

Life skills for adolescent girls in the COVID-19 pandemic

Girls'
Education
Challenge



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Life skills for adolescent girls in the COVID-19 pandemic

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This briefing offers guidance on how to align the design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of essential life skills programming for girls. It provides a life skills framework for implementers to consider how best to adapt their programming interventions under the unique conditions created by COVID-19.

Foreword

As adolescent girl programmes around the world adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic, life skills programming remains a critical part of girls' education. It is important to consider *how* to adapt programmes in terms of the content and the delivery approach in order to help girls navigate the added risks they may now be facing.

There is substantial evidence that life skills programming for adolescent girls contributes to:

- psychosocial, health, economic and learning outcomes¹
- reduced exposure to gender-based violence (GBV)²
- personal wellbeing³
- greater social, political, and economic inclusion⁴
- postponed marriage and greater agency in family planning.⁵

The promotion and acquisition of life skills is an important element in preparing highly marginalised adolescent girls for their transition into adulthood. This is particularly important in contexts where access to appropriate information, guidance, role models and services is limited.

Life skills in crises and the evidence gaps

The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting lives globally through the direct health effects of the virus, and the profound economic and social consequences of government responses to curb its spread. We know from previous emergencies and economic crises that adolescent girls face increased and heightened risks across a range of domains.⁶

In previous crises, adolescent girls have been exposed to a rise in sexual and gender-based violence and unwanted pregnancies. For example, there was a heightened risk of HIV infection among adolescent girls and young women during the 2008–09 global food, fuel and financial crisis.⁷ During the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, there were approximately 18,000 additional teenage pregnancies. The rise in teenage pregnancy is attributed to several causes, including increased sexual exploitation, sexual violence and transactional sex, as well as a rise in consensual sexual activity and enhanced barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health.⁸

Learning from previous crises also demonstrates that girls experience reduced access to education and increased drop out rates post crisis.⁹ Compared to the global average, girls in crisis-affected countries are half as likely to progress to secondary school.¹⁰

Life skills, delivered alongside other interventions that support social networks, relationship building, and economic opportunities, show a promising protective function for girls from physical violence, early marriage, and early pregnancy during emergencies.¹¹ However, evidence is limited due to the lack of systematic programming and evaluations on girls' life skills in crises.¹² Thus, there is a need for more focused programming for adolescent girls in crises and efforts to build the evidence base around what works.

The immediate need during COVID-19

The reality of COVID-19 home quarantine requires governments and other actors to identify different approaches to continue to help girls to develop life skills during their time of increased vulnerability. Since April, over 100 countries have instituted a full or partial lockdown.¹³ As a result, best practice approaches commonly used to develop girls' life skills during emergencies, such as girls' clubs and safe spaces, can be challenging to implement.

To support girls during this crisis there is a need to understand the changing realities of adolescent girls' lives and design alternative approaches and relevant content that can be delivered effectively during lockdown.

The Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) life skills framework

The GEC, GAGE (Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence) and the Brookings Institution have jointly developed a life skills framework to provide a common approach to design and measurement across a range of different marginalised girls' life skills projects. It is currently being used to guide the GEC's *Leave No Girl Behind* project's baseline evaluation design. It is used in this paper to frame the ways in which life skills interventions can be adapted during COVID-19.

