

# NGOs Responding to COVID-19 and COVID-19 Restrictions

A Report by Women Founders Collective  
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In July 2020, Women Founders Collective’s Board members contacted NGOs that worked with girls and young women to see how they were dealing with the pandemic and the restrictions imposed in their countries. Although much had by then been written about the ways girls and young women were suffering from the cessation of in-class education and the increase in sexual and domestic violence, we wanted to know how NGOs who serve this population saw their work. We proceeded by developing a questionnaire that each member of the Board used in asking her contacts to respond. By the end of October, we had 17 replies from India, the USA, Nigeria, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Unfortunately, some of the NGOs we had hoped would respond had already closed their doors and dismissed their staffs.

The questionnaire, directed at NGOs that had programs that specifically targeted adolescent girls and young women, asked about pre-COVID-19 work, how COVID-19 had affected their clientele, how their work had been changed by COVID-19 and COVID-19-restrictions, and their greatest challenge.

This report is an attempt to distil the replies of various NGOs in order to highlight what we perceive to be the challenges they face and their creative attempts to meet those challenges. In doing so, we have erased geographical boundaries, which seemed less important than we anticipated. While we recognize not specifying the country of an NGO omits the vast differences

between the global north and the global south, COVID-19 has exposed previously ignored inequalities within countries. For example, while one might assume Internet connectivity is less a problem in the USA than India, the move to on-line education has made visible the 15 million K-12 American students who lack Internet access.<sup>1</sup> While the number and percentage is larger in India, there are significant differences between Indian states and regions within those states. In the end, focusing on common problems rather than regional differences seemed more valuable for NGOs keen to resume their work. Our goal in identifying the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of adolescent girls and the NGOs that work with them is to identify themes that cross borders and suggest the value of sharing experiences and solutions.

## THE FATE OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN DURING CRISES

In December 2019 health official in Wuhan, China identified a cluster of cases of pneumonia, closed the market they thought responsible for its spread, and notified the World Health Organization [WHO]. Less than a month later, Wuhan and three other cities were locked down but by then the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 had appeared in a number of other countries. At first unsure of how the virus was transmitted, the WHO and countries around the world faltered in their response. However, in March WHO declared this a global pandemic as the virus had appeared in almost every country. Now, twelve months after it was first identified, COVID-19 has infected 84 million people and killed almost two million.

From the early days of the pandemic, UN Secretary António Guterres called on countries around the world to recognize the “unimaginable devastation and suffering” caused by the virus and act together in finding a vaccine and addressing economic recovery.<sup>2</sup> Given the extent of the dislocation, UNICEF’s April warning regarding an increase in Gender-Based Violence [GBV] experienced by adolescent girls was significant and timely. Drawing on data from recent epidemics – ZIKA, SARS, and Ebola – and early reports of increased GBV, UNICEF predicted COVID-19 would heighten girls’ risks for GBV; thwart their educational, economic, and social development; and endanger their reproductive health. Women Win [WW] warned that historically, states in crisis allocate very little in terms of money or resources to the issues of adolescent girls and that this could easily happen now. WW called attention to the adverse effects on the “education, personal safety, bodily autonomy, health, peer support, social connections, and economic prospects” of girls and young women.<sup>3</sup> During the special two-day

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<sup>1</sup> “In Rural ‘Dead Zones,’ School Comes on a Flash Drive,” *New York Times*, Nov 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/us/wifi-dead-zones-schools.html>

<sup>2</sup> “COVID-19: Act now or risk ‘unimaginable devastation’ globally, warns UN chief,” *UN News*, 28 May 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1065002>

<sup>3</sup> Women Win, “COVID-19: Protecting Adolescent Girls and Young Women,” <https://www.womenwin.org/news/girls-empowerment-through-sports/COVID-19-protecting-adolescent-girls-and-young-women/>

session of the General Assembly in November, six world leaders voiced their specific concerns about the health, safety, and education of girls. Now, almost a year since the first COVID-19 lockdowns, there are scattered reports of the toll the pandemic has taken on adolescents but little in terms of solid data or proposals about how to work with this population post-pandemic.

