

Girls Can't Wait

Understanding the Crucial Role
Local Organizations Play in Protecting Girls
and Providing COVID-19 Relief

a report by
She's the first
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Vulnerable girls risk losing their futures to the COVID-19 crisis.

A global pandemic is a catastrophe on multiple levels, but the impact on girls will be devastating if we don't take quick and decisive action. Rates of domestic violence are already increasing worldwide, as schools are closed and girls remain in their homes and away from support services. We've seen how local epidemics impact girls: Teenage pregnancy increased by 65% in Sierra Leone during Ebola, children reported a universal uptick in violence, and many girls never returned to school when it reopened. **And yet, there is little attention on girl-centered responses to COVID-19, in spite of there being promising actions we can take to avoid a bigger disaster.**

To produce this report, we worked with 33 community-based girls' organizations (CBOs) representing 15,000+ of the most vulnerable girls in East and West Africa, Central America, and South Asia. **These organizations, and the many grassroots organizations like them around the world, are uniquely suited to slow the spread of COVID-19 and ensure the safety of girls in the most vulnerable communities.** This is because girls' organizations have:

- **Trusted access to remote communities** and the ability to leverage educated students and their parents to influence others, to promote healthy behaviors and to disseminate information
- **A gender-sensitive approach**, meaning girls' voices shape the planning and execution of response efforts, to ensure that girls are an integral part of the response plan

What follows is a summary of trends as well as recommendations for time-sensitive next steps, both for CBOs strategizing a response and donors seeking direction.

For more facts, visit
shethfirst.org/covid

TOP CHALLENGES

A global pandemic brings challenges to everyone, but girls disproportionately experience negative consequences:



Food Insecurity

More than 820 million people were food insecure prior to this crisis. Girls who relied on meals at school no longer have them, while securing food and safe water for girls and their families is now more difficult than ever, due to lockdowns, shelter-in-place edicts, supply chain breakdowns, rising costs, and rampant job loss.

64% of CBO leaders fear that girls will engage in transactional sex due to economic stress and lack of resources.



Disruption to Education & Loss of Safe Spaces

Schools are closed in 192 countries, a situation we know can create disastrous results for the more than 750 million girls affected. Girls are already at a disadvantage in low- and middle-income countries. Closed schools mean more girls will experience higher rates of abuse, female genital mutilation, and child marriage, and they are less likely to restart their educational careers.

70% of CBO leaders worry girls won't return to school; 100% fear teen pregnancy rates will rise.



Girls are Harder to Reach

Girls who lived in dormitories near their schools are returning home to rural areas, or their families are relocating to more distant villages, believing it to be safer. This makes it incredibly difficult to reach girls, increasing the need for a quick response and a deep network in rural areas. For girls without internet, phones, or a network, the challenge is even greater.

79% of CBO leaders are concerned about potential domestic abuse in girls' homes.



"COVID-19 doesn't obey border laws. Even if most countries succeed in slowing the disease over the next few months, the virus could return if the pandemic remains severe enough elsewhere."

BILL GATES

HOW CBOs ARE PIVOTING TO HELP

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS DIDN'T WAIT TO RESPOND.

They immediately reacted to the crisis by **addressing food and water insecurity**, **distributing health and hygiene information**, and keeping **psychosocial support** for girls at the top of their agenda.

DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD & WATER

While many girls' organizations are not set up to address food insecurity, this crisis has forced the issue to the top of their agenda. In **Sierra Leone**, Project PIKIN has created care packages with food, water, hygiene items, and cleaning supplies for students' families, as long as they stay within the limits of Freetown (this measure also keeps more girls within range of the program).

Kopila Valley School in **Nepal** is working with local farmers to source food and is coordinating with the local police force to create pick-up locations for families. Many programs already have existing food supply chains for their kitchens. As food insecurity grows, CBOs have the opportunity to use their suppliers in support of their students or the surrounding community.



GIRLS AS EDUCATORS

CBOs recognize that educated girls can be a powerful asset in public health initiatives. MAIA, a CBO in **Guatemala**, works with girls to 1) educate their own families and communities and 2) transmit community-level information back to the organization. In this way, the organization is able to track real-time challenges during the pandemic, and the girls are able to translate basic health, hygiene, and safety protocols into indigenous languages.

In **The Gambia**, Starfish International filmed skits, performed by mentors, demonstrating safe distances and hygiene practices in a culturally-relevant manner, which students share with their own networks via social media and phone.

Organizations like Kusi Kawsay, a program for indigenous youth in **Peru**, sent flyers and materials home with students prior to social isolation.

Many organizations worldwide have created new materials in print or via social media, to ensure timely information reaches girls and community members quickly and in local languages from a trusted source.