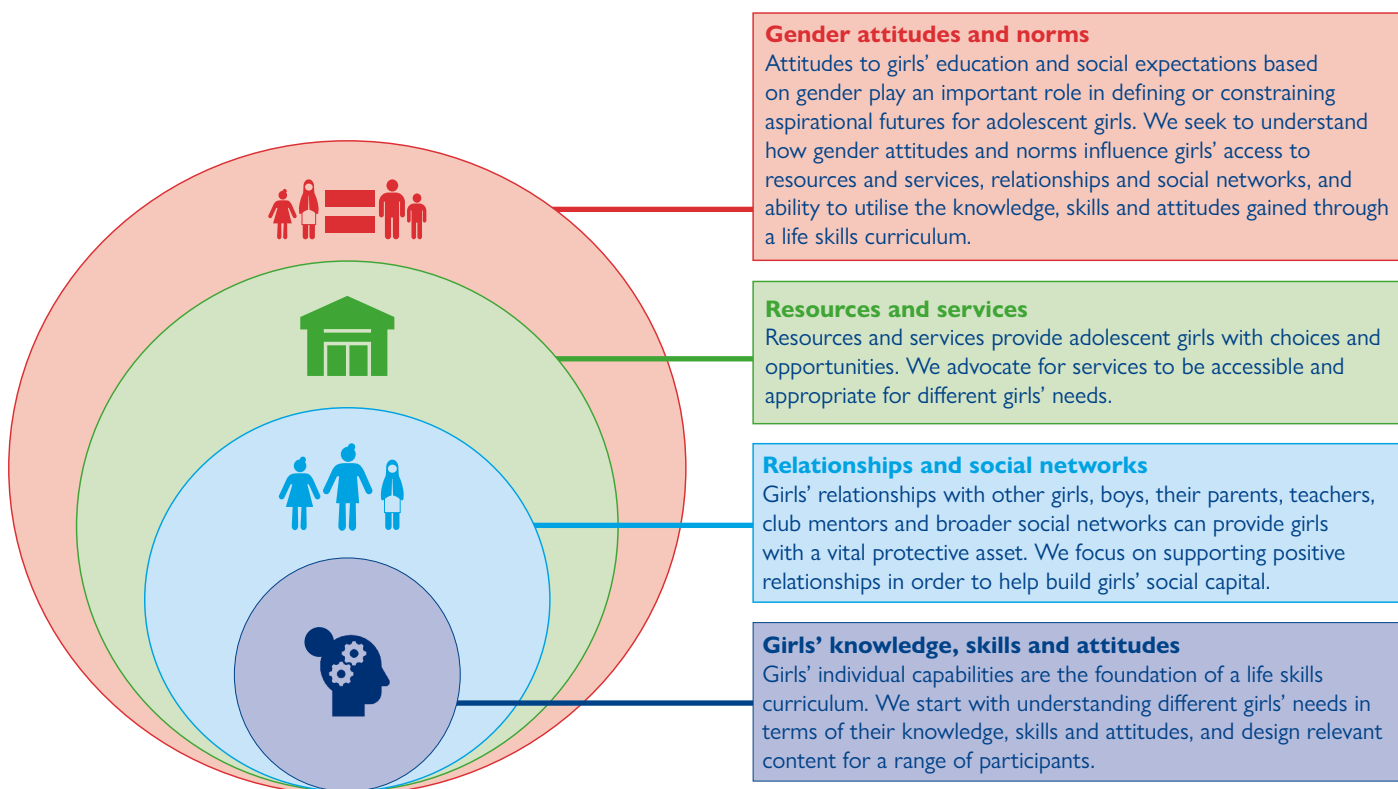


Figure 1: The GEC's life skills framework



Girls' knowledge, skills and attitudes

Life skills is a general term used by the education and development sectors to describe the skills necessary for full and active participation in everyday life. In this framework, we present them as a combination of the knowledge, skills and attitudes which comprise the content of a life skills curriculum. Life skills are a combination of:

- Skills – what one has. For example, the mix of interpersonal (communication), intrapersonal (self-esteem) and cognitive skills (critical thinking).
- Knowledge – what one knows about a topic. For example, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), financial literacy, how to have positive relationships and rights.
- Attitudes – what one believes is desirable and the values one holds. For example, that girls have a right to go to school and that violence against girls is never justified.

Together, these form a set of competencies (what one can do) that a person should be able to activate in any given situation.

