

COVID-19 and ADOLESCENT GIRLS: Ensuring the U.S. Government's Response Prioritizes the Needs of Child Brides and Girls at Risk of Child Marriage

Background:

The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic in many developing countries and fragile and conflict-affected contexts is still unclear, but we can expect—and indeed are already seeing—significant impacts for populations who are already marginalized, particularly girls and young women. For example, there have already been anecdotal reports from Girls Not Brides USA members that in some contexts girls who are out of schools are experiencing an increase in FGM and being prepared for child marriage as a result of COVID-19 and anticipated impacts. Girls and young women face underlying gender and age-related barriers and discrimination to accessing essential services and information, support, safety, and ensuring their rights are protected. The COVID-19 crisis will exacerbate these existing vulnerabilities and result in both immediate and long-term impacts for girls at a devastating level.



Globally, 1 in 5 girls around the world are married before the age of 18. Child marriage is a critical issue in stable contexts, but in times of crisis, the risks are magnified. While gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage in both stable and crisis contexts, often in times of

crisis, families see child marriage as a way to cope with economic hardships, food insecurity, and to protect girls from increased risks of violence. Disruptions in education caused by crisis also increases vulnerability to child marriage, as families may see girls' future opportunities already limited without continued access to safe, quality education and learning opportunities.



Child marriage has devastating lifelong consequences for girls. Married girls often drop out of school early or are forced to leave, face disproportionate risks of intimate partner violence (IPV), and commonly become mothers before they are physically or emotionally ready. Adolescent pregnancy is the leading cause of death among adolescent girls globally, and 90 percent of births to adolescent girls occur within a child marriage. Public health crises and other slow and sudden onset emergencies exacerbate these risks. During the 2014-2016 West African Ebola outbreak, girls faced a rise in sexual violence, and girls in Sierra Leone experienced a 65 percent increase in adolescent pregnancy rates. Following the crisis, pregnant girls and girls who were already mothers were also not allowed to go back to school, which left them more vulnerable to child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence throughout their lives.

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Evidence has proven that education plays a crucial protective function for girls, as girls who are in school are less likely to be married as children, and less likely to experience life-threatening adolescent pregnancy. Of concern, out of the total population of students enrolled in education globally, UNESCO estimates that over 89 percent are currently out of school because of COVID-19 closures. This represents 1.54 billion children and youth enrolled in school or university, including nearly 743 million girls that are now out of school. Although alternative learning opportunities may be available in some contexts, girls face significant gender-related barriers to accessing such limited opportunities, including increased caregiving responsibilities in the home as younger siblings are also out of school and family members may be sick, harmful gender norms that prioritize boy's education over girls', and the ongoing global digital gender gap. In parts of the world where gaps between girls' and boys' access to education are significant (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia), girls who stay home from school are at particularly high risk of not returning. With the uncertainty around when schools will reopen

and if girls will be able to return to school after a crisis, marriage may seem like the best option to secure a girl's safety or economic stability.

Household stress and economic pressures contribute to increased intimate partner and domestic violence, and restrictions on movement may reduce access of those experiencing violence in the home to essential protection services. Emerging data shows that since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and particularly domestic violence, has intensified. In China for example, the number of domestic violence cases reported to the local police tripled in February compared to the previous year. In France, reports of domestic violence have increased by 30% since the lockdown on March 17. Increased cases of domestic violence and demand for emergency shelter have also been reported in Argentina, Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States (according to UN Women). While quarantine helps stop the spread of the virus, it also means survivors have no safe spaces to escape abuse. Child brides are statistically more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women who were married as adults, and the barriers they face to getting help will be more pronounced because of unequal power dynamics.

Adolescent girls living in humanitarian settings, including conflict-affected or forced displacement contexts, are already at increased risk of child marriage and the COVID-19 crisis will magnify these existing vulnerabilities. Nine out of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage are fragile or conflict-affected countries. In humanitarian contexts, girls are more likely to be unaccompanied or separated from their families





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or caregivers, or even caring for other children, both related and unrelated to them, in “make-shift” girl-headed households. Girls living in humanitarian contexts often do not have adequate and sustainable shelters, increasing their risks of experiencing gender-based violence. Education is already unlikely an option since data has shown that adolescent girls living in conflict contexts are 90 percent more likely to be out of school than their counterparts in stable contexts, and digital connectivity, particularly while on the move, is difficult or impossible.

As humanitarian systems respond to this new threat, a necessary focus on containment means that girls living in these contexts will likely have reduced access to essential and often life-saving child protection, gender-based violence, education, and health services. Humanitarian support for girls' needs is already drastically underfunded. According to global funding data, gender-based violence accounts for only 0.12 percent of all humanitarian funding. And lack of comprehensive sex- and age-disaggregated data, means that girls as a group are often invisible or under-prioritized in humanitarian response plans. Data on child marriage is rarely collected at all in conflict and displacement contexts, meaning that prevention and response needs go unknown and unmet.

Recommendations:

COVID-19 will magnify existing social and structural inequalities and adolescent girls and young women will face unique risks in the wake of this global pandemic. The U.S. Government should adopt measures to prevent, mitigate, and respond to the disproportionate effects of this pandemic on girls and young women. We urge the U.S. Government to take the following steps to promote the health, safety and human

rights of girls during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery, including through:

- 1) **Ensuring that all phases of the U.S. global response to COVID-19 are informed by a gender equality and social inclusion analysis** so that programs and policies do not reproduce or perpetuate harmful gender norms, discriminatory practices, or inequalities;
- 2) **Systematically collecting, analyzing and using sex- and age-disaggregated data** to increase understanding of how COVID-19 impacts women and girls differently, including girls who are at risk of child marriage and already married girls;
- 3) **Increasing and prioritizing efforts to safely and meaningfully consult with adolescent girls about their needs, priorities, and solutions during containment, response, and recovery efforts**, including through safe and appropriate use of technology; supporting girls' civic and political capacity, knowledge, and skills, through both medium and long-term recovery interventions; and amplifying girls' priorities and experiences in the public sphere to shape norms and activities related to the crisis
- 4) **Ensuring that supplemental funds to respond to the pandemic globally are gender-sensitive, flexible, and address the immediate and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the health, safety, education and opportunities of girls and young women globally**, particularly girls at risk of child marriage and already married girls. Specifically, response programming should:

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- a. **Recognize violence prevention and protection, and sexual and reproductive health services and information as essential**, including adolescent-friendly maternal healthcare, and prioritize support to local women’s civil society organizations, girl-focused groups and networks, and other frontline responders;
- b. **Ensure the prioritization and funding of adolescent-friendly gender-based violence prevention, mitigation, and response services** and information commensurate with increased need;
- c. **Address gender-and-age-based barriers to accessing health services**, including adolescent friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services;
- d. **Address economic shocks, which may push families toward negative coping mechanisms like child marriage**, including through supporting innovative and context-appropriate social protection mechanisms, such as cash-based programming, where appropriate, and gender-sensitive provision of food and other supplies to ease economic stress; and
- e. **Support the provision of equitable, safe and quality education**, including comprehensive sexuality education, and support efforts to remove barriers to adolescent girls’ access to education. When schools can safely reopen, girls—including pregnant girls, married girls and young mothers— should be fully supported to return and continue learning.
- f. **Provide a humanitarian exemption for funding to UNFPA**. UNFPA’s presence in many of the worst-affected communities and its expertise in preventing and responding to gender-based violence, including child marriage through its joint UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, makes it a key actor in ensuring critical supplies get where they are needed, including in humanitarian settings.