HOW CBOs ARE PIVOTING TO HELP



CONTINUING EDUCATION

As schools across the globe close, education CBOs have worked to fill the gap with take-home workbooks, texts, and exercises. Some organizations have begun working via phone to continue services.

The Girls Livelihoods and Mentoring Initiative (GLAMI) in **Tanzania** began a weekly texting schedule between mentors and students on three key themes: 1) COVID-19 support, 2) study skills at home, and 3) how to stay calm at home. They also set up a toll-free number where girls, at no cost, can reach someone 24/7 who will be able to direct them to the closest place they can find help.

Phone trees, which provided a way for organizations to check in with all girls in their programs and to help girls maintain social connections of their own, are now being used to support communities at large. Other CBOs hold regular check-ins via phone with parents and assign weekly themed projects and assignments for students.

BEST PRACTICES

CBOs looking to respond to the COVID-19 crisis can look to the above examples for guidance. They can also:

- **Ensure that girls have access to phones** as soon as possible, along with phone credit or another way to reach program representatives. Check in with them once per week, and determine if you're able to set up a mentorship or education program via phone with supplementary printed materials. Specifically work to incorporate ongoing sexual and reproductive health and rights education.
- **Equip girls with emergency phone numbers**, and create a plan with your team for how to respond should one arise. **Remind girls of their rights**, including their right to safety.
- **Distribute health and hygiene information** to community members and to girls. This can be in the form of videos translated to local languages, skits, or printed materials. You are a trusted leader in the community and can use that status to ensure more people stay safe, especially girls.
- **Address food and water insecurity**. This can be done through existing supply chains where possible, community food sharing programs, or via care packages left at homes or town centers. If you decide to hand out physical materials, include soap and menstrual hygiene products.

CONCLUSION

Countries with advanced economies are unlocking resources to help the poorest citizens survive COVID-19 and the economic downturn. But for girls living in low-income countries, there is no bailout, and they have everything to lose. The best immediate course of action is to invest in grassroots organizations who can react in real time to these pressing needs. Their deep roots within communities allow them to counteract gut-wrenching effects of this pandemic and prevent the spread of the virus.

As was widely recognized prior to COVID-19, protecting girls' rights directly impacts the long-term stability of our economy and climate. It would be the setback of a lifetime to ignore this strategy.

It is imperative to prioritize girls to make entire communities more resilient. In addition to the above recommendations for CBOs, we suggest the following complementary efforts:

- **Funders** should prioritize girl-centered organizations. And as a best practice during times of emergency, they should also disburse grants early and allow flexible use of funds, so CBOs can adapt to a changing landscape quickly
- **Citizens** should consider joining monthly giving programs to give nonprofits predictable income
- **Governments and world leaders** must prioritize funding for gender issues, including girls' and women's health and reproductive rights



She's the First COVID-19 Response Fund

During this crisis, our top priority is that girl-centered CBOs have the resources they need to ensure the progress made for girls globally isn't wiped out by a pandemic. To that end, we have disbursed sub-grants early, which continue to be flexible for partners to use as they deem necessary. We've also launched the **SHE'S THE FIRST COVID-19 RESPONSE FUND**, specifically created to get funding to local organizations across the globe — and fast. We're appealing to donors and foundations to work with us to provide girl-centered CBOs with everything they need to safeguard girls and their communities.

THIS FUND WILL FACILITATE THREE MAIN AREAS OF PROGRAMMING:



Food & Water
Supplies



Community Education on
Health & Hygiene



Technology
Solutions

Notes

1. Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone, UNDP
2. Children's Ebola Recovery Assessment: Sierra Leone, Save the Children
3. COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response, UNESCO
4. Food Security and COVID-19, a World Bank brief

Participating organizations were surveyed online and orally to find these results. They include:

MAIA	The Helpmate Foundation
Kusi Kawsay	Kakuma Vocational Center
Sacred Valley Project	Women Concern
Akili Dada	Eagles Youth Development Initiative
Selamta Family Project	SEGA
Arlington Academy of Hope	Hope for Lives - Uganda
Starfish International	Girl Child Network Sierra Leone
Project PIKIN	Il'laramatak Community Concerns
GLAMI / AfricAid	Time + Tide Foundation
Project Education South Sudan	The Kilgoris Project
Shanti Bhavan	ANEG Foundation
BlinkNow Foundation	Global Learning for Sustainability
Give Hope Uganda	Initiative for Transformative Change and Development
United Action for Children	Sisterschools Digital Exchange Programme
Sukaar Welfare Organization	Adiro Lab
Able-Uganda	Future for Marginalised Community (FUMACO)
Growth Through Learning	
Youth Networks for Positive Change	

