

ADOLESCENT GIRL POWER GROUPS: BUILDING RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19 PROGRAMMATIC GUIDANCE FOR SAFEGUARDING PROGRESS

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The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and girls

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives around the world through the direct health effects of the virus, and the far-reaching economic and social consequences of government efforts to curb its spread. The UN reports; “Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex”¹. The pandemic has significantly increased the burden of unpaid care work carried out by women and girls and threatened their livelihoods. Increasing financial stress and social isolation measures have heightened women’s and girls’ vulnerability to gender-based violence and reduced access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health related services and supports.² The UN has challenged development actors to “put women and girls at the centre of all COVID-19 recovery efforts” in order to counter the regressive impact of COVID-19 on gender-equality worldwide.

Adolescence offers a critical window of opportunity to equip vulnerable and energetic young people with knowledge, skills and confidence that build their resilience during times of crisis. Effective models for empowering adolescent girls in particular are needed as we navigate a path towards gender-transformative COVID recovery across the globe.

Adolescent Girl Power Groups: A model for safeguarding gender-equality gains and building resilience in times of crisis

The World Vision Canada ENRICH project has been working with vulnerable communities in Thakurgaon district, Bangladesh for the past five years to reduce maternal and child mortality rates through improved health and nutrition information, services and supports. Acknowledging the intersecting gender inequalities that contribute to poor health and nutrition outcomes for women and girls, the ENRICH project team in consultation with the local partners, established Adolescent Girl Power Groups (AGPGs) in 2017 to put adolescent girls at the centre of the project’s efforts to tackle gender injustice



and advance gender equality in participating communities. World Vision’s AGPG model provides girls with both life skills and livelihood skills to address the risks and vulnerabilities they face including early marriage and pregnancy, and to harness their potential as community mobilizers and change agents. Sixteen AGPGs have been active in five sub-districts of Thakurgaon for the past three years, providing 320 girls with a dedicated space to increase their knowledge, and build their communication, self-confidence and critical thinking skills.

A cross-sectional research study conducted by the ENRICH team, with AGPG members, their parents and facilitators, revealed that participation in the AGPGs over the past three years has contributed to a number of gender equality metrics including girls’ health knowledge, confidence, mobility and social capital, elevating their status and decision-making power within their families and communities. Beyond increased power and agency at the individual level, AGPGs have proven to be a source of collective agency, as the girls work together to challenge harmful and discriminatory gender norms and promote gender responsive health, nutrition and hygiene practices at the community level. This sense of collective impact and shared optimism is a factor in the AGPG’s high retention rate, which has seen almost all members consistently participating since the introduction of the groups in 2017.



The research also found that participation in the AGPGs brought a number of direct and indirect benefits to the girls and their families which strengthened their resilience against the impacts of COVID-19. Specifically, the study revealed that the girls' health, nutrition and financial literacy, coupled with new-found self-confidence, negotiation skills and peer support networks laid the foundation for more harmonious and equitable family dynamics, emotional support and economic resilience in the face of the pandemic. Many of the girls felt that their three-year engagement with the AGPGs had improved their relationship with their parents and their ability to advocate for their interests within their families. As one AGPG participant explained, *"From much ahead of the COVID-19 crisis, our parents were motivated towards us, so we're free with them in terms of sharing our thoughts and requirements."* The groups also provided a buffer against the negative effects of self-isolation during lockdown. Study results revealed that while government restrictions prevented the AGPGs from meeting in-person during the two-month lockdown period, in most cases, lines of communication remained open between AGPG members and their peers and facilitators via mobile phone. Survey responses from the girls suggest that friendships and a new sense of optimism were factors in their resiliency during the pandemic. In addition, facilitators provided psychological support and evidence-based infection prevention advice to the girls which they passed on to their families and community at a safe social distance.

Of the girls surveyed, 71% reported that their AGPG helped them to maintain relationships with friends during periods of self-isolation, and 68% reported that the group provided a connection to support and advice during such uncertain times. From an economic perspective, the girls' involvement in income generating activities and their training in financial literacy over the three year AGPG period allowed them to

generate savings and influence household spending decisions, which helped their families meet the demand for basic household items with less income during the pandemic.

AGPGs: A tool for gender-transformative COVID recovery

Recognizing that the empowerment of adolescent girls is critical for both mitigating the effects of the current pandemic and building resilience against future crises, World Vision recommends the integration of AGPGs into projects targeting adolescents. This recommendation builds on evidence showing that the most effective models of adolescent empowerment include life skills, delivered alongside other interventions that support social networks, relationship building, and economic empowerment in order to provide a protective function for girls from physical violence, early marriage, and early pregnancy during emergencies.³ World Vision's early research on the AGPG model presents encouraging findings about the potential of AGPGs to serve a protective function against harmful gender and life-stage related health risks while increasing the social capital needed to assert their rights and influence decisions that impact their lives.

With appropriate guidance, tools and supports in place, the AGPG model can be easily and inexpensively woven into existing programs, regardless of their thematic focus. For example, where trust-based relationships with local communities exist, and space and opportunities for girls to convene regularly can be facilitated by leveraging existing project mechanisms. The AGPG model can be strengthened further when coupled with World Vision's complementary models including *MenCare* which promotes the involvement of men and boys in gender equality efforts, and *Channels of Hope for Gender* which leverages the power and influence of religious leaders to challenge gender-discriminatory beliefs and practices at the household and community level.

References

- 1 UN Women, April 2020. *UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women*. Available online: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Bandiera et al., 2019; UNFPA, 2017

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