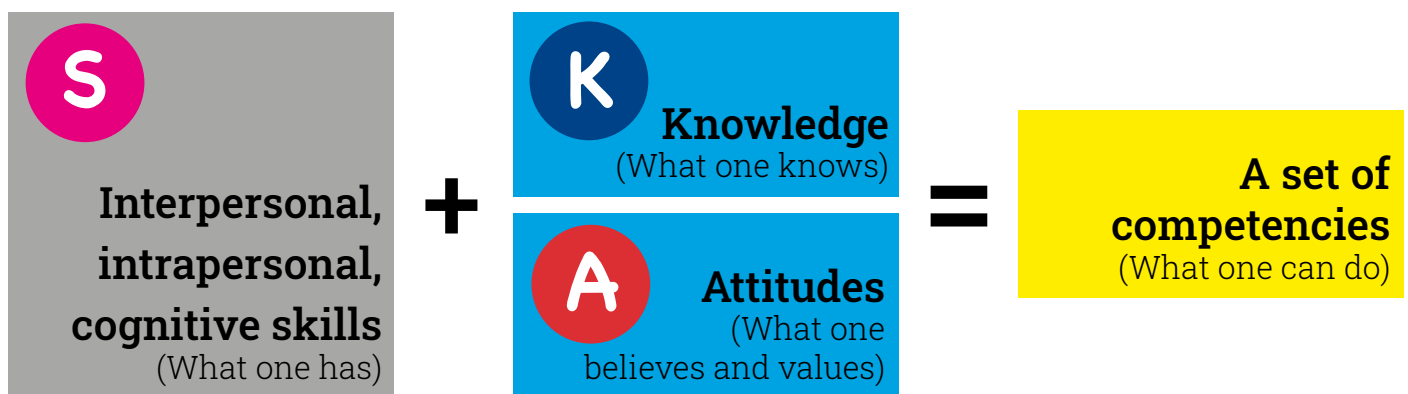


Figure 2: Adapted from the Brookings Institution's life skills conceptual framework¹⁴

What we know happens in a crisis

There is a shortage of knowledge about the needs of adolescent girls in crisis contexts and during disease outbreaks. Systematic consultations with girls themselves to identify what support they require most is also lacking. This results in a lack of well-tailored, gender and age-specific programmes that systematically target adolescent girls and their unique needs during emergencies and health crises.¹⁵

Evidence highlights that, when consulted, girls in previous emergencies and crises expressed an interest in developing their life skills. Their motivations relate to various issues such as:

- strengthening their ability to continue their education¹⁶
- improving their communication and negotiation skills within the household¹⁷
- obtaining a livelihood; developing technical and vocational skills¹⁸
- negotiating safe sex¹⁹
- interacting with peers and with trusted adults²⁰
- improving relationships with other communities in contexts of displacement.²¹

It is important to speak with girls and understand their changing needs when a crisis or emergency hits. The curriculum of any life skills programme may need to be adapted to the crisis context and tailored for different groups of girls to meet their unique needs. For example, rural as well as urban settings, and refugee communities as well as host communities. Applying an intersectionality lens is critical to uncovering how a crisis affects girls with different socio-economic characteristics.

Developing life skills content during COVID-19

In the context of COVID-19, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes targeted by life skills programmes should consider COVID-specific needs. For example, GAGE's virtual research with adolescent girls in low and middle-income contexts in April and May 2020 has highlighted that girls want context-relevant information on:

- prevention of virus spread (for example, what measures to take if there is no access to water or soap, how to care for sick relatives)
- services to support them through the crisis (for example, the social assistance services available, how to apply for social assistance, how to effectively access and utilise online education and psychosocial support).²²

Case study

Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE), Zimbabwe

The SAGE project is supporting up to 21,780 highly marginalised, out-of-school adolescent girls in 11 districts across Zimbabwe. During the first phase of its COVID-19 response, it is keeping in contact with its beneficiary girls through SMS and mobile phones. It used mobile phones to conduct a girls' survey to help shape its approach in terms of content and delivery. It is sending out bulk SMS messaging which focuses on wellbeing and safeguarding topics. It is also converting messages into audio and visual formats in order to reach girls who have sensory impairments.



? How can we shape the content of a life skills curriculum so that it is relevant to all girls?