## **THE WORK OF NGOS PRE-COVID**

The NGOs that Women Founders Collective contacted worked on a number of fronts to shelter endangered and vulnerable girls, help further their education, and empower them with knowledge and skills to take charge of their lives and fight for their rights. Among the institutions set up by NGOs were homes for abandoned children, drop-in centers for girls, and tutoring centers. In addition to financial assistance in the form of scholarships, NGOs have provided legal services, loans to start businesses, and health care. Concerned with what happens after school, NGOs offered mentoring, internships, job placement support, and special assistance to encourage dropouts to continue with their education. In addition, going beyond traditional academic education, NGOs both taught marketable skills and provided grants to support skills-based training.

Historically, most organizations had moved from specific goals to broader ones – for example, from basic education to a focus on economic and emotional independence, rights, and social and political empowerment. While working with one specific group or issue, most NGOs geared their work towards ending practices of gender-based discrimination and creating a world of gender equality.

To foster independence, NGOs imparted critical knowledge about laws and rights regarding age of marriage, child labor, human trafficking, and violence against girls and women, and about health and safety issues, especially nutrition and menstruation. Beyond knowledge, NGOs have worked to create awareness about the problems girls and young women face and to train young women to be leaders with their peers and within their communities to end violence against women and become champions of gender equality. To develop leadership skills, programs have been organized to impart an understanding of social mobilization, how to voice needs and demands, and how to achieve solutions. Essential to this work has been engaging girls in activities to build confidence and self esteem, develop ideas and values, break gender stereotypes, and form core groups that can play a role in effecting positive change within their communities.

NGOs were also aware of the need to change society and to do so have developed networks of likeminded organizations to exchange information about practices and act as platforms for advocacy and lobbying. They have also acted as advocates for adolescent girls and young women. In their efforts to bring about a shift in attitudes and behavior: from deep-seated ideas that perpetuate gender based discrimination and violence to gender equality, NGOs have developed awareness among girls and their communities about girls' rights, run media campaigns, and arranged for awards and ceremonies to honor and encourage those working to further the education and rights of girls and young women.

## **NGO ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF COVID**

There was general agreement among NGOs that COVID-19, with its attendant imposition of restrictions on mobility and loss of jobs, placed great economic strain on families and hit girls and young women especially hard. Families that survived through daily wages and remittances from members who had migrated for work, have had to struggle for survival. Considered less valuable than sons, daughters are at greater risk. With everyone at home, adolescent girls – who have not had schools to escape to – have been burdened with additional household chores such as taking care of younger children in the household. With resources stretched, girls are married early since during the lockdown weddings involve fewer expenses, are arranged without dowry, and allow the family to shift the burden of their daughter to another family. Lockdowns have isolated families and resulted in rising levels of stress, anxiety, and gender-based violence. As one NGO put it, all the indicators of gender equality -- from gender-based violence and early marriage to lack of access to food, hygiene, healthcare, education, work, and technology -- have gone backwards.

NGO after NGO reported that the areas where they work, areas where the majority of the people work in the informal economy, have been devastated by COVID-19. The March lockdown in India, which included public transportation, led to migrant workers from different states returning home. Jobless at the end of their gruesome journeys, they brought COVID-19 with them and exerted additional burdens on their families.

With work difficult to find, the financial stress on families has increased. The NGOs responding to WFC found that adolescent girls and young women have been the worst sufferers. With enhanced food insecurity, both married and unmarried girls have been subjected to greater domestic and sexual violence during the lockdown and have had to suffer silently since reporting and redressal systems were not functioning. In addition to the marriage of girls below the legal age for marriage, there is evidence girls are being trafficked as their families fall prey to lucrative job offers. When piecework is available, young girls and boys are put to work to help sustain the family. When this happens, it is unlikely they will resume their education once schools re-open.

