

# Stand with Adolescent Girls and Young Women During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

## JOINT STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By The Child, Early & Forced Marriage & Unions and Sexuality Working Group, and Partners<sup>1</sup>

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The global pandemic COVID-19 lays bare and exacerbates existing inequalities. For adolescent girls and young women in many places, this means that the harmful impacts of patriarchy and gender inequality are magnified and intensified. The coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdowns heighten the perpetration of gender-based violence; elevate risks of child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU)<sup>2</sup>; reduce mobility and spaces for mutual support and solidarity; increase the burden of unpaid care work; and, in some cases, raise the likelihood of girls staying out of school compared with boys—to name only some of the consequences.

The increased rights violations and impacts on the lives of adolescent girls and young women will not necessarily recede after the peak of the pandemic. And even if they did, we cannot accept a return to “pre-COVID” levels of inequality—we have to aim higher. We must continue working toward and investing in a feminist vision where young women and adolescent girls—in all their diversity—are free and equipped to choose their own futures.

**We are calling on funders of all types and sizes—foundations, governments and others—to stand with adolescent girls and young women during and after this global pandemic.** This means taking a human rights-based, gender-responsive approach during the crisis, and funding and supporting gender-transformative approaches over the long term. This is the only way to effectively tackle the root causes of the inequalities adolescent girls and young women face everywhere.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Right now, funding bodies must **make existing grants flexible** to allow organizations to respond nimbly to increased risks. Where possible, funders should **make new emergency resources available** to respond to the intensification of violence, online harassment and increased barriers to education, sexual and reproductive health, mental health and other essential care. Funders should **streamline administrative processes to reduce barriers to access**, expedite delivery and issue funds on flexible terms that allow for adapting activities in changing environments.

Now and in the longer term, we urge funding bodies, governments and other organizations working with adolescent girls and young women to:

#### Support initiatives that address root causes and deliver sustainable change

- 1. Recognize patriarchy and control of adolescent girls' and young women's sexuality as root causes of CEFMU** and other rights violations, and ensure that the voices and perspectives of adolescent girls and young women are at the center of setting priorities and developing programs.

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**The Child, Early & Forced Marriage & Unions, and Sexuality Working Group\*** and Partners:

Aahung, American Jewish World Service\*, CARE\*, CREA, Firelight Foundation, Global Fund for Women\*, Girls First Fund, *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage\**, GreeneWorks\*, International Center for Research on Women\*, International Women's Health Coalition\*, The Kendeda Fund, MADRE\*, Nirantar Trust\*, Plan International\*, Population Council\*, Promundo\*, The Summit Foundation, UNFPA, UNICEF, and The YP Foundation

<sup>2</sup>UNFPA, 2020. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage

2. **Respect and foster adolescent girls' and young women's collective action** by investing in initiatives that support them to recognize gender inequality and other forms of discrimination that affect their lives. Programs should engage adolescent girls and young women in feminist perspective-building through a political/structural lens, with a focus on building their agency and leadership, while supporting their collaboration with feminist and other progressive movements.
3. **Fund an intersectional approach** and prioritize investment for adolescent girls and young women who are most vulnerable to CEFMU and other rights violations, and who face the greatest challenges in rebuilding and moving forward with their lives in the wake of the pandemic due to multiple and reinforcing forms of discrimination—based on race, caste, class, religion, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity—in addition to gender and age.
4. **Support grassroots groups and community-based organizations, women-, girl- and youth-led collectives,** networks and social movements that are taking gender-transformative approaches to shift harmful gender norms at all levels, including among girls and their peers, families, communities, institutions, laws and policies. This includes funding programming that engages men and boys on how patriarchy affects their own lives, while supporting them to reject their privilege and unequal power, work toward gender equality and hold other men and boys accountable.
5. **Collaborate with grantee partners and adolescent girls and young women to define what success looks like** in their contexts, and co-create meaningful ways to measure social change beyond legal shifts or age of marriage indicators.
6. **Advocate to ensure laws and policies ostensibly intended to protect adolescent girls and young women do not undermine their autonomy** by criminalizing their sexuality, conflating the age of marriage and age of consent, barring their access to education due to pregnancy or limiting their right to own assets and control resources, or having other negative impacts on their rights.

### Invest in access to and availability of essential services and social protection

7. **Support comprehensive sexuality education** for adolescents and young people of all gender identities that is rights-based and grounded in feminist principles, including through distance learning options while schools are closed, and alongside access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and referrals.
8. **Recognize SRHR as essential services**—in times of crisis and beyond—and remove barriers to access to contraception, safe abortion and menstrual health items, as these are central to adolescent girls' and young women's health and autonomy.
9. **Integrate gender-based violence prevention and response in all work** with adolescent girls and young women—including to address intimate partner violence—with particular attention to providing care to the most vulnerable, including those in humanitarian settings.
10. **Minimize the negative impact of school closures** by investing in inclusive gender-responsive distance education methods, including radio broadcasts and community sensitization on the importance of girls' education. Where schools normally provide meals, support alternative measures for delivering food to communities facing poverty in order to guard against negative nutrition impacts for adolescent girls, young women and their families. Once schools reopen, support return to school for all girls, including pregnant girls, married girls and young mothers, and involve adolescent girls and young women in shaping decisions about their education.
11. **Support provision of mental health services** that are accessible to young women and adolescent girls. These services should be confidential and gender-responsive, with trained professionals attuned to the particular stresses faced by adolescent girls and young women, such as CEFMU, gender-based violence and restrictions on mobility.

**12. Support gender-responsive social protection measures** across sectors to mitigate the immediate and long-term negative economic impacts of the pandemic on families and individuals—especially the most marginalized—including to prevent CEFMU and other rights violations for adolescent girls and young women. Plans for economic recovery should “build back better,” with social protection coverage and gender-transformative approaches to livelihoods centered on economic justice for adolescent girls and young women, including attention to skill-building, child care, family leave plans and safe transportation.

COVID-19 has thrown the entire world into fear and uncertainty. But we are sure that the need for supporting a gender-transformative approach for adolescent girls and young women is critical now, and will continue to be in the coming months and years. With crisis comes opportunity. **We urge funding bodies, governments and all organizations working with adolescent girls and young women to join us in embracing this opportunity to push past the status quo.** This includes learning from innovative approaches used throughout the crisis and making long-term commitments to dismantling the structural inequalities adolescent girls and young women have faced all along, as well as supporting community-led approaches to gender justice for all.