It is important to design the content and approach with a diverse group of girls in mind, especially for those who are most marginalised. This will enable the intervention to help girls overcome their unique constraints to participation and will best respond to their changing needs in terms of identifying the knowledge, attitudes and skills most relevant to girls now. Content should be tailored to the specific age, context and subgroup of the adolescent girls benefiting from the programme.²³

Case study

Expanding inclusive education strategies for girls with disabilities Kenya

This project aims to increase the educational and vocational opportunities for 2,260 girls with disabilities in five counties within the Lake Region. In response to COVID-19, it is providing parents of girls with disabilities a resource pack to support them with information on the specific needs of girls with disabilities relating to COVID-19. This includes life skills content on topics such as safeguarding, GBV prevention and response, and COVID-related health and hygiene.

! Tip: For helpful guidance on how to keep in contact with girls safely, see the GEC's [*Keeping in contact with girls: COVID-19 Communication and Safeguarding Guidance*](#).²⁴



Relationships and social networks

Social networks are a vital protective mechanism for girls. They benefit significantly from the social capital, friendships and networks that come from meeting regularly, for example in clubs and safe spaces. The quality of the relationships between girls and those around them is particularly important for building and maintaining girls' social capital.

What we know happens in a crisis

The importance of relationships during a crisis cannot be underestimated. The disruption of social networks further exposes girls to violence, exploitation and abuse. It is critical to explore innovative means to keep girls and their club facilitators and mentors connected. This is for several reasons:

- Interventions that support social networks and relationship-building can help protect girls from physical violence and early marriage throughout all phases of emergencies.
- Through relationships, girls can access information that could be potentially life saving, risk reducing or critical in enabling them to identify alternative pathways when faced with life-altering circumstances.
- Access to quality social relationships (with peers and mentors) during this time is critical for setting girls up for positive outcomes post crisis.

GEC Endline evaluation *Sisters for Sisters, Nepal*

In 2015, two large earthquakes struck Nepal and affected two of the GEC's target districts, Dhading and Lamjung, which closed down schools for almost three months. The project shifted its activities for six months to help to set up temporary learning spaces and get children back to school. The project's 'big sisters', who deliver academic, life skills and protection/wellbeing support to 'little sisters', continued to visit and mentor the younger girls. A micro-grant was given to the 'big sisters' to cover activity costs so they could continue their mentoring work. These activities helped ensure the smooth implementation of the emergency phase and also supported the girls to successfully transition back to school once regular services resumed.



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Delivering a safe space during COVID-19

The COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures imposed across the world have resulted in schools shutting down, and extra-curricular activities and clubs halting. Most, if not all, clubs and safe spaces are unable to meet in person. Whether safe spaces are designed to meet in person or online, they must ensure both girls' and mentors' safety.



How can we provide a virtual safe space to continue the supportive role that girls' clubs play?

Safe spaces can provide protective environments through the development of peer networks and the delivery of essential life skills content. They can also help prepare girls for recovery and rehabilitation post crisis. Whether online or in person, key considerations for safe spaces include how to:

- keep in touch with girls safely
- ensure girls can maintain friendships with other girls
- ensure ongoing parental engagement and support
- build and maintain trust with the community
- engage boys
- ensure the size, timing, location and frequency of safe space groups is appropriate
- ensure the make up of clubs is inclusive
- ensure adequate resources are available (for example face masks and hand sanitiser).

Often club mentors and facilitators are young women from the local community who will be faced with similar challenges to the beneficiary girls. It is important to consider how to keep in touch with them safely, what additional training they might need, how to virtually deliver extra training and what additional resources they might need. Their needs may also evolve over this period and so regular contact with them is important.

Case studies

Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises (ENGINE), Nigeria

Through innovative partnerships with communities and the public and private sectors, the *ENGINE* project in Nigeria offers support to 16,000 marginalised girls and young women aged 17–23 years old. It is now using WhatsApp and Facebook to keep girls connected to each other and their mentors. These virtual spaces are set up to reflect size and formation of the physical club in order to maintain a sense of familiarity. Feedback from these sessions is used to shape the content for life skills learning for that group. As different communities face different challenges, the life skills content is shaped by girls' experiences and adapted accordingly.