The closure of schools and colleges has been a setback for young people, especially for girls who in recent years have been encouraged to continue their studies. Online teaching often does not exist or is not practical without devices or connectivity.

## **SPECIAL PROBLEMS OF NGOS**

One of the major problems of NGOs working with adolescent girls and young women has been remaining in contact with their clients. For some NGOs, schools were the sites where they recruited girls for their programs and where they met, for others it was the community. The closures of schools and restrictions preventing gatherings have made it impossible for NGOs to continue their programs in person. Staying in touch requires both devices (smartphones or tablets) and connectivity (a problem in some regions). Since smartphones are relatively expensive for those who work in the unorganized sector, it is rare for young women to have smartphones or even simple phones of their own. When girls can use the smartphones that belong to their families, they are unlikely to have the privacy necessary to address sensitive

issues. In some cases, the girls who NGOs worked with migrated “home” with their families and the NGOs lost contact with them.

NGOs have recognize that the need for help has doubled or tripled due to job loss, reverse migration, and economic collapse at a time when it is difficult for them to meet basic needs. For example, with schools closed, children who qualified for mid-day meals are no longer getting them. Meanwhile, the staffs of NGOs have been unable to come to their offices and in many cases, unable to work from home. Nor have NGOs, because of travel restrictions, been able to carry out the fieldwork and surveys that form the basis of their work. A number of NGOs reported postponing and in some cases abandoning plans for programs that would have benefited girls.

Beyond logistics, the pandemic has forced NGOs to switch from their normal activities to relief work. Learning that the families of the girls and young women they worked with were practically starving, most of the NGOs began relief work. In addition to teaching people about safe practices and how to quarantine, they turned to relief distribution, often engaging the adolescent girls and young women they had worked with to make posters and distribute information on safety measures, identify food insecure families, and deliver food aid.

Along with the need to pivot, NGOs experienced financial problems. Unfortunately, a number had to close their doors, as they were unable to pay salaries. Those who relied on donors reported a drastic reduction in funds just when the need was greatest. Even though they were dealing with COVID-19, they found their funding reduced as it was diverted to COVID-19 services. NGOs stressed the need for more funding, especially flexible funding so they could plan for the future. As so many NGOs noted, losing touch with the communities they had worked with reversed years of building rapport.

Below are summaries of NGO comments on specific topics:

**Education:** Even if girls and young women could connect to their schools and colleges on line, devices were rare and if owned by their families, more often in the hands of males than females. There is a risk that those who had less interest in studies will not return once schools resume. Scholarship applications were in some cases made available online but this meant bypassing girls who were not connected to the Internet. Efforts to provide internships and placement support ceased because so many businesses and enterprises have not been functioning normally. Most programs for tutoring, skill development, and training have been suspended. Many of the girls NGOs had worked with reported they had lost contact with peers.

**Economic:** The economic crisis has made it necessary for adolescents to help support their families. At the same time, jobs for girls and young women with limited skills and education, for example as maids, nannies, selling vegetables, etc. have disappeared. Some who had not previously worked have been engaged in agricultural activities like paddy sowing. For those girls and young women who were earners, the lockdown has been especially hard. Handicraft and cultural production, promoted as ways for girls to earn some income while in school, have witnessed loss of demand, disruption of supply chains, cancellation of events and orders, and the loss of business. At the same time, with increased family-based work, schools closed, and more people occupying the same space, girls and women have noted the difficulty of producing saleable objects at home.

**Social:** There was general agreement that the pandemic and lockdowns have contributed to worsened conditions for girls and young women. The cessation of their education, confinement to home under COVID-19 restrictions, and reduced social and official intervention, has apparently erased the gains of recent years and brought about a return to the view of daughters as a burden that will ultimately leave the family.

