracted to living here.

### **Information on COVID-19**

Talking about COVID-19, I knew nothing in the beginning. As time passed, we gradually got a little information about it. At the start of this pandemic, I don't think we had any idea or information but now the government has been providing us with a range of information and I think if we follow all the instructions given by government and WHO, we will be able to protect ourselves and keep our community safe.

### **My experience regarding COVID-19**

As the country was facing lockdown, being in your own house, not able to meet your friends or relatives was so frustrating. Even if we went outside to buy something or for any other work, we used to worry that we may be in contact with infected people. This is a major worry that I think all of us still have. However, as we were locked up inside our home with our families, it also was fun because we had more time to spend together. But at the same time, our parents had to work from home so they also felt pressure. We used to call our relatives and friends whenever we missed them.

As we had to live inside our house, it felt like we were criminals who were inside the jail, so it affected the mental health of many people. I used to think, "what if someone was going through depression and couldn't get any help?" At the time of the pandemic, even if we suffered from the simple common cold, we used to get so scared. So, I think it affected the mental health of many people. The kind of support that is being provided to help children and young people to cope with physical and mental health impacts is mostly through media awareness and counselling. There are quarantine centres and hospitals with COVID-19 wards for infected people. But, these days, most of the people who have the virus are quarantined at home.

I think people are trying their best to prevent the spread of COVID-19. No one is going outside without wearing a mask or carrying hand sanitizer. There are no youth or children walking unnecessarily on the road. They are being extra protective for themselves and others. People are not getting together and creating crowds – they are keeping a good distance from each other. Parties and gatherings are not being organized because such events have a high risk of spreading COVID-19. These little steps have worked really well but there is still space for improvement as a few people are still not taking the virus seriously and they are not realizing that they can spread COVID-19 if they don't follow the steps as guided by the government.

### **How has COVID-19 affected my education?**

COVID-19 has affected the education system of Nepal very badly. We were going to have our board exam in March, 2020 but a day before the exam date, our exam was cancelled. And this was the first time we didn't sit our board exam and we received our result on the basis of internal evaluation by the teacher. Because of the virus, which was a great threat to our education system, the government ran many virtual classes but again, I didn't find these as effective as attending physical classes in school.

Then after 8 months of lockdown, we could finally go to school and it was a great feeling. The schools were a little strict regarding COVID-19 matters as it is a deadly virus. Hand sanitizers and wearing a mask is still compulsory but social distancing is not maintained at all nowadays.

### **My message to the adults as a child**

We children are very outgoing, energetic and enthusiastic; we would love to go outside, visit many places and learn many new things but it was not possible because of COVID-19 this year. So I think adults should understand us and help us learn many new things even in quarantine. This will develop the bonding between adults and children more.

After staying inside our home for 8 months, we have realized how hard it is. I do think about the animals who used to live in wide open spaces but as we have been destroying their homes and creating ours, they have had to live in fewer places now and are scared of coming outside because of a fear of us, human beings. At the time of COVID-19, we were locked up but animals were not, they could walk freely without fear. We were so frustrated in 8 months but what about those animals who were living in fear all the time?



Indeed, we are the most intelligent creatures among all, but we are using our intelligence to destroy other creatures' shelters, food, freedom and also destroying nature. I would like to see all the creatures on this planet living peacefully, living together, and conserving Mother Nature. From our experiences of living in small spaces and being frightened to go out, we should further increase our humanity and consider other creatures that we share this planet with.



## NISCHAL

### 12 years old, Baglung, Nepal

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My name is Nischal. I live in Baglung district Ba.Na.Pa-3. I study in 5 class. I am 12 years old. I like to play outdoor games, listen to music, read and play games on my mobile. I also like to write about my daily activities. Today I am going to write about my experience with the corona virus.

Initially, I heard some rumors about the corona virus. Later, rumors about this virus started appearing on radio, television and in newspapers. The virus originated in China



Image: Nischal

and is usually transmitted from an infected animal to humans. This type of virus usually has a range from common colds to serious illnesses. Symptoms of the virus include fever, nausea, and shortness of breath. The epidemic of Covid 19 was spreading all over the world. The number of infected people started increasing day by day and our exams were about to begin. Even in such a dangerous situation, we rushed to take the exams because the government announced that they were to shut down our schools from April 26. Our schools were closed and we were forced to stay at home indoors. As the number of people getting the virus increased day by day, our minds were filled with feelings of anxiety and fear. Some of our family members were fearful and wondered what would happen if they got Corona. We had to stay in quarantine and the situation about quarantine was not safe enough.

According to the World Health Organization, it was said in the news that children and the elderly people are more likely to feel ill and that the epidemic spread around the world, our school was totally closed. We have to worry about whether we can go to school again or not, we were restricted to go out to play with our friends, and the school was closed for long time. We stayed at home and did various activities like painting, dancing, playing internet games and making tick-tock. Due to the compulsion to stay indoors and not being able to socialize outside, in some cases people became victims of mental illness. Due to such a dire situation, some youths lost their jobs. People became mentally challenged and became

addicted to mobile internet games. Currently, most of the students in Nepal play games like PUBG, Free fire, and Mine cafe which has led to a decline in their creative ability. Similarly, it was impossible for us to take school physical classes due to the need to maintain physical distance, to avoid crowds and to adopt health and safety standards.

The government was instructing us to adopt an alternative technical education system in those difficult situations and we started taking online classes. The number of students who use to come before COVID-19 was high and at online class it was very low. We were 40 students in class, whereas 8 or 10 students only used to join online classes. Lack of internet and economic status, it was still a problem for much of my friends. It was also difficult for our teacher to run online classes smoothly. Everyday Corona Kahar, broadcast on Nepal's famous National Television Avenues, became a means of burning the poor and laborers' stoves by helping them and supporting. While the delegates, the student leaders and people's representatives went to the districts and villages in the districts to conduct relief distribution programs and broadcast the video on television and internet. About 9 months later, our school started operating.

The first day of my school was very exciting. After so long I was going to meet my friend and teacher although I had some fear inside about COVID-19. Firstly I wore a mask, used sanitizer and reached my school gate. My school guard checked my fever and gave me sanitizer then allowed me to go inside. We were strictly instructed by our teachers and Principal to maintain social distance and use sanitizer. Me and my friend entered into the classroom and sat on a bench at a distance and were told that we should use soapy water or sanitizer in every activity like lunch or toilet. The day was good. After that we are attending classes regularly by following the same precautions. But the fear about COVID-19 is the same as recently two people were dead by COVID-19. Mentally it has affected me making me fearful. If it's symptoms show in me, then what will happen?

In this regard the government and different organizations provided training on how to control impact and prevention, how to improve safety, as well as distributing free masks and sanitizers, and how to engage people in the relief of food shortages. The country has been running agricultural programs and the government has also given priority to the agriculture sector in the budget this year. In fact, no one would have thought that the epidemic would take place.

Due to this epidemic, the state's coffers were destroyed. These and similar problems will take some time to be resolved gradually as the lockdown opens and people gradually return to their jobs and careers. The government has been conducting extensive capacity building programs to engage the youth in the agricultural sector, agricultural insurance market and it is essential to improving the infrastructure and improving education and health for children.

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# AKANGKHYA GOGOI

24 years old, Assam, India

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## My Pandemic Diary

My name is Akangkhyia Gogoi. I am 24 years old and I live in Assam which is one of the north-eastern states of India. At its northern boundary is the Kingdom of Bhutan and the state of Arunachal Pradesh. To the east are the states of Nagaland and Manipur, to the south are the states of Mizoram and Tripura. To the west the states of Meghalaya and West Bengal and the border with Bangladesh. My state is a land of plains and river valleys. Assam's economy is fundamentally based on agriculture. Over 70% of the state's population relies on agriculture: people work as farmers, as agricultural laborers or as both for their livelihood. Assam is richly endowed with natural resources, such as abundant rainfall, alluvial soil, as well as a rich and diverse plant and animal genetic base.