Girls Learn, Succeed, and Lead, Tanzania

This project is supporting 7,000 marginalised girls in Tanzania to improve their learning and encourage their transition to secondary school. Learner guides are older girls and young women who mentor younger girls in CAMFED's life skills programme in Tanzania. They are also from marginalised communities and rely heavily on their businesses to generate income to cover their basic needs and school-related costs for their family members. Learner guides are struggling to generate sufficient profit as a result of COVID-19. CAMFED is working with Kiva (a non-profit organisation that allows people to lend money to low-income entrepreneurs and students) to restructure the learner guides' business loans. This includes introducing a grace period and adjusting the loan amount and repayment tenure for the period of the crisis. This revised loan product should help learner guides sustain their businesses during this period.

Social media and the gender divide

Social media can enable adolescent girls to access information and give them opportunities to interact with their peers. GAGE's virtual research with adolescent girls in Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon since the COVID-19 pandemic shows that social media platforms such as WhatsApp and YouTube have been key in keeping girls with access to connectivity informed. A 17-year-old Syrian refugee girl in Jordan explained how peer connectivity was helping her to cope with online schooling: "My colleagues and I help each other through a WhatsApp group and try to understand everything together."

Evidence from low and middle-income contexts shows that there are significant digital gender divides. These need to be addressed if programming is not to reinforce existing inequalities. Key barriers include:

- time poverty due to domestic and care responsibilities
- restrictions by parents and older brothers of girls' consumption of media due to conservative gender norms
- limited media and IT literacy
- costs of mobile phones and data.²⁵

These challenges have also been highlighted in GAGE's virtual research. A 16-year-old Palestinian refugee girl in Lebanon explained:

"Knowledge is light and a weapon for every girl in our community, but not all girls have access to education. I feel blessed for being in school but I am currently facing great difficulties with the long-distance learning that is mainly done through WhatsApp. This education method has caused us severe stress and depression."

In rural Ethiopia, many adolescent girls reported that they had no access to either the internet or a phone. They reported that even radio programmes were difficult to access due to their household not owning a radio or other family members controlling its use.²⁶

Case study

Community-Based Education for Marginalised Girls in Afghanistan

This project is supporting 49,150 girls for two years through community-based girls' schools. During COVID-19 it is focussing its efforts on the psychosocial support and mental wellbeing of girls and women. To do this, it has employed a combination of helplines, TV and radio programmes and community peer groups. While prioritising in-person engagement as much as possible, it has created socially distanced peer groups which are run by community-based female volunteers. The groups offer in-person psychosocial support for girls and a physical place of safety during the crisis if needed.



Resources and services

The ease of access to relevant resources and services (for example, menstrual pads, adolescent-friendly health services, distance learning technology, public health information, information about social and economic assistance) can enhance or inhibit girls' choices and opportunities. If relevant services and resources are unavailable, a girl's ability to translate her acquired life skills into empowered action becomes limited.

What we know happens in a crisis

Evidence suggests that during past public health emergencies, resources have been diverted from routine health care and essential SRHR services towards containing and responding to the emergency. GAGE's findings from virtual research with adolescent girls in low and middle-income countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that essential resources are already being diverted. The research shows that girls and young women are less likely to seek hospital deliveries and/or feel compelled to turn to more expensive private services rather than risk infection from COVID-19 in public hospitals.²⁷ This can result in both short and long-term implications, including increased pregnancies and higher numbers of maternal deaths for those unable to afford hospital treatment fees.

There are also heightened risks of child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting now that girls are out of school and fewer local government officials are present to enforce local laws. GAGE's virtual research in Ethiopia found that without teachers and health workers in the community, some parents are taking advantage of the pandemic restrictions to arrange these illegal practices. A 17-year-old girl from South Gondar, Amhara region, Ethiopia commented: *"Since Easter is a marriage season, young people have been getting married off. There are girls who were married at the age of 15, most are from the rural areas. I know an 8th grader who got married from the town."*

GEC Endline evaluation

Supporting Marginalised Girls in Sierra Leone to Complete Basic Education with Improved Learning Outcomes

As a direct result of the Ebola virus outbreak in Sierra Leone, regular services and programming on sexual and reproductive health stopped and many communities no longer sought to access health care out of fear of contracting the virus. The Plan International UK-led project in Sierra Leone responded by establishing relationships with local radio stations to broadcast messages on SRHR, hygiene, pregnancy prevention and early marriage. The radio broadcasts led to discussion of family planning becoming more normalised. Girls reported feeling more supported on SRHR issues by teachers and their communities as a result.

