World Association of Girl Guides & Girl Scouts
Girl Powered Nutrition COVID-19 Position Statement

April 2020

No girl should be held back by poor nutrition

Gender inequality can be a cause as well as an effect of malnutrition. Currently, girls are more likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies than boys are, for reasons including reproductive biology, low social status, poverty, and lack of education. Sociocultural traditions and disparities in household work patterns can also increase girl’s chances of being malnourished.

Improving nutrition early on in life helps girls and young women to reach their full potential and break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition. Second only to the first two years of a child’s life, during adolescence girls experience the most rapid rate of physical growth, gaining up to 50% of their physical weight and 20% of their physical height.

While women and girls are disproportionately affected by malnutrition, they are also the critical actors to finding lasting solutions. However, there is little disaggregated data about the progress being made on improving the nutritional outcomes of adolescent girls.

With 2020 being a critical year for young women and girls' nutrition, the COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to the progress that is being made. This year marks the halfway point to the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition and the year of the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit, both at risk of not being fulfilled. 2020 also marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, of which we’ve seen little progress on ‘Women in Poverty’, one of the 12 critical areas of concern identified. With the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW64) and Generation Equality Forum postponed, young women and girls are being left behind.

How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting girls’ nutrition?

During the COVID-19 global pandemic crisis, access to food and good nutrition is fundamental in ensuring the health and wellbeing of girls across the world. We have long understood that undernutrition compromises immune systems, making bodies more vulnerable to virus attacks and communicable diseases and less able to recover from sickness.
Girls are disproportionately affected by malnutrition. Impacts on a girls’ nutrition early on in life will lead to a cycle of malnutrition through puberty and adolescence, and affect young women’s abilities to reach their full potential.

Malnutrition in young women and girls is amplified by this pandemic, which will have long-lasting effects on healthcare, economies and food systems.

In several countries, imports and exports have stopped, leaving many unable to afford the rising costs of purchasing food or access nutritious food at all. Young women are often the last to eat in their families, and eat the smallest portions due to cultures and gender norms, even less in times of crisis. With a global food shortage, young women and girls will be eating smaller portions, less regularly.

With women often being the natural food handlers in the home, the responsibility and consequences of coping with limited global food availability will fall to them. With many people out of work, this affects their ability to purchase food. As women often do not control the finances in a household, they may not be able to purchase the food they need for their families to remain healthy.

With more young girls in lock-down at home, there is also the greater risk of domestic violence, abuse, mental and physical health problems to name just a few. Economic stress on families due to the outbreak can put girls at greater risk of exploitation, child labour and gender-based violence. It has been reported young women are at risk of early-age arranged marriages in return for money and food supplies. When families are facing food poverty, it’s often the girls who are neglected.

The COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be reported at scale in some of the most impoverished part of the world, but we know that we are on the verge of not just a global health pandemic, but a global food and nutrition crisis, where young women and girls will be a group most at risk.

Many countries are encouraging self-production of food to sustain their food supplies. Longer term, there is the risk that agricultural production will be impacted, with consequent longer-lasting and deeper impacts on food availability and food prices. Food shortages and contaminated produce will prevail due to lockdown restrictions and sickness of workers. The strain put on the supply chain due to increased demand for food items will result in swelling markets and price hikes.

It is estimated that a further 265 million will be added to the 821 million people already declared chronically hungry around the world by the end of 2020. As women and girls represent 60% of the global hunger statistics, a further 159 million are at risk.
Recommendations

Urgent action is needed from Governments to avoid the long-term and large-scale impact the pandemic will have on our most vulnerable populations, particularly those at risk of malnutrition or who are malnourished in any form.

- Take steps to ensure everyone has sufficient access to nutritious food, particularly those in vulnerable groups and those who are now considered vulnerable due to COVID-19.

- Ensure that nutrition remains a top priority in health systems, applying a gendered lens to the COVID-19 response, upholding girls’ human rights in health, recognising the disproportionate impact many issues have on young women and girls, particularly in developing countries.

- Transform discriminatory social norms, stereotypes and practices around malnutrition through legislative reforms, awareness-raising and media campaigns and educational programmes for both boys and girls. Address harmful norms and perceptions that regard girls as inferior to boys and prioritise boys’ access to food.

- Disaggregate national data under each Sustainable Development Goal target by age, sex and other categories bearing in mind the intersecting nature of inequality so that progress for all girls is adequately captured. Recognise girls and young women as a distinct demographic group with unique nutritional needs.

- Recognise intersections in cross-cutting issues that disproportionately affect young women and girls e.g. nutrition, gender based violence and body autonomy. Protect girls from early marriage and pregnancy, which have further negative consequences on their access to food, among other resources.

- Invest in increasing understanding of healthy nutrition for girls at all levels. Maintain and scale-up investments in nutrition programming and national and international policies, saving lives through a holistic and multi-sectoral approach with a special focus on adolescent nutrition.

- Take steps to consult young women and girls in forming solutions to policy and practice. Increase their involvement in decision making at all levels in both public and private domain.