I am a job aspirant and I recently completed my Masters in Arts in Linguistics from University of Delhi. Delhi is the national capital of India. It is about 2,080kms from my home-state.

### My reaction when I first heard about the pandemic

I came to know about the outbreak of the Corona virus in Wuhan, China sometime in Feb 2020, from a friend. To be honest, I didn't think it to be that contagious. But since early measures were taken in my country, even I followed the basic sanitation practices which we were asked to follow. I travelled to my state for my mid-semester break in the first week of March. That was when I realized that the virus had spread widely in my country as well, which made me scared about the wellbeing of my family and myself. From the 14 to the 16th March, lockdown was implemented across the whole country and what was supposed to be a week-long mid semester break, turned into a year-long quarantine.

Along with my concerns about health, I was also worried about my academics and I wasn't sure how everything was going to turn out. I was thankful that I had my family with me and had everything that I needed to survive the pandemic, which immediately reminded me of the poor and the deprived section of the world that hardly have any shelter or food. The least me and my family could do was personally help our house employees, who are paid daily wages but due to lockdown were paid off and had no source of income.

### **The flow of information about Covid-19**

Most of the population in India are known to use mobile phones and television to receive information. The major source of information was through the media. People were watching the news and to find out the number of cases of Covid-19 which was taking its toll, and getting higher each day. Since India is one of the most populated countries of the world, the containment of the virus was even a bigger challenge.

Around August -September 2020, the country witnessed its highest number of Covid positive patients. At some point in time, we as a family even stopped watching the news and keeping track of the Covid positive cases as it was becoming very depressing and we were scared and concerned about our mental health as well.



Image: Akangkhyia Gogoi

### **My country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic**

The Indian Government was quick to take several measures to contain the spread of the virus. To avoid community spread, a nationwide lockdown was imposed during March 2020: all international and domestic flights were cancelled; and all schools, colleges and offices were closed and switched to an online platform for functioning.

Awareness programmes and information were provided by the government through verified resources in order to curb the flow of false narratives and false information.

India acted on its 'Neighborhood First' policy and supplied food and medications to some of the under-developed countries based on humanitarian grounds. My country is also one the successful countries in developing and providing vaccines against the virus. Serum Institute of India is also making the Oxford University developed "Covi-shield" vaccine and the "Covaxin" developed by by the Indian company Bharat Biotech.

### **How the pandemic affects me**

The Covid-19 pandemic drastically affected me and my whole family. As my father is in the tea manufacturing industry, he had to resume his job from the month of May, 2020 as almost all the manufacturing industries were reopened at that time. My father has to meet many people due to his job and responsibilities and because of that he came in contact with the virus. Even though he was quarantined and we were all very cautious, my brother, my mother, and I were all Covid-19 positive after a week.

We took the medication and the required rest and after 2 weeks we all tested Covid negative. After having the virus, I have noticed my immunity system has weakened and I get tired easily and exhausted from only a few hours of physical work.

From my experience, I have learnt that there is nothing more than ones health. The well being of my near and dear ones matters the most. Also cleanliness and sanitization is something that should be practiced regularly in every household. I would suggest that the decision makers implement policies that put more emphasis more on health sector. Also community sanitization campaigns should be implemented on a regular basis.

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## ZARA

### 12 years old, Naarm (Melbourne), Australia

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*I live on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung people of Kulin Nation.  
I pay my respects to Elders past and present.*

#### **How it all started**

Our first lockdown started in late March and ended in late May of 2020. To be honest I enjoyed it. Home school was fun, I enjoyed doing my work every day and finished it before 12 o'clock every day. I could work at my own pace, with no annoying classmates to interrupt me. Although I missed my friends and wider family, I enjoyed it a lot more than the second lockdown. At the end of the first lockdown however, I found it was not as fun as the start. I started to lose motivation and home school was no longer fun. We then got to go back to school but it wasn't the same.

#### **Then it just continued**

Fast forward to mid July 2020, we were put into another lockdown. I started off fine, school was once again done by 12 o'clock and I was catching up with friends on Zoom and Facetime. It got to the middle of the lockdown and I was losing my patience. I hated hearing the radio in the morning, the number of cases in Melbourne, the deaths, all those people in hospital. I lost motivation to do my school work and dreaded Monday morning and looked forward to the weekends even though there was nothing I could do. I started finding ways to motivate myself and get all my work done. I started going on walks or exercising every morning before 'school' started. I wrote down everything I had to do for that day, and I found that helped me because it was very satisfying to cross off everything that I had done. I started getting worried that my family and friends would get COVID-19. Hearing that a 21-year-old man had died, made me think that anyone could get it and die. My grandpas, grandmas, aunties, uncles, mum, dad, friends, siblings, anyone I knew. During this trying time, my uncle got sick and I started worrying that he would get COVID-19 from being in the hospital and then get really sick.

**Things got better**

It all started to get better as the restrictions were lifted. We had 10 cases a day, we could go and see family, go to our holiday house, I got into the high school I applied for, we bought a block of land, I went places again. Then we could go into New South Wales, and we could see our family from different states for Christmas! Even though at the start when we could go to different states, it didn't affect me or my family very much, but it still felt good that we finally had that freedom.



Image: Zara



### **And again, into lockdown**

But of course, it got worse again. I got a notification saying we had to wear masks at school. Then more people got the virus from someone working in a Quarantine Hotel. I was sitting on a bus with the rest of my class when we got back to school from camp, our Assistant Principal got on our bus and told us we were going into a 5-day lockdown. Everyone on my bus was very excited to go home but, as soon as he said that everybody sank back into their seats. I was a little confused as to why they put us in a lockdown with only 13 cases and why they had waited so long last time. But at the same time, I was happy that it was only 5 days, and if we had waited longer, we might be in another lockdown today. And here we are again in another lockdown but hopefully not as long.

### **And now**

At the time of writing this paragraph it is now February 22nd, 2021, 5 days out of the lockdown. At the end, it just seemed as though everything was normal apart from the fact we couldn't go to school (but I'm not saying I could go another two days.) I'm pretty happy now that we had that last lockdown, even though it could have been avoided, it was necessary at that point of time. We now have to wear masks whenever we go into a shop which has been an added restriction.



Image: Zara

I'm pretty happy about the vaccine coming out. Our Prime Minister got the first one yesterday on February 21st and they will soon roll it out to health workers, the elderly and people who have a higher risk factor of COVID-19 hurting them more. Then they will give to all the adults and kids like me. I know that even with the vaccine, COVID won't have gone away forever in Australia, so that means we probably won't be going back to normal before 2022, but hopefully we will go back to being as normal as we can.

Over the past year and a bit, I have changed a lot about the way I think and do certain things. I've learned not to take things for granted. I never appreciated the fact that we could go into shops without wearing a mask, or even feel safe when you're sitting next to people you don't know on the train or tram. I had never even thought about that until I had to wear a mask for more than an hour and then be relieved when I got home because I could finally take it off, or when I sat on a train for the first time in twelve months and I felt very uncomfortable.

In our first and second lockdown we weren't told much about what was going on about our lockdown apart from when we were talking to our teacher about it in our daily meetings. I think that maybe they could have told us a little more about if we were going back to school and what the new restrictions would be. This could have been because they either thought that we didn't care much about it or we were getting the information through our parents. But for the third lockdown I received a lot more information in those short five days than I did in the few months we were in lockdown over the last year. I'm not sure why, but it could be because now I'm in high school and we don't rely on our parents as much anymore. I preferred our lockdown while in high school a whole lot more mainly because it was more 'normal' than when I was in primary school. We had meetings for every subject and it was actual school work. When I was in primary school we had meetings once a day to just talk and we repeated a lot of work or even stayed in one maths unit for four weeks.