**Gender-based Violence:** Many NGOs have reported an increase in child marriage and forced marriage, trafficking of girls for sex and labor, and domestic and sexual violence. NGOs have noted that COVID-19 confinement makes it difficult for girls and women to access hotlines and other sources that otherwise might help them, while many simply don't know these sources exist or do not fully understand their rights. At the same time, protection mechanisms have been less responsive and although newspapers have reported spikes in child marriages and domestic and sexual violence, including incest, the official reporting of violations has been limited. While the Internet has been the way to continue education, keep NGOs connected to their clients, and maintain contact with friends and family, there have also been increased cyber crimes. In addition to scams and the hacking of personal data, girls and young women have faced sexual exploitation on the Internet.

**Health:** Many of the NGOs contacted work in villages that lack adequate bathing facilities and toilets. While this is not a new issue, it became acute with COVID-19 when hygiene, especially thorough hand washing, was necessary to prevent spread of the disease. Sanitary napkins, expensive and not always easy to obtain, became scarcer with lockdowns. COVID-19 and government imposed restrictions of movement have created a climate of fear and uncertainty, exacerbating already existing mental health issues and creating new ones. By June and July there was some hope of returning to at least a 'new normal' in the last quarter of the year but by late August it was clear the pandemic would continue to disrupt and take lives for months ahead. For families with little or no savings, survival has been difficult and many have sold what little property or assets they had. Economic hardship and stress have resulted in depression and suicides. Among adolescents, acute depression and the inability to access education or help have resulted in increased suicide attempts. Unfortunately, these youngsters and their parents seldom seek help since mental illness remains a taboo topic with little media or government attention to the matter.

Also impacted are those suffering from chronic illnesses. For example, regular treatment and supply of routine medicines for TB patients has almost come to an end as the entire focus of the government health infrastructures has moved towards Coronavirus.

## **THE WORK OF NGOS UNDER COVID-19**

In March, in order to comply with government-imposed lockdowns, NGOs had to close their offices, halt their fieldwork, and cease educational and skill development programs. Some have not yet resumed operations, while others began to work from home, organize on-line meetings, and devise new ways of carrying on their activities. However, not all staff had the resources to work from home and the spottiness of Internet capabilities as well as the fact that many of their clients did not have smart phones interrupted both projects and communication.

Almost all the NGOs that continued to function turned their attention to creating awareness of COVID-19, educating communities about precautions and quarantining, and engaging in relief measures. NGOs that worked with adolescent girls and young women involved them in efforts to educate their communities, address the myths in circulation, and make and distribute masks.

Along with basic health information about how to avoid getting ill, the NGOs informed people about how to quarantine. More than one NGO worked to get smart phones into the hands of girls they had worked with and although they had some success, this was not an option for all NGOs.

As noted by many NGOs, the girls they had been working with came from families that depended heavily on family members who had migrated for work. As their fathers, brothers, and sisters returned home, they and their families were in desperate need of food and support. Depending on the community, girls were involved in relief efforts. In some cases, girls helped pack relief kits, in others, they distributed relief. One NGO involved young women in the preparation of food that was distributed as cooked meals. Especially creative was the decision of NGOs to train volunteers to identify vulnerable families most affected by the pandemic in their villages so they could be the first to be given help.

Because the NGOs were acutely aware of the health issues faced by the girls they had worked with, they knew menstrual health was an issue. Many NGOs reported paying specific attention to the need for sanitary napkins at this time and added them to their hygiene and wash relief packages with information about how to deal with menstruation.

Since gendered violence persisted and even increased, many NGOs devised awareness campaigns about domestic violence, forced marriage and child marriage, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, and laws on social media and worked to promote information about hotlines and helplines.

