

WAGGGS POSITION PAPER

THE NEEDS OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 presents an unprecedented challenge in the lives of girls and young women around the world. This global pandemic is exposing the existing inequalities across our societies and highlights the specific risks and vulnerabilities that girls and young women face. These deep-rooted social norms and values are barriers to girls living safe, healthy and full lives.

One of the largest changes that COVID-19 has brought about is restrictions on movement and gatherings. With these restrictions come a loss of community, support and safety that many girls and women rely on. Around the world, schools and organisations providing services have been closed. At the same time, community groups have been paused, many are laid off from work, and we are not able to gather with family and friends. This increased isolation and economic uncertainty poses a severe risk for girls and women.

SAFETY OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

As the largest voluntary movement for girls and young women, WAGGGS believes in a world where all girls are valued. We seek to create a safe and supportive environment in which girls can develop their potential, free from judgement, stereotyping and violence. We are working through our programmes to listen to the unique challenges girls around the world are facing at this time, adapting to better serve them and advocating for the changes needed to address the structural barriers to their wellbeing.

- **GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

In normal times, gender-based violence carries severe risks for women and girls. Today, measures being put in place by governments to address the current outbreak are making it harder, and in some cases impossible, for girls to access protection from violence at home and in their communities.

Since the start of the global pandemic, many countries have been in some form of lockdown in an effort to control the virus, restricted to their homes with very little movement. For many women and girls this also means they are confined with an abuser with no escape. According to the [United Nations Global Study on Homicide](#),

every year gender-based violence affects more than 1 billion women worldwide and in 2017, it is estimated that globally 87,000 women were killed by their intimate partner or family member. For girls, particularly adolescent girls, staying at home during the pandemic increases the risks of being subjected to domestic violence and abuse.

Alongside these severe risks, girls and women often have less autonomy and decision-making power than boys and men. Combined with the compounding effects of economic uncertainty, this could lead to girls being forced into early marriage, deprived of the opportunity to return to school, burdened with additional chores while ill and generally less likely to have their own needs met.

We have already heard from girls in Uganda participating in the WAGGGS Girls as Drivers for Change project. During this period of lockdown, many young women have been asked to work with their family and as a result may not be allowed to return to school, whilst some face early forced marriage.

In 2017, WAGGGS ran a #GirlsAreUnsafe campaign to mark 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence, which asked girls to draw and share the places where they felt most unsafe. The hundreds of drawings and data received were a stark reminder of the daily reality for girls across the world. Places where we assume girls should feel safe, such as homes and hospitals, were pictured as the places they felt most unsafe.

'STOP THE VIOLENCE' is our global flagship campaign to end violence against girls and women through advocacy, education, awareness raising, community action and research. Though the ability to deliver programs and training in person is limited, we continue to offer support to our Member Organisations delivering the Stop the Violence Campaign through virtual tools to raise awareness about the issue and offer support for women affected in their countries. An example of action being taken is the Girl Guides of Sri Lanka creating a social media campaign to share helpline services for victims of domestic abuse.

This work is more important than ever. As we navigate the impact of COVID-19 on girls and women we are supporting our Member Organisations to adapt their national campaigns to meet the needs of girls and women under the current circumstances.

- **SAFETY ONLINE**

Access to information through the internet and opportunities for online learning are now a critical part of how we stay connected and continue to develop. Unfortunately, online spaces are also powerful tools used to intensify the abuse of women and girls. Our 2020 research in partnership with the [Web Foundation](#) found that half of the girls and young women surveyed have experienced online abuse, including

threatening messages, sexual harassment and the sharing of private photos and videos without their permission.

On the flip side, nearly two billion girls and women across the globe have no access to the World Wide Web. When we remove access to online spaces provided through schools, community organisations and internet cafes, they are further deprived of opportunities to learn, earn and have their voices heard.

In this time when many Girl Guide and Girl Scout groups are moving their activities for girls online, we are gathering their advice and good practices to support safe online spaces for girls to stay connected during COVID-19 and exploring innovative ways to reach girls that do not have access.