Now that we are practically COVID free, normal things are slowly getting better. I am slowly getting used to all these new requirements. But if I could say anything to myself back at the start of 2020, before any of this started, it would be "don't take anything for granted".

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# CHERI

## 18 years old, Yangon, Myanmar

\*Not their real name

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### **What life has been like in Myanmar since COVID-19: A young person's perspective**

Myanmar has a population of 56 million and 70% of the population lives in rural areas. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not easy for Burmese people to keep the normal balance of their lives. As for the youth, it was difficult for us at first as we've been dealing with climate change, economic inequality, and low standard education before the pandemic and we are now facing much bigger problems because of COVID-19. However, starting from February 1st, 2021, Burmese people are facing more serious cases because of the political crisis.

#### **A little about me**

My name is Cheri and I am currently a sophomore student at a technological university. I live in Yangon which is the economic city of Myanmar. My life changed overnight when the government announced that they had found the first COVID-19 infected person and we had to stop our university's semester-end exam and the whole country went into lockdown. Our life would never be the same again.

#### **COVID-19 first wave**

When I first heard about the first COVID-19 infected person, in addition to being frightened I also felt really happy since the Ministry of Education ordered the universities to stop the ongoing examinations and shut down the universities until further notice. Well, as a student, it was a piece of great news at first. But as time went by, I started to miss my friends, my university, and my normal life. We couldn't go out because of the lockdown and we had to wear masks all the time and it was really annoying.

I sometimes felt depressed and arrogant because of staying inside for a long time. I also had no idea of what I was supposed to do. I felt more depressed when I heard that people of my age were being productive and doing good things, whereas I was just sitting at home playing games and watching movies all day. My weekly schedule became the same, and I got confused at whether the day was Monday or Tuesday since I had been doing the same thing every day. Starting from day 1 of lockdown, my friends and I would wait for the list of infected patients from the Ministry of Health and Sport through Facebook.

Our house bought all our groceries online. The life savior during lockdown was an application called "foodpanda." We ordered food from around our neighbourhood anytime we wanted. They also offered contactless delivery. The app was very useful for all the people in big cities. Furthermore, online learning platforms became very popular and they offered free courses. We could study for free from very famous universities like Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, etc. To summarize the first wave, the people were scared to go out, they did their best to stay put. Our mental health situation became weak but the people helped each other through this hard time.

### **COVID-19 second wave**

During the second wave, people have become more relaxed compared to the first wave. There are more people on the streets wearing masks. More shopping malls, restaurants, stores, and markets have reopened. The nightlife had been restored in some parts of Yangon. Online-based businesses (eg. online shops, food delivery services) are doing really well compared to other businesses. As for the youth, they have realized that online learning platforms are extremely beneficial to them in regards to saving time. Myanmar is the first country in Southeast Asia to receive the COVID-19 vaccines. Thus, the citizens have the hope to see the country 'alive' as she used to be.

For me and my friends, we were genuinely joyful with the expectations of the universities reopening. All of the people had beautiful, ambitious plans in mind by the time the country was stated COVID free. Nonetheless, such plans were brutally demolished by the political crisis which occurred on February 1st, 2021, and came to us like a storming disaster.

### **Summary**

To summarize, COVID-19 struck our country as it did around the world. The civilizations have suffered deaths and painful losses during 2020. The medical staff have been under enormous stress and pressure because of the pandemic. But our people held on together with unity and fought the pandemic together with the result of the joyful COVID free lives waiting ahead of us.

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# CHRISTINA PEROILI

## 26 years old, Afio, Malaita, Solomon Islands

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My name is Christina Peroili. I am 26 years old living in Afio in Malaita, one of the nine provinces of the Solomon Islands. I live with my mother and my elder brother's family. Like many other rural communities in the Solomon Islands, farming and fishing are the main sources of income and livelihood in my community with limited formal jobs that focus on community development. This includes jobs in schools, clinics, and religious establishments, few retail shops and non-governmental organisations.

I am currently working as a Community Development Facilitator for a Community Livelihood Sector in one of the non-governmental organisations, facilitating projects for five nearby rural communities in terms of implementing economic development activities. Activities of the project include building construction, establishing community saving clubs, production of food, establishing market connection and conducting entrepreneurship training. My work also focuses on the inclusion of children, youth, and people with disabilities, old age and gender into the activities that we carry out.

To travel to a nearby semi-urban town I have to travel by an Out-Boat Motor (OBM) or a truck, and to travel to Honiara the capital city of the Solomon Islands, I have to travel by a passenger boat. This movement is one of the ways we get news and updated stories on COVID-19 from those who are travelling back and forth from these towns to the communities.

### **My reaction when I first heard about the COVID-19 pandemic**

I first heard of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, 2020 from my work colleague through word of mouth and cell phone communication. Later I saw the formal announcement on Facebook made by the Government. I was afraid that people might die; I was also worried about the work I do in the communities and the people that I work to support. I feared that my work will be disturbed and that I would not achieve the goal and objectives of what I am supposed to deliver. This is because people were scared and were more focused on the health issues of their family. There was also limited scientific information for people to understand the cause, symptoms, preventions, etc of COVID-19. Parents were worried about their children in boarding schools who were returning home because of school closure. The reduction in cash flow was also seen as a problem since people were not able to sell their products in the semi-urban areas or the capital city, due to the restrictions of movement from the rural areas to the city that the Government was implementing.

Our country got positive cases of COVID-19 later than most countries because of the strict measures that our government had imposed at the start of the pandemic. However, I panicked and thought my family would be misfortunate and miserable because of this pandemic. As a result, I was not able to go to work but stayed at home and set precautionary plans for my family. I tried to utilize what I learnt from my work as much as possible to support my family with regards to information gathering and preparedness. The nation was at risk and with the limited solutions and resources, whatever the measures taken to protect the country, would hit hard and have negative impacts on the citizens. Evidently the restrictions affected the economy and flow of income in rural communities like Afio.

### **The flow of information and COVID-19**

In Afio, our main source of information is through word of mouth spread by those returning from Honiara or the news on the radio because elders in the communities are still listening to it.

Recently my office has installed an internet disc that makes it easier for me to access social media and see the news from our government. The government news told us about the regular washing of hands, covering of mouth with an elbow when coughing and social distancing. Nevertheless, access to the internet is not reliable as it is only 2G and a very limited network coverage which is sometimes very slow due to bad weather that affects the internet connection.

I believe more needs to be done to ensure that correct information is passed down to the people in rural communities. There is information that comes with the fear that makes people in Honiara start moving to the rural areas thinking that they are escaping COVID-19. There were no focal points in the province that we could get information from in the early months of COVID-19 so most of the information we got was from our other family members and friends, and they for sure are not medical and health experts.

### **How the COVID-19 affects me**

I have been facing a lot of challenges with regards to carrying out my job due to the COVID-19 saga. It slows down the progress of activities, as I am not allowed into some communities. Communication is limited due to the internet barriers but also because we spread the information relating to my work through word of mouth, which cannot happen since moving from one village to another is also restricted. It has also demotivated supporting components and partnerships that I previously built with the communities to fully support the progress of my work. Generally, having fear of the seriousness of the pandemic, all activities were halted for a while.

### **My country's responses to COVID-19**

There are a number of precautionary and preparatory measures that the government has taken. These include curfews, lockdown, closure of international borders, school closure, health and hygiene awareness, etc. There is also the state of emergency procedure that was launched by the head of the government in March, 2020. This regulates the spread of information regarding COVID-19 and controls media outlets to help curb the spread of misinformation.

To support the project that I am working on with the rural communities in Malaita, preparedness and response plans are developed for communities to guide them on how they can tackle the impacts of COVID-19. Also, awareness and updated information have been regularly delivered to the communities, this time with the information from medical experts in our country. In terms of food security, garden tools and vegetable seeds have been supplied for each household to sustain food production. Furthermore, families create their own safe space for learning, especially for children in their homes.