Delivering adolescent girl-friendly resources and services during COVID-19

During crises, adolescent girls need access to important services, resources and information in order to navigate new risks and uncertainty, and identify and plan for post-crisis possibilities. Life skills programmes can serve as important hubs, providing adolescent girls with knowledge about where services are being continued or discontinued, when to seek such services and how to do so safely. Adolescent girls also need access to the latest public health information about COVID-19, including how to protect themselves and others, and how to avoid spreading the disease. Additionally, they need access to information about social and economic assistance to help them cope with the ensuing economic crisis created by the pandemic.

How can we ensure adolescent girls have access to the information and services they need?

Utilising existing community networks to leverage their local knowledge and proximity to beneficiary homes can be an effective means to distribute messages and materials to adolescent girls and boys.

There is strong evidence to suggest that remote approaches focused on public health and SRHR can positively impact adolescents' knowledge, skills development and goal setting.²⁸ Resources should be disseminated in a targeted way to ensure girls in harder-to-reach communities and households are not left behind. Given the increased stress, anxiety and depression experienced by many girls during this period, approaches focused on mental health and wellbeing are also important.

Where services are not available, implementing agencies have a role to play in identifying adolescent girls' priorities, coordinating with other agencies and advocating for investment from government actors and donors.


Case studies

Excelling Against the Odds, Ethiopia

This project is supporting 16,480 marginalised girls in remote areas of Ethiopia who face challenges of early marriage, street life and heavy domestic work. In its COVID-19 response, it is partnering with and utilising the network of government health extension workers to distribute sanitary provisions to marginalised girls in local communities.

CHANGE, Ethiopia

The *CHANGE* project in Ethiopia is supporting up to 31,000 girls to improve their learning outcomes, with a principal focus on improving literacy and numeracy. It is now delivering in-person activities through the field staff facilitators who live in project intervention areas. On the ground, the facilitators have been meeting with girls in smaller groups of four on a weekly basis, while following strict social distancing measures. They use this time to distribute protective supplies like face masks, sanitisers and soap. The project has provided mobile air-time for all facilitators and additional capacity building to enable them to monitor and support the girls' safety and wellbeing.

 **Safeguarding and distributions during COVID-19** is the GEC's safe distribution tool providing guidance on risk mitigation for resource distribution activities (for example, hygiene kits).



Gender attitudes and norms

Gender stereotypes, expectations and norms play an important role in defining aspirational futures for adolescent girls. It is important to understand these because when girls begin to display behaviours and attitudes that may appear to go against the norm, they can experience backlash or violence by members of the community.

What we know happens in a crisis

Existing evidence is mixed on what happens in crises. Some studies point to a disruption of traditional gender norms and more opportunities for girls and women to become engaged in the public sphere in crisis settings.²⁹ Others suggest that girls and women may be expected to shoulder additional responsibilities based on traditional gender roles.

GAGE's interviews with adolescent girls in five low and middle-income countries indicate that girls who are now out of school are facing greater domestic and care work burdens and are given little time to study even where distance learning is a possibility in principle. For married adolescent girls, the work burdens appear especially intense as husbands and in-laws are at home for greater periods of the day under lockdown and expect adolescent girls and women to cater to their needs. A 17-year-old married Syrian refugee girl in Lebanon explained:

“There is a lot of tension at home, all men are sitting at home without work and we are all nervous and fighting all the time. The men's demands never end at home and they release their anger at us, even though we are working outside and doing everything at home while they sit all day without doing anything. We are restless ... working and cooking all the time.”