We aim to support girls to navigate the internet safely and through the WAGGGS' Surf Smart programme we are delivering a non-formal education curriculum designed to inform young people about how to connect positively online, protect themselves from online threats and respect their rights and reputation on the internet.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

The health and social impacts of COVID-19 have been devastating, as have the economic impacts on the most vulnerable. As families lose sources of income they must adapt, and unfortunately this often happens in ways that hamper girls' ability to live up to their full potential.

- **NUTRITION**

Already, we know that 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. Malnutrition in young women and girls is likely to be amplified by this pandemic, which will have long-lasting effects on healthcare, economies and food systems. 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.

In the WAGGGS Girl Powered Nutrition (GPN) programme, delivered in partnership with Nutrition International, we work with Member Organisations to ensure girls can access good nutrition. Through the GPN badge activity pack, girls develop the skills and knowledge required to improve their own nutrition and take action to improve nutrition in their local community. We also support girls to develop campaigns and advocate on a national and global level to stop the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition.

- **MENSTRUAL HYGIENE**

The current pandemic highlights and further exacerbates the menstruation-related challenges many women and girls face around the world. During a period of restricted social interaction many of the places where girls can access critical information about menstruation are closed. Routine healthcare services are reduced. A lack of adequate information about this normal biological process breeds fear and shame. Lockdowns intensify the impact of household level taboos and stigmas making it more difficult to manage menstruation without shame and discomfort, often in confined spaces.

The social taboos combined with the economic impact of COVID-19 mean that families are less likely to spend money on items that are necessities for girls, such as menstrual hygiene products. Disrupted supply chains drive prices up, making menstrual products unaffordable for many. Furthermore, menstruating girls and women face inadequate access to toilets and water, and those needing to use communal facilities may be at greater risk for contracting COVID-19. Lack of proper menstrual health management leads to greater risks of infections, discomfort, and can have serious detrimental impact on mental wellbeing.

Periods don't stop for pandemics. Our Global U-Report poll with young women told us that 1 in 4 girls are finding it harder to manage their menstruation during COVID-19 with 50% struggling to get menstrual hygiene products. It is critical that after the COVID-19 crisis urgent action is taken to address the ongoing global crisis in menstrual health and hygiene.

The WAGGGS Red Pride Programme uses an activity pack - Rosie's World - to teach girls what menstruation is and how to manage it safely, hygienically and with confidence. By training girls on good menstrual hygiene management, they are equipped to fully and equally participate in society. After completing the pack, girls share their knowledge through peer-to-peer Take Action projects, with the aim of educating more girls, whilst simultaneously reducing taboo and stigma in the community.

- **BODY IMAGE AND MENTAL WELLBEING**

The growing increase of body dissatisfaction and negative self-image continues to pose a threat to the advancement of girls and young women. It has been shown that, globally, the April to June period already poses a challenging time for those with body image concerns due to social pressures around changing seasons. However, isolation and national lockdowns exacerbate a number of potentially already present triggers for young women and girls when it comes to mental and bodily well-being.

A peak in loneliness:

Terms such as isolation and social distancing highlight the lifestyle changes that have forced individuals to remove themselves from crucial social interactions that would usually maintain positive mental and emotional wellbeing. Research has long demonstrated loneliness as a strong predictor of disordered eating. Feeling disconnected from others can lead to increased fixation with body image.

Increased social and political commentary on bodies and body image in relation to lockdown measures:

We have seen the emergence of harmful social and political messaging with a direct correlation to lockdown and isolation measures. Popular terms such as gaining “The Quarantine 15 [pounds]” and “the COVID-19 [pounds]” are viral terms steeped in sizeism, which perpetuate stress and anxiety about the shift in eating habits. In some cases, a lack of access to balanced food groups may trigger long-term negative impacts on body image, as well as physical well-being.

Girls and women face pressures from authority, too. Official lockdown advice from Malaysia’s women’s ministry highlights the pervasiveness of this issue. Guidelines issued by the ministry directed women to make sure they wore makeup at home, and to avoid loose and casual clothes in order to maintain a “happy” home.