However, COVID-19 has been happening for months now and we have eighteen reported cases with two active cases (at the time I am writing this diary) in the Solomon Islands. It has not been massively escalated in the country or reached the rural communities. Whilst community preparedness plans have been carried out, I feel confident now and have trust that we as a family, community and nation have to work together to combat the socio-economic impact that is now grappling the country.

My general observation is that activities are now starting to revitalize but we will have a new normal to live by including daily practicing of COVID-19 prevention measures, community support and community preparedness plans. In the future, upon any future circumstances relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of emergency plans for local communities will be reactivated.

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# NIBIR

## 16 years old, Assam, India

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### About Me

My name is Nibir. I am sixteen years old and living in Guwahati, Assam, one of the seven states in Northeastern India. I live with my family here and I am a student in 10th grade.

### How I learnt about COVID-19

The most common way to access information about COVID-19 is basically the daily newspapers, the news that airs on TV, and social media. Most information also gets spread by word of mouth. In rural areas radios are also being used to access information.

### How did I feel?

I first sensed the seriousness of the pandemic when our schools were closed right in the middle of our exams. At first it wasn't very nice to stay inside all the time: the television, the phone, it all got boring after a while. But slowly we started adapting to the new normal.

As a student of 10th grade, this was the last thing we wanted for ourselves because in no way could online classes be a good substitute for face-to-face classes and actually being in a classroom. The workload was hectic and I had issues with poor network connectivity and a lack of digital knowledge. Not to mention the many distractions that came along with the baggage of using a phone.

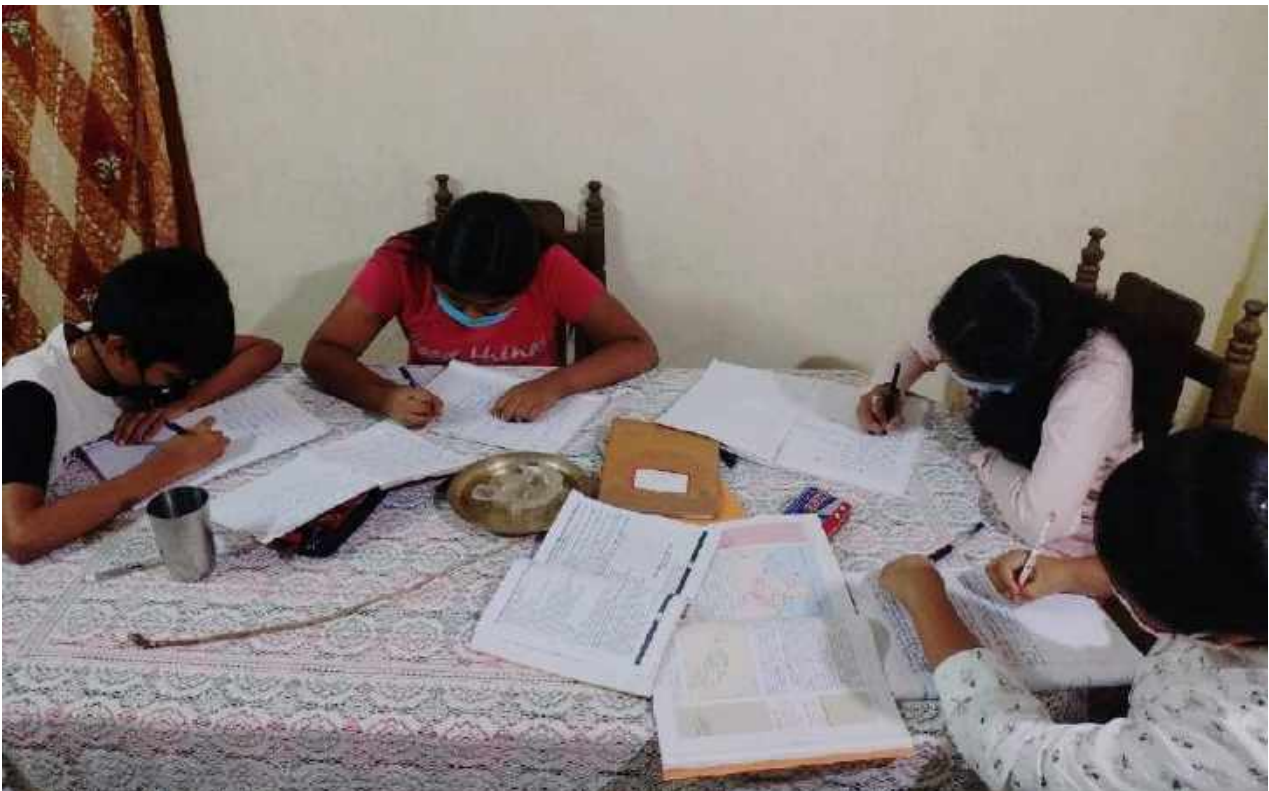


Image: Nibir



The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected our social life. Going out and meeting our friends, movie dates, hangouts, etc. were not an option anymore. On the other hand, the lockdown really let us spend some quality time with our family and let us discover the little joys of staying in and learning new things.

We have tried to be careful. We started by being extra sure that everything that came from outside of our home was sanitized- the person, the packets of food, the money, the phone - basically everything. The government also took necessary measures and a lockdown was declared across the entire nation very early on to limit the spread of the virus and to ensure the safety and security of the citizens.

### **My thoughts for the future**

After the pandemic, of course things will take time to settle down and to get back to normal again. That normalcy is what I anticipate: getting to go to school without wearing a mask and meeting people without having a fear of getting infected. I just hope everything gets back to normal again soon, even though we've learned a lot from this pandemic, I'd really love to get to breathe some fresh air without a mask.

During this pandemic I have learnt the importance of internet in today's world. This is because that is the only medium through which we are able to continue our education in such a situation. I also suggest that it is very important to carry out vaccination campaigns in all of the remote areas where people are still not vaccinated.

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## MUHAMMAD FAWWAD

25 years old, Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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My name is Muhammad Fawwad, I am 25 years old and basically belong to a remote northern district of Pakistan, namely Chitral. I live with my parents and siblings in the Peshawar district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. Residing in an urban area means more population and more interaction with other people. My siblings are students and my father is a retired government employee.

After my graduation in 2018, I joined an international non-government organization, ACTED, as a Community Mobilizer in my hometown of Chitral. The project I am working on mainly focuses on three areas: Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM), Food Security and Livelihood (FSL), and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). As I am also a team leader of my team, I have some extra responsibilities as well. In this project, up till now, we have built more than a hundred community-based organizations and also built their capacities to respond to any emergency situation by giving them trainings and emergency toolkits. We also worked on several more difficult schemes by building different kinds of infrastructures to improve their mitigation. Moreover, we are also helping them to improve their livelihood by providing them with vocational training opportunities and helping them with crops and kitchen gardening activities. As my family is living in Peshawar, but I am working in Chitral, this means that I have to travel from Chitral to Peshawar and then back to Chitral once a month on holidays to visit my family.

### **My reaction when I first heard about the COVID-19 pandemic**

I first heard of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 on television while watching a NEWS channel with my family and then I heard about it on social media as well. At first, I was quite frightened, in fact, my whole family were afraid. But after a few days I was astounded when I heard from people around me that it was all a drama created by a specific unknown group. So, from that moment onwards, I was unsure what to believe about the reality of this virus. I was fighting inside myself about the reality of this virus. But as the number of cases proliferated and people whom I knew started to get infected with this virus, everyone soon realized that this was not a myth but rather a reality. Although we were implementing standard operation procedures (SOPs) at home, which were regularly announced by the WHO and our government, we further started to strictly follow the

instructions while going outside too. I was worried about my parents as they are old, and I had heard that this virus affected older age people and children more as their immune system is weak. But this pandemic affected the whole world and at the start there was no medicine or vaccine for it. So, every country in the world started to find out more information about it and many began to develop a vaccine for it. Meanwhile people had to just pray for their loved ones as they could do nothing about it. And then governments all over the world started a lockdown to prevent the spread of this virus and soon everything halted all together.