Shifting discriminatory gender attitudes and norms during COVID-19

Efforts should be made now to ensure that the progress towards gender equality in communities is not reversed by this crisis. Implementers of life skills programmes have the potential to play a catalytic role in encouraging mainstream actors to consider the specific risks and needs that adolescent girls face in their broader response to the pandemic. For example, they can advocate for:

- health sector responses to ensure that adolescent sexual and reproductive health services are continued during the crisis
- teachers who are furloughed to disseminate messages around gender-equitable community responses to the pandemic alongside girls clubs' implementers
- age and gender-responsive social protection scaling efforts.

In short, this is an opportunity to leverage gains already made by doing more community-wide positive gender norms messaging.

It is important to continue working and communicating with parents and other gatekeepers to gain their support to share domestic burdens and responsibilities more equitably between women, men, girls and boys. It is also important to demonstrate the benefits that girls' access to certain media outputs, content and resources can bring to the whole family. Maintaining and building on the gender norms progress made so far increases the likelihood of girls returning to education after the crisis.

? How can we leverage the gains made so far on community-wide gender norms messaging?

In order to ensure adolescent girls are able to access the resources and services they need during and after a crisis, it is important that gatekeepers have positive perceptions of girls' autonomy, aspirations and agency.

Men often dominate in public images of a crisis. While women may dominate on the front line, this renders their work invisible and reinforces perceptions that girls and women are only capable of doing their stereotypical roles in the home. Public service announcements and campaigns can help to promote positive messages about girls' and women's roles in crises and serve as reminders of girls' and women's capabilities, contributions and agency. Keeping girls and women visible during a crisis has multiple benefits. It can help to highlight the enhanced risks girls and women face, and ensure that girls' and women's needs and potential are prioritised in post-crisis recovery plans.

Radio programmes can engage listeners and transform discriminatory attitudes about girls' roles, education and opportunities. Interventions that focus on shifting gender norms through communication and media have demonstrated a strong impact on girls' own attitudes and knowledge as well as those in her home and community. Increasing knowledge and understanding about harmful gender norms can help to create a more supportive and enabling environment for girls both during and after the crisis.

Case studies

Impact(Ed) International, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria

This project aims to support 461,350 marginalised girls in Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria with improved literacy, numeracy and life skills. The project is now broadcasting its TV series, *My Better World*, on Citizen TV. *My Better World* is an award-winning animated series based on the life skills programme developed by CAMFED. In addition, Impact(Ed) has converted the life skills series for radio. It is now airing through multiple broadcasters in Somali and Kiswahili in Kenya. It will soon air in Nigeria and Ghana in Hausa and English. Impact(Ed) has found that collaboration with government efforts has enabled it to reach a wider audience as well as influence and improve the national messaging efforts. In doing so, it can bring strong messaging around girls' rights and education directly into people's homes.



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Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER), Sierra Leone

The *EAGER* project is supporting up to 32,500 of Sierra Leone's most marginalised adolescent girls including girls who are pregnant, young mothers, married and those who have been affected by Ebola. It is now developing a national radio show with BBC Media Action designed to increase knowledge and understanding about gender norms and transform unsupportive attitudes about girls' capabilities, opportunities, and roles. GBV prevention messaging will be included as part of the project's strategy to mitigate its anticipated increase during COVID-19. In addition, they will adapt planned programming to be responsive to any new needs arising during the pandemic response.

! The GEC's *Communication for Change: Checklist* provides guidance on using media and communications safely.

Conclusion

The findings from GAGE's qualitative research suggest that girls around the world are facing new and heightened risks and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. With school closures and lockdowns continuing, it is critical to find creative and innovative ways to continue supporting adolescent girls' with life skills programming. The GEC's adolescent girls life skills framework provides a guide to design life skills interventions with a focus on adolescent girls' empowerment while being flexible to the changing conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Going forward, the GEC will be using evaluations, research and project monitoring to track the short and long-term impact of these initiatives on the lives of adolescent girls.

Further information

Girls' Education Challenge www.girlseducationchallenge.org

GAGE www.gage.odi.org

Brookings Institution www.brookings.edu

The case studies draw from ongoing GEC project adaptation plans. The authors would like to thank the GEC for their willingness to share, which has provided many illustrative examples for this piece.

References are available at: <https://bit.ly/32Onala>

Endnotes

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