Disruption to daily routines and traditional coping mechanisms:

Body image and body anxiety preoccupation increases with an upheaval of daily routine. Isolation and lockdown have created a number of variables contributing to an increase of eating disorders in some parts of the globe - including anxiety around food preparation and general anxieties about the global crisis.

Young people have more time to fixate, and appearance has become the centre focus of online social comparison. We have seen an increase of diet and exercise advice as to remedy the closure of spaces such as gymnasiums, which - used correctly - can support good nutrition and physical health, but can also increase concern with body and weight.



CALL TO ACTION

Faced with a changing world, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we – as the largest voluntary movement for girls and young women worldwide - call upon governments, institutions and decision-makers to address prevalent inequalities and gender-based violence through the following actions:

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

- Fully fund frontline women’s organisations providing services to women and girls suffering violence. This includes supporting non-profit organisations and youth services working with girls and young women to ensure their sustainability and capacity to support girls and young women in the new landscape created by COVID-19.
- Provide information in the best accessible way at local and national level on how women and girls experiencing violence can get help.
- Adopt, strengthen and enforce laws and policies on violence against women and girls. Do not allow perpetrators to walk away with impunity.
- Emphasise the importance of supporting girls’ right to education by ensuring that girls are given additional support to return to school safely
- Prioritise supportive policies and investment to address inequalities in access to digital equipment and accessible educational opportunities particularly for girls and vulnerable young people.
- Invest in data collection efforts to understand the nature and scale of violence against girls and track progress. Only 41 per cent of countries regularly produce such data, and data on girls is particularly limited.
- Challenge harmful social norms, by working with faith leaders and communities, and organising public awareness and education campaigns that address inequality and condemn violence. Legislation alone is not enough.
- Integrate education on gender equality and healthy relationships as part of school curricula.
- Meet the needs of girl survivors of violence by providing services, programmes and responses that take into account the best interests of the child.

NUTRITION

- 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.
- Transform discriminatory social norms, stereotypes and practices around malnutrition, applying a gendered lens to the COVID-19 response through legislative reforms, maintaining nutrition as a priority in health systems.

- Address harmful norms and perceptions that regard girls as inferior to boys and prioritise boys' access to food and recognising the disproportionate impact many issues have on young women and girls, particularly in developing countries.
- 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.

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

- At least maintain current levels of investment in menstrual health and hygiene during the pandemic. After the COVID-19 crisis passes, urgently increase investment in menstrual health and hygiene education to ensure girls face reduced barriers in re-entering schools and wider society.
- Challenge harmful myths, social taboo and stigma by investing in girl-led community action and advocacy work. Actively engage all stakeholder of influence in this work, teachers, parents, religious leaders, community leaders, men and boys. Focus locally on the issues girls want to change and ask decision makers for tangible changes.
- At a National level, conduct girl-led advocacy campaigns that focus on specific policy change or budget allocation. New Zealand has in 2020 announced free menstruation products for all girls in school. Advocate to other governments to follow.
- Include specific budget lines for menstrual health in all youth focused initiatives in addition to mainstreaming it into cross-cutting plans.
- Speak out yearly on Menstrual Hygiene Day, 28 May, to raise awareness of the issues and press decision makers for action in every country.

BODY IMAGE AND MENTAL WELLBEING

- Support young people to access resources to promote positive mental wellbeing and self-image to build a more positive environment.

- Regulate media and social media, to ensure it promotes positive online and digital practices, and actively enforce clearer signposting to support young people on their platforms.
- In response to the closure of formal education institutions across the globe, governments need to support the circulation of Non-Formal Education curriculum tools that address mental wellbeing issues.

Girls' and young women's involvement in decision making at all levels, in both the public and private domain must be prioritised by National governments across the globe. Governments need to take steps to consult young women and girls to inform and shape policies and practices.

ABOUT THE WORLD ASSOCIATION OF GIRL GUIDES AND GIRL SCOUTS

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) is the largest voluntary organisation for girls and young women in the world. We are the umbrella organisation for 10 million Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in 150 countries and we understand the issues that matter to girls because they tell us. Around the world, girls and young women face barriers, discrimination and inequality but we believe that every girl has the potential to change this and we empower and equip them to do so.

We are here for every girl and any girl.