Everyone got stuck where they were and could not move or travel anywhere. As I was in Chitral doing my job when lockdown occurred there. I had planned to travel to Peshawar to join my family but unfortunately, I got stuck in Chitral due to the reduced transport system. Hence, I was very worried about the situation and my family especially. These restrictions not only affected the economy of the country but also the people psychologically.

Then after a few weeks, we were issued Non-objection Certificates (NOC) by the district government and soon we started our response and relief activities and started to distribute food and non-food items to the vulnerable communities. We also provided free masks and sanitizers to the public and installed hand washing stations in local markets. At the request of the local government, we also disinfected the markets with sprays. The stress level soon reduced when I got busy with my job once again.

### **The flow of information and COVID-19**

As I spent more time during this pandemic in Chitral, I want to focus on the situation there in this diary. The flow of information in Chitral was through social media and television stations. Because of the high literacy rate in my hometown, the majority of the general population have smartphones which they used during the pandemic to keep them up to date regarding the situation. Although the internet service is not very fast as it is a remote area but 2G is available in almost every part and some parts covered with 3G signals.

I think keeping oneself updated in those peak times of this pandemic when it was very new and destroying the lives of the public, was very necessary for everyone. It was important for everyone to keep themselves updated so they may know the steps that their local government was taking and to know about the latest instructions from the WHO and government health departments to keep them and their families safe. I want to explain my situation. Before this pandemic, I did not follow the WHO page on any social media platform but as this pandemic spread, I started to follow them and other important pages on Twitter and Facebook and I am very sure that many other people also did the same.

District local government and law enforcement agencies also became very active. During lockdown they made sure that no one left their home unnecessarily and made regular announcements from their vehicles through loudspeakers instructing people to stay in their homes and strictly follow the SOPs. They also repeated the procedure of proper hand washing. It was a time when the whole world was on the same page fighting this deadly virus.

### **How the COVID-19 affected me**

There were a number of ways in which this pandemic affected me. Firstly, I was unable to carry out my job due to a complete lockdown in the whole country and therefore a lot of activities got delayed, especially the agricultural ones which are very specific to seasons. But when we got the NOC from the local government, the whole team was still not allowed to work and most of the staff were requested to stay home. As I am the team leader, I had to work, but without my team. So, the pace of my work got disrupted and we were unable to achieve our planned activities. Secondly, I was unable to visit my family in Peshawar for a long time and even in the holidays I was limited to my hostel room which really affected my mental health. I still remember that I was really feeling homesick in those days and even during the Eid festival, I could not make it home to meet my family. And last but not least, in spite of following strict SOPs, I myself was diagnosed with COVID-19 during the Eid festival. It really struck me hard as I lost my sense of taste and smell for quite a long period of time and with the fever, I had a hard time. The thing which was worst above all of those was the fact that I was away from my family, so it further enhanced my pain and suffering. But with continuous support and motivation from my relatives in Chitral and my friends and colleagues, I recovered from it and after the 14 days quarantine period, I once again joined the office and continued with my responsibilities to provide response and relief activities to the COVID-19 affected community.

### **My country's response to the COVID-19**

Pakistan, just like any other country in the world, took a number of precautionary and safety measures which included complete lockdowns, international border closures, curfews, and the closure of all educational institutes and recreational areas. Moreover, a National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) was also set up which is a nerve centre to synergize and articulate unified national efforts against COVID-19, and implement the decisions of the National Coordination Committee (NCC) on COVID-19. This centre is a centre of operation to collate, analyse and process information based on digital input and human intelligence across Pakistan through all provinces. Recommendations based on information/data is then processed including health, finance, and all matters related to COVID-19 to the NCC headed by the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Besides government efforts, semi-government and non-government organizations also came forward to offer their services in the form of awareness and relief activities. My organization not only helped the poor and vulnerable in the community, but also contributed towards building the capacity of the government health and police department by donating to them a large number of masks and hand sanitizers as they are the front-line soldiers.

The day-to-day activities are now starting to get back to normal and the strict lockdown has been lifted in my country. Although this virus took many precious lives all over the globe, it has taught us many precious lessons as well. Before it, we were not in a position to tackle a biological hazard of its kind, but now it has enabled us to prepare or be ready to respond to any such kind of future hazard.

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# TAIMUR KHAN

25 years old, Pakistan

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## **My Pandemic Diary - Corona Go, Go Corona**

### **Zoom Learning: opportunity vs disruption**

Attending online Zoom classes are a continuous reminder that there is a pandemic going on. Though I came with the expectations to go back to university, attend classes, enjoy with friends, and hopefully get accustomed to living alone, I ended up here with my laptop.

Sometimes I feel so trapped in my laptop. You know, just before the whole Corona thing, we were so much more vocal about reducing our screen time. Now it's become mandatory for all. I cannot even imagine what the little children are going through.

Due to the online way of teaching, I do not feel that I am doing a Masters course. The experience is totally different for me. And my communication skills are not improving. I think this is the biggest loss for me. I have spent almost 6 months here online, but I am on the same level that I was before coming here.

I am experiencing Zoom fatigue (online way of teaching); sitting in front of the laptop screen for up to 5 - 6 hours daily is causing fatigue in my back, and I have neck pain.

Due to the online way of teaching, I don't 'feel' the classroom environment from where I sit in my room. I cannot concentrate on the lecture and self-studying in my room is not effective for me. I want to go to the library but due to lockdown, libraries are closed.

### **Limited options to exchange culture**

I was thinking that during my Masters degree I will make more and more new friends from different countries and get to know about their cultures.

I was very excited to experience a different lifestyle, to know about their norms, values, and cultures and take part in different festivals. Now I only see the empty streets. I pass by the city center, and then occasionally I see strangers. Sometimes that also makes me feel good.

I do not think I will be able to meet my colleagues and/or attend any lectures in person.

**Interrupted social life**

Because of the lockdown, everyone is isolated and cannot meet. Only two people are allowed to meet but then there are many restrictions you have to take into consideration. I just see my dorm friends, and that is all.

I was so frustrated during the winter break. I could not even go out and say hi to my friends, I mean I hardly know people here.

**Restrictions in travel**

Due to travel restrictions, I cannot travel outside a 15-kilometer limit; this is really frustrating for me. When I think of traveling or to make a day trip to nearby cities, I only remember the sign that they have put in the bus station that discourages me to step out. I see the signs about wearing masks, keeping social distance and sanitizing hands. And many people don't care about these instructions, they don't wear a mask or maintain social distance and thus they increase the risk of the virus transmitting. That discourages me to step out.

I think stepping out will only be possible through vaccinations, when 70-80% of the population gets vaccinated then there will be very little chance for the virus to attack people. There will be no Corona-fear anymore and the government will lift lockdown and reopen everything again. The first thing I will do is to meet my classmates and have a party and some fun times with them. I will try eating different dishes in restaurants and visit public places. During lockdown, I learned a lot about myself; that I always like to spend my time with my friends and isolation can affect my mental health and build depression and social anxiety. About the world, I learned that all the people living in this world are selfish and mean and they only care about themselves. We have messed up this world so much and as a result, global warming and climate change are the rewards. This world needs to be repaired. Otherwise, we cannot survive.