Reaching out to the girls who had been in their programs, NGOs became aware of the ways they had been cut off from any education. NGOs reported that education was often a priority for their clients who wanted to go to school but lacked access to on-line instruction. Even if they could connect, as first-generation learners, they were unable to ask their parents for help and support. And, given the immediate need for food to sustain the family, education was not a major concern for their parents. Some NGOs were especially creative in developing worksheets that would make it possible for girls to continue their education without the internet, enlisting clients with some education to teach those younger than them, arranging for remedial coaching using the internet, and involving privileged children to reach out to these children. One of the serious concerns with education is that examinations have not been held and there is no schedule for schools and colleges to again open.

In an effort to lift the prevailing atmosphere of doom, some organizations have organized performances on Facebook, used social media to publicize heroic girls and women, and encouraged young people to draw, write and paint about their lives in ways that can be shared. Although NGOs have suffered loss of support and had to pivot to continue their activities, a number have been remarkably creative during this difficult time. One of the areas where they have been especially imaginative is in giving additional responsibility to those they have worked

with, and engaging volunteers from the areas where they have worked and from corporations to help in their work. Aware that isolation compounds the problems they have been working to overcome, they have formed WhatsApp groups where girls can share problems and discuss issues. These platforms have also been used to share inspirational and motivational videos, which help the girls fight against situational pressure. NGOs have understood the value of creativity at this time and encouraged poster making and photography, connecting their clients to important international days such as World Nature Conservation Day, and then exhibited the results on websites and Facebook. Other NGOs have encouraged girls to keep Corona virus diaries, which can then be shared. Being alert to mental health issues, NGOs have been able to identify cases that needed help and arrange for tele counseling. Since using the Internet and social media are so important at this time, one NGO organized online workshops so that young people could become digitally empowered and adapt to the new normal.

Listening to the NGOs who reported on their work during COVID-19, one is impressed by the ways in which knowledge and understanding of local issues determined their responses. One NGO set up mobile libraries while another understood that what was most needed was direct aid—cash—for the very vulnerable.

## **ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE**

Although we have not turned the corner in any of the countries where these NGOs work, we will return to a new world when the pandemic is under control. In this new world, it is unclear adolescent girls and young women will participate in traditional schooling to the same extent as they did before COVID-19. However, it is obvious they will be asked to share the burden of supporting the family, and that means they will need skill development, career preparedness, and an understanding of how to migrate safely to cities and other locations where there are jobs. The experience and knowledge of the NGOs who responded to the WFC survey make it clear they should be at the forefront of efforts to design future programs for adolescent girls and young women.



## **APPENDIX – EXAMPLES OF NGO ACTIVITY DURING COVID-19**

### From a Coronavirus Diary

*14 April: Thinking lockdown is over many people came out on roads, some drove around on bikes. (It has been extended to May 3 actually). My family is also talking about going to our village. One of my relatives left to go home in the village. When they went to cross the border, the police arrested them. They were quarantined there itself and tested. There were about 5 vehicles with 40 persons including children and old people. They will have to stay on at the border until May 3.*

*15th April: Today the police van did not visit our area. Noticing that, some people crowded under a tree and played cards and smoked and drank. Some were forming groups to hang out and chat. Some kids also sat there watching all these people. Looked as if there was no lock down.*

### Kids Helping Kids

*Our passionate, dedicated and enthusiastic teachers are finding ways and means to engage the students and their families. Printed worksheets of the regular curriculum, worksheets, which are fun with activities in math, science, and the arts, are keeping the kids engaged and happy.*

*A tenth class student from a private school and a bunch of students from various schools from privileged backgrounds started a programme called CHILDREN FOR CHILDREN. They are coordinating with other schools to bring in innovative methods of engaging our students and assisting our teachers*

### Young People Engage with Their Communities

*Girls and boys were engaged in poster making and photography and their work was exhibited on the NGO website and Facebook page during global campaigns like the World Nature Conservation Day and World Photography Day. As a part of the rapid response to COVID-19, young girls and boys volunteered to identify vulnerable families most affected by the pandemic in their villages and also supported us in distributing dry ration kits to these families. Over 6000 families were given ration kits in the three states.*