



## CALL TO ACTION

Cognisant of both the direct and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls and young women worldwide, **we, the undersigned, call for governments to join us in recommitting and accelerating efforts to end the harmful practice of child marriage.** Research has shown that adolescent girls are facing an increased risk of child marriage due to this pandemic and the subsequent breakdown of existing social networks, social services and economic security. According to UNFPA, this unprecedented global health crisis places the progress we have made to date in delaying marriage for girls at risk and an increase in 13 million more child marriages can be expected due to COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

The pandemic is increasing economic instability and food insecurity while exacerbating existing inequalities worldwide. We know that adolescent girls are on the [front lines](#) of the pandemic response, facing disproportionate burdens of caring for the sick and completing increased domestic workloads. Given the centrality of adolescent girls as caregivers within households and active members of their communities, we urge policymakers to meaningfully engage young girls in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Girls need to have a voice in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programmes during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. **It is only when girls are included as part of the solution, that their rights will be upheld and lasting change can be made.**

The role of civil society organizations and youth-led movements in reaching out and supporting these girls cannot be undermined. In order to reach the most vulnerable, grassroots organizations and community-based efforts need to be financially supported through additional flexible funding. **Thus, policymakers need to ensure that these actors have the space and (financial) resources needed to build their internal capacity and safely reach and support adolescent girls during the pandemic.**

More specifically, we call for adolescent girls' meaningful engagement to remain a key priority for three key focus areas, namely, education, gender-based violence (GBV), and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). **Here, we propose a set of calls to action that contribute to a comprehensive approach towards ending child-marriage and safeguarding girls during the COVID-19 pandemic:**

### Education

Recognising that COVID-19 introduces further barriers to girls' schooling and that girls are less likely to return to school following the COVID-19 pandemic, which will significantly impact their economic prospects in the long-term, we call for governments to:

- Consider research results examining adolescent girls' vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the pandemic, acknowledge the factors that threaten girls' educational attainment and work toward sensitizing communities to the importance of girl's education being a key priority;<sup>3</sup>
- Promote a gender-responsive approach to distance learning: amongst others by making use of existing technologies (e.g. radio); supporting girls to build digital skills and knowledge; taking steps to provide sufficient resources to girls at home for them to complete their

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<sup>1</sup> Between 2020- 2030. UNFPA, 2020. *Impact Of The COVID-19 Pandemic On Family Planning And Ending Gender-Based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation And Child Marriage.* [UNFPA.](#)

<sup>2</sup> More Than Brides (2020). *Girls and Women on the Front Lines: Bracing for the COVID-19 Response in Low Resource Settings.* [More Than Brides.](#)

<sup>3</sup> Rogers, H. and Sabarwal, S., 2020. *The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses.* [The World Bank](#); [UNESCO.](#) 2020. *Covid-19 School Closures Around The World Will Hit Girls Hardest.*



education remotely, and accounting for the flexibilities necessary for adolescent girls to complete schoolwork given their caregiving roles;

- Once in-person schooling commences, ensure that schools are safer and more accessible for adolescent girls returning to school by providing free or affordable education (incl. catch-up courses), free meals and ensuring access to water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH) facilities and products;
- Ensure that adolescent girls who have undergone child marriage are supported in the process of re-entering the schooling system (e.g. through the provision of catch-up courses) and can go back to school safely without fear of facing stigma or discrimination, given the expected increase in child marriage practices during the pandemic.

### **Gender-Based Violence**

In light of the growing reports that GBV is rising due to the pandemic and restrictive measures taken to tackle COVID-19, such as the closing of public buildings and the lockdown measures, we urge governments to:

- Encompass and strengthen GBV services as part of essential services which are guaranteed during the pandemic;
- Work together with community-led initiatives and local leaders (such as religious leaders) to encourage and empower community members to speak out against GBV and to report suspected cases of GBV;
- Increase efforts to strengthen the knowledge, skills, and adaptability of GBV support mechanisms such as health, psychosocial and legal support;
- Commit to finding new ways to reach adolescent girls at risk of GBV by identifying ways to reach out to them: either via in-person or alternative communication channels (for example radio and social media outreach);
- Invest in identifying, protecting and engaging adolescent girls that are particularly vulnerable, such as those living in situations of conflict, displacement, separation from their families, and migration.

### **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**

The COVID-19 pandemic and government's responses to it have put girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights at risk due to the reprioritization of national healthcare budgets and (human) resources, reduced mobility of girls, and disruptions in supply chains and health systems, among other factors. Therefore, we call on governments to:

- Continue comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) through gender-sensitive distance learning and to ensure that CSE remains in the curriculum when schools reopen;
- Ensure that sexual and reproductive health and rights information, services, and products remain essential and accessible, especially to the most vulnerable girls – such as out-of-school or married adolescent girls. Hereby, supporting public health systems to meet girls' needs by expanding and strengthening these key structures.



By signing this call to action, we as organizations are committed to continuing our work on child marriage and urge governments to sign on to this call to action:



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