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## PEMA LHAMO

23 years old, Bhutan

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### **Pandemic Reflections: The timeline**

#### **The beginning**

I joined work in March, 2020. It was my first ever posting ever since graduation. I was super excited to finally go to work after an 8-month long hiatus. Every morning when I woke up, I pictured what I would wear, matching the colors of my outfit with my shoes. Even the work planner seemed fancy and cool. However, this excitement and happiness of mine was short lived as the first Covid-19 case in Bhutan was evident only 3 days joining work. We were about to attend an official workshop but in the midst of it all, the case was announced. I saw people panic. Video footage of people lining up in grocery and medical stores began to circulate on social media. It all seemed surreal. Announcements were being made on various media outlets, and the government decided to hold a press conference. This was when it all started. Did I ever imagine it would be this serious? Honestly, I never thought the disease would even spread and reach Bhutan. I never imagined that the disease would become a pandemic and many lives would be affected.

#### **The 7:00am call**

It was around 6:30 am in the morning when I got a phone call from my friend. Honestly, it was annoying to hear my phone ring at such an odd hour when all I wanted to do was sleep-in till 8:00 am, as I had stayed up pretty late the night before. However, now that I think back, I am so grateful for that call as she told me that the whole country will be under lockdown starting 7:00am in the morning, as community transmission was evident. Why was the call from my friend so important? Well, I had stayed over at my cousin's place for work and if I had known about the lockdown any later than 7:00am, I would have been stuck there until the lockdown ended. Of course, I would have survived and would have had food to eat and a place to stay but I can never imagine myself being 'locked down' at someone else's house for an uncertain amount of days. I still remember the chaos, the panic and the rush of vehicles at such an early hour in the area I was currently staying. I grabbed all my stuff, said my goodbyes to my cousins and rushed towards the car. I had only started driving, as I had recently got my license, so I was still an amateur at driving. However, as I slowly backed my car, all I could think about was to reach home before 7:00am. My dad had gone on an official tour and my mom was the only one at home so I had to reach home to get to her.



Going back home never felt this important before. I left the parking lot and drove at a speed I never imagined I would have driven in any given situation. While passing by the streets, I could see lines of people, all buying groceries and essentials and everyone was rushing into stores as we all had the same deadline: 7:00 am.

### **Day 1**

I reached home safely and made it just in time. My mom had kept the front gates open for me and as soon as I entered the house, she was watching a press conference by the Prime Minister. I sighed in relief that I made it home, that I could see my mom's face. As we listened to the updates, I realized that this was happening for real. We were all fearful that the lockdown might happen and various rumors about it were already floating around. The moment finally began and it felt different. My legs were still shivering after having driven the car at such a high speed. We continued listening to the press conference on the TV, as it was the only source we could trust at that time. I was glad that we were well informed on this matter. As the speech went on, many messages started popping up on our phones. It was from our cousins, friends and colleagues in the group chats, asking how we were doing and if we had our rations stocked. Videos taken from their windows were also sent showing how streets looked empty and the only life roaming around these streets were the dogs. I think talking to each other was just a way to remind ourselves that we were all experiencing the same thing together. I could say that for myself at least. I was still trying to digest the situation and listening to familiar voices did help, as I then thought that I wasn't the only one. My mom had already stocked up the groceries and turns out she also bought my favorite snacks and chocolates. The press conference had ended and my mom went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. It was just like any other day, the usual routine but it all felt like a dream. I spent the rest of the day watching people's stories on Instagram. I could see a lot of "Day one of the lockdown" posts with pictures and videos of their homes but I still wondered if others felt the same way I did. Looking at their posts made it seem like I was the only one who still wasn't able to absorb the situation as they seemed to have accepted it and moved on. This lockdown lasted for about 21 days and gradually opened in phases for different districts across the country.

### **Life after the lockdown**

I put on a face mask and hung the sanitizer on my bag before leaving for work. It was the first day at work post lockdown. Our offices arranged for us to work in a shift mechanism in order to reduce crowds and maintain physical distance. Tuesday and Thursdays were my days. As I carried my bag, and left my car, the look of the office was kind of different. It was the same old structure but it felt nice to see it again after a long time. The parking lot was only half full and that was a good thing as I did not have to fight with some stranger for a

parking spot. The usual buzz around the office was replaced with silences. Dust had settled on my desk and as I wiped it off, I realized that I missed coming to this place. However, this time around, I did not see many familiar faces due to the shift system at work. Lunch breaks were even quieter and boring. Our usual conversations and the laughter over jokes did not echo anymore. I could even hear the typing sounds of my only colleague in the office. We ate lunch, worked until 5:00pm, went back home and waited until the next shift. It became a monotonous routine which continued for weeks. Trust me, those two weeks completely destroyed my motivation to work and keep to the schedules. Gradually, things got better as all of us started coming to the office like the normal routine. The lifeless town became alive again, we were allowed to eat out, but the closing times of eateries and shops had a curfew. Even then, I was glad that we had places to eat out and relax.

## **Lockdown #2**

We were just beginning to adapt and go back to our usual routine. Work resumed, schools resumed and the curfews for the closure of business entities were extended by about 2 hours. I was on an official tour outside of my district and one morning, I got that fateful call again, from the same friend. She told me that a person had tested positive in the capital city. Contact tracing had already begun and anytime soon, there might be another lockdown. My heart sank after hearing the news. I was going to be away from home if there was to be this new lockdown. However, there was no official news about the lockdown so not all hope was lost. For the rest of the day, we tried to finish all our work and planned to go home the next day. I was excited about the thought of going back home and stayed up late packing my things and sorting out files. I was going to pull an all-nighter to finish and wrap up my work. It was around 4:00 am in the morning when I decided to take a short nap. I set an alarm at 6:00am but what woke me up was not the alarm but a call from one of my colleagues who also came on tour with me. He sounded different. I found out that travel restrictions were imposed and we no longer could travel to another district. My heart sank for the second time. The thought of not being able to go home killed me from within. I tried to call the taskforce members, the traffic division, the health officials but to my disappointment, nothing could be done. I might have made around 20-30 calls that day and around 10 calls were made to my parents. I missed home, more than ever. As the day went by, it was announced that the whole nation will be under lockdown starting the next day. With a heavy heart, I plugged in my earphones and went to sleep. That day was a tough one for me.

The next morning, I did not expect anything good to happen. I just woke up, ate my breakfast and watched some TV. I suddenly got a call from my colleague again and when I saw his name on my phone screen, I only expected the worst. However, he called me to say that the stranded people could go back home after undergoing a COVID-19 test. My body automatically stood up and I began running around. I could not help but smile. At that moment, I was ready to undergo any sort of test as long as I could go home.

As I reached the test center, I realized I was too excited that I forgot I had to undergo the swab test and not to forget, the headache I had when I woke up in the morning. The test was scary but what was scarier was the wait for the result. Thousands of thoughts crossed my head which were accompanied by various "what ifs?". I started associating my headache to the symptoms of COVID-19 and this was not something I had been looking forward to in the morning. I might have done a bit of overthinking and I ended up getting even more worried. They finally gave me my results. All through my life, no piece of paper ever made me feel as happy as the negative marked paper I had in my hands at that time. Absurd, but the negative word was the most positive thing at that moment. I was able to finally go back home.

### **A final word from me**

Well, one thing the pandemic has surely taught me is to enjoy the little things in life. I would have never imagined that little things that I enjoyed, such as simple family meals and conversations, going out to eat with friends, hiking, or even celebrating a birthday, had so much value. As I looked back to the good old times, I realized I had so many opportunities to spend my time with the people that mattered but priorities and circumstances were different. I realized how important it was to be truly present in the moment. I told myself every day not to lose hope. I told myself every day to live in the moment and I told myself every day that everything will be alright. Over the past year, I had gone through new experiences and come across different situations but the one thing that remained unchanged was the ray of hope I had in me that told me that everything will work out. Even when I was expecting the worst, deep inside, I was hopeful and that is what kept me going. It still does.

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# KRIPA KHADKA

25 years old, Nepal

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## Wednesday, 3 March, 2021

Dear Diary, it's me Kripa Khadka. I feel so good to share my feelings with you. It's been so long since I have written something in you. So today I decided to share with you what I have gone through in the past few months. These months have been hard for me as it was my journey of 'pregnancy and delivery' as well as having fear of COVID-19.

Dear friend, as I was a teacher, I used to go to school and have a regular routine. I was six months pregnant when I first heard about COVID-19 through my friend. I took it so lightly but all of a sudden this COVID-19 virus started spreading all over the world. Whenever I saw the posts about COVID-19, fear started to grow inside me. My heart filled with tears when I saw a post of a little baby suffering from this virus and his parents were not able to touch the crying baby, also images of the doctors and nurses in China having rashes on their faces due to prolonged use of masks. Soon after, our Nepal government announced a lockdown and exams started earlier than previous years. But not for all the students. Class 10 were not able to take their exam as the Nepal government cancelled it.

After lockdown I started to stay at home doing household activities. I used to listen to the FM radio and watch TV to get information about COVID-19. When two women from our district were found suffering from COVID-19, we were so frightened. Everyone was hating their family members.

In the case of an emergency, we could visit a hospital. It was my 8 month of pregnancy. I used a mask, gloves and sanitizer and visited the Zonal hospital because I was having pains in my lower abdomen. But the guard didn't allow me to enter the hospital. I felt so bad. I just returned back home. The other private clinics were closed and I didn't have any options. I used to watch Avenues television, it was doing a great job. The television showed a situation where the poor people were affected by the lockdown. Through Avenues television they shared their problems and a helping hand reached to meet them and give them food. The government was also doing a great job by distributing food, masks, sanitizer, PPE and testing (polymerase chain reaction).

School was totally stopped so we went for alternative ways of teaching. We started to teach using the Zoom app. But unfortunately it was not good enough as many of the parents didn't have internet and also had some financial problems. Only 10-15 students joined the Zoom class, out of 30- 35 students. After a month I gave birth to a baby girl. The delivery was good but on the second day my daughter was transferred to Pokhara as she was not responding well. I feel it was because of an infection due to a urinary tract infection. If I could have gotten a check up at the time I had pains, my daughter may not have had to suffer. I was frightened about COVID-19 as my baby was newly born.



Image: Kripa Khadka

Now I have left my job due to my baby girl. I stay home to take care of my child and get busy on household work. But when I go out I always use a mask and sanitizer. Things are getting back to normal but I still fear that COVID-19 is somewhere around me. I hope one day I will be fear free and walk freely without using a mask and sanitizer.

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## ADNAN KHAN

25 years old, Pakistan

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### Life in a Pandemic

Being a student of disaster management, I had studied about pandemics in university, but I had no clue that I would get to experience one in my lifetime. As COVID-19 started in neighbouring China, I took it as a rumour and didn't believe in it until it was declared as a pandemic by the WHO. As first cases were detected in our country, it brought different fears with it due to uncertainties associated with it. Life suddenly changed, everything was locked down, roads were empty, educational institutions closed and my mental health deteriorated as I started experiencing episodes of anxiety. Taking a break from my job and volunteering responsibilities, I had planned to study for the whole year 2020 to take an exam, but things didn't go as planned as my mental health deteriorated and I couldn't focus on my studies.

Life became very uncertain and my hope for a brighter future diminished. As time passed and life became more online and less physical, it took me time to adapt to the new normal, as physical gatherings are one of the integral components of our culture, which makes it hard to follow social distancing and to lose the opportunity to meet your family on a regular basis. With very less options available to exercise and play outdoors, I felt that physically I had got weaker, which made me worry about my health in the long term.

Then, for the very first time, I felt hopeful for the future when a breakthrough was achieved in developing a vaccine for COVID-19. Despite being hopeful, it's sad to see that the developing world is still far from vaccinating its whole population, while the developed world is close to vaccinating the majority of its population. Every citizen of the world should have access to this life saving vaccine, no matter what level of standing their country has in global world power. Developing countries should make full efforts to procure vaccines for its public, and make the process of inoculation transparent, inclusive and accessible to every community of the society, prioritizing health care workers, the immunocompromised and the elderly. This pandemic is a wakeup call for policy makers, front line workers and researchers to invest in health related infrastructure, research and development so that the next pandemic can be avoided.

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## RUQAIYA

### 14 years old, Bocalevu, Labasa, Fiji Islands

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My name is Ruqaiya. I am 14 years old and from Bocalevu, Labasa, Fiji Islands. The most beautiful place in my country is Savusavu named as "The Hidden Paradise".

There are five people in my family. My father is a farmer and my mother is a language teacher. I finished my primary education last year and joined Labasa College this year, 2021. My favorite subject is Office Technology. I like watching movies, at least once in month. I play basketball on weekends and chess whenever I get time. I'm into reading thriller novels as well, Danielle Steel being my favorite novelist. I am happy to step into college life which provides more freedom than being at primary school and where I can finally aspire to working in the consulting industry.

#### **COVID-19 in Fiji**

I got to know about COVID-19 from my teachers in school when it was first discovered in Wuhan, China. We were advised by the teachers to take precautionary measures as this virus was quite dangerous as it spreads to people easily and it had no cure. So, I was afraid and took precautionary measures like washing my hands whenever I went in and out of the house and using hand sanitizers as well.

Then just after one month, on 19 March, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in Fiji was reported in Lautoka, and the government then closed all the schools and non-essential businesses. On 21 March, Fiji confirmed its second case and also the first local transmission case through household contact. The person was the mother of the first patient and was admitted in Nadi Hospital. The other family members from this first case remained in quarantine and were being monitored.

On 23 March, Fiji confirmed its third case, a one-year-old nephew of the first patient. The government established eight fever clinics around the country with six clinics running in Nasinu, Labasa, Savusavu, and Nabouwalu. Two others had been running in Lautoka since 20 March. On 24 March, Fiji confirmed its fourth case, a 28-year-old Fijian citizen, who had returned from Sydney over the weekend and was not related to the first three cases. He and his immediate family members were put into quarantine and were monitored at the Navua Hospital.

Fiji Airways had suspended all Singapore and Hong Kong flights after the two countries introduced border restrictions. On 25 March, Fiji confirmed its fifth case, a 31-year-old female from Lautoka. She was in contact with the first case, who was a flight attendant. Then Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama announced that Nadi International Airport would shut down from 26 March and all local shipping services would cease from 29 March.

When Fiji confirmed its first case of COVID-19 in March 2020, there was a surge in panic shopping seen in the supermarkets in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa. On 18 March, the Reserve Bank of Fiji reduced its overnight policy rate (OPR) and predicted the domestic economy to fall into a recession after decades of economic growth. It has now been a year since the first case of COVID-19 in Fiji and as of 3 March 2021, the country has had a total of 63 cases, as of which 7 are currently active and there has been 2 deaths, with all cases recorded in the islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

### **COVID-19 and Me**

For the first few days when the lockdown started, I didn't know what to do. I was at home and didn't have any work to do because our school was closed. So over time, I found ways to deal with the pressure. I realised that lockdown gave me more time to do the things I loved, hobbies that I couldn't do as I had been previously swamped by schoolwork. I started baking, drawing and writing again, and felt free for the first time in months. I had forgotten how good it felt to be creative. I started spending more time with my family. I hadn't realised how much I had missed them.

Almost a month later, I feel so much better. I understand how difficult this must be, but it's important to remember that none of us are alone. No matter how scared, or trapped, or alone you feel, things can only get better. Take time to revisit the things you love, and remember that all of this will eventually pass. All we could do at that time was to stay at home, look after ourselves and our loved ones, and look forward to a better future. Moreover, some of the benefits of lockdown was it was the best time to spend with grandparents, cousins, mother, father, and other relatives as there was ample time to spend with them. Everyone was doing working from home.

There was no need to step out of the house and meet with relatives so we would pick up the phone and call them and talk, which built more family relations. Secondly, watching a movie along with the family and enjoying it could only happen now, at this time. Spending time with parents and explaining career plans, getting their views and brainstorming with them, ideas for me to step towards my proper future path. Thirdly, I saved time as I didn't have to spend time using transportation to go to prayers, sports, chatting with friends. I got more time for self-study so I used it in a proper way and avoided watching movies and playing mobile games.



Usually our daily lives are so disconnected and we all have our own little rituals, going out shopping, going out eating and meeting friends and families who live somewhere else. The lockdown has brought people together and formed new friendships. While a global pandemic has brought going out to a halt, I've been lucky enough to have a family that continues to support me during these uncertain times, who have allowed me the time and space I've needed over these past months to study independently.

### **My Future Thoughts**

As the world now starts to come on track again, it is important to understand and realise the life lessons which the period of lockdown has given us. The times were challenging, despair was all around but eventually we found the way out of it. No matter how awful situations may become, there is always a way out of it. Hope, and the feeling of togetherness in our hearts can give us immense strength to fight any enemy in any form. I've kept a positive head, always looking towards the current challenges of lockdown as an adaptive learning experience that we are all faced with. As the motto goes "always live to learn, to try and fail, but most of all, keep it real".

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## RESMA

### 16 years old, Kathmandu, Nepal

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I'm Resma. I recently joined my high school. I'm 16 years old and I'm currently living in the capital of my nation, Kathmandu (Nepal). The pandemic approached us unknowingly. I was living my daily hours freely but the COVID-19 pandemic made me panic-stricken and more fearful. The place where I'm living is quite populated and polluted. The environment is quite busy and noisy. That's why I was more worried.

Although living in one of the main cities, I wasn't sure about how accurate the information about the pandemic was. I was getting most of the reliable information through social media and online means but there were more false rumors from different people's opinions shared by those around me. The news of people dying and suffering used to scare me. But at the same time, we became more aware. There were the mixtures of feelings like: feeling of fear, loss, and boredom, and somehow, I was getting strength to fight against this through BTS songs. BTS is a band from South Korea.

In many instances, what most worried me was my mental health. I had never faced such a pandemic before. We, especially young people and students, were living in mental fear due to COVID-19. It resulted in positive as well as negative effects on our community. After being inside, within a limited boundary, inside a home and having a series of online classes, the school authority decided to reopen the school. But it wasn't the normal 7-8 hours which we were used to in the past. It just felt completely suffocating and very different as we had to maintain a social distance, which made us have a fear in our mind all the time. But the school administration was applying the necessary safety measures.

We were compelled to study in a socially distanced environment which was very hard for us. During periods of school closures and lockdown, I desperately longed to stay connected with my best friends but those days pushed me to be isolated, like I was in a corner, which led me to become more introvert than I previously was. However, family and friends were always there to ask me if I'm fine so I didn't always feel alone.

I did yoga, drawing, listened to my favorite songs, made delicious food at home, and talked to my friends through social media - this helped me to stay mentally and physically healthy. I continuously practiced social distancing, washed my hands with soap and water, used sanitizers and masks. We changed our diet and consumed more vitamins and healthy food. The pandemic, especially the lockdown, was a bad experience of my life. But it somehow brought me closer to my family as I got a chance to spend more time with them.

After the pandemic is over, I would like to see the changes made by humans in terms of their irresponsible behavior towards the environment and the living creatures of the world. I would like to see the changes in the attitudes of people first. The world has arrived in the 21st century, but many narrow minded societies still exist. I wish when children and youth put forward their genuine ideas and innovations, they would be encouraged. The children and youth should be given opportunities to work hard to be independent. They should be involved in decision making process and their opinions must be heard.

Thank you for reading my pandemic diary.

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# SORAYA

18 years old, Selangor, Malaysia

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## Soraya's Life in the Pandemic

My name is Soraya, an 18-year-old student in her second year of A-levels. I live in Selangor, the most developed and populated state in Malaysia and I will be telling my perspective of my life during the pandemic.

On the 18th of March, 2020, a lockdown was issued in Selangor. The government was quick to take action as the number of cases of the pandemic was rising. We were in strict lockdown for four months, during which, only one person from each home was allowed to leave the house to buy groceries. It was providing results when the number of cases decreased and lots of people recovered quickly. The government then lightened the restrictions of the lockdown and I could finally go back to school to attend physical classes. However, then in late 2020 we had a great influx of cases and the number of people with the virus went into the thousands, and was caused mainly due to a few clusters around the country. It was getting to the point where it became a matter of 'when' and no longer 'if' each of us was going to catch the virus. Though it has been recently decreasing again and everyone is just impatiently waiting for the vaccine so we can quickly return to life before the pandemic.

To me, my education was impacted the most by the pandemic. Schools were shut down, learning was only through online school and exams were cancelled. It took a while to get used to the new norm. I have to admit that I was eager to do online school in the beginning as I looked forward to waking up later and got to work in a very comfortable place, not having to deal with traffic. However, my attitude towards online school declined incredibly after a few weeks. Bad internet, lack of motivation, procrastinating became the source of my frustrations. My place of resting and working were no longer separated which I once thought to be a good thing. It was hard for me to finish work and understand what was going on in my lessons. I was ecstatic when I was allowed back into school in the first week of this year as I was getting fed up with being at home. Everyone was excited to see each other (with social distancing) especially with the stress of A-levels. However, this excitement was short-lived when a close friend of mine tested positive and my time in school didn't even last three days. Due to me being in the same area with this friend, I had to return home immediately and isolate myself in my room for two weeks. Thankfully I tested negative in the end and no one from school contracted the virus from him.

I believe the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) that our school enforced kept us safe through the means of making everyone wear their masks at all times, students having designated classrooms to go to during breaks, hand sanitizer being provided in every room and markings on the floors to indicate the distance of one metre. Now that we are in school again (it's March, 2021), our teachers are stricter as it is nearing our exams so there is always a teacher checking in with us to ensure that we are socially distancing and following the SOPs.

During the lockdown, everyone in my family was either working or schooling. There were not a lot of places to move around in the house and eventually we got slightly fed up of looking at each other. It was the need for a change of environment that got me a bit fed up having to do the same thing over and over again. This spurred us to want a sense of normalcy to celebrate an occasion. My family decided to dress up for my brother's birthday and my mum cooked a feast for dinner. That was easily my best memory from the lockdown as it gave us a lovely break from the usual repetitive routine. In the early days I was inspired to pick up more hobbies with my new free time like painting and baking, but that motivation was depleted as I started to worry about my grades as we didn't have an exam to prove my understanding in my subjects.

Whilst isolating ourselves, it didn't help that I am not a huge social media user nor the fact that I was a couple months into a new school, so keeping in touch with new friends was a slight challenge. Though having said that, I made a very close friend from the first time we started talking on the first day of quarantine which led me to get closer with everyone else. I am grateful that he was there for me when I was feeling a bit lost. It was truly helpful because they are now people I can comfortably ask for help with schoolwork without the feeling of being dumb. Additionally, I did get to catch up with my old friends from my previous school and we got closer playing online games together, watching movies or just talking for hours into the early mornings. I am so thankful for them as they made sure I wasn't feeling sad, or would just hear me out if I had anything to talk about. It's been a while since I have last seen them, and for most of them, it's been more than a year now. It would be really great to see them face-to-face rather than on the 'laggy' video calls.

I have to say that I am privileged that I get to live in comfort as compared to so many other people out there and will always be grateful for everything that has been provided to me. I am grateful that my biggest worries only consisted of my grades and being bored, and the latter was never an issue due to all the calls with friends and my family's love. In the end, I'm hoping that everyone gets vaccinated as quickly as possible so we can return to doing things that were not possible during the pandemic.

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