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## **Advocates Say Global COVID-19 Funding for Girls Can't Wait**

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GOVIND JANGIR/SHUTTERSTOCK

While COVID-19 is most dangerous for men's physical health, its secondary effects are building into a global disaster for girls and women. Gender disparities persist around the world, but girls in the Global South and in

low- and middle-income countries are especially vulnerable to the pandemic's impact, as we recently addressed in a report on the effects of the disease in [Africa](#).

The virus hasn't fully hit these [countries](#) yet, but as Bill Gates recently [wrote](#), we know “that the disease will eventually spread widely in these nations.” He also noted, “The numbers suggest that even a single Manhattan hospital has more intensive-care beds than most African countries.” As COVID-19 spreads more widely in poor regions, illness and death won't be the only consequence; the economic and social fallout will likely also be devastating. Girls, women, grassroots groups, international human rights and feminist funders, local women's funds, and other grantmakers and nonprofits now risk seeing years of gender equity progress unwound.

### **Girls in the Crosshairs of a Pandemic**

Around the world, women, teen girls and young girls provide a disproportionate amount of caregiving, both professionally and informally. They also fill more roles relating to basic needs like food and water—needs that are harder to meet during a pandemic. Meanwhile, they experience less job security, health benefits, social equity and education access. They undergo more abuse and are underrepresented in decision-making forums. And girls are, in many cases, the first members of families to become vulnerable during a major crisis.

We're already experiencing a worldwide spike in domestic abuse. And previous health disasters like Ebola have shown that in response to economic stresses and lockdowns, more girls are [married off before adulthood](#), physically and sexually assaulted, and trafficked. Teen pregnancies and rates of STIs rise, and girls' life trajectories are forever altered. During the Ebola pandemic, many girls lost access to school and were never able to return.

Consider a girl who is married off or sent to live informally with a man during this pandemic (trafficked). “Should the area go into lockdown, the girl will be confined to the house of a stranger, isolated from her friends, family, education and other support services, making her even more vulnerable to abuse, and likely to suffer on a long-term basis,” according to the [With and For Girls Collective](#) (WFG) in a [series](#) called “COVID-19 and Girls’ Rights.” WFG is an international funding group that runs participatory grantmaking by and for girls. So far, it has awarded \$3 million in flexible funding to more than 60 girl-led and -centered groups in 41 countries.

A number of key funders of women and girls are part of WFG. Its members include Comic Relief, EMpower, FRIDA, MamaCash, Nike Foundation, NoVo Foundation, Plan International U.K., Purposeful, Stars Foundation, Global Fund for Children and Global Fund for Women.

The Prospera International Network of Women’s Funds is also an important convener in international feminist funding—it comprises 38 funds from 33 countries that make grants in more than 170 countries. We asked these groups and others how funders can best respond to the current pandemic in an effective, girl-centric way. The answer is consistent and straightforward across the board, expressed succinctly by WFG’s new director, Purity Kagwiria: “[Support] groups and networks at the grassroots of communities that reach the most vulnerable girls around the world.”

### **What Do Girls and Grassroots Groups Need?**

Even when a global crisis isn’t underway, girls and women are underfunded by philanthropy. In 2015, foundation human rights funding for girls and women around the world was about [\\$561 million](#). While this was up from \$319 million in 2011, it means half of our species received about 23% of \$2.4 billion in foundation human rights funding.

WFG offers suggestions on how grantmakers can best help girls during this crisis. Like many funders and advocates, they suggest more unrestricted core support. WFG member Global Fund for Women already provides core support. President and CEO Latanya Mapp Frett says, “Many of our grantees are having to suspend, halt, postpone or otherwise severely [change their] operations, and are facing life-threatening conditions.”

Chernor Bah is the co-founder of Purposeful, a movement-building hub for adolescent girls with offices in Sierra Leone and the U.K. that is home to WFG. Along with core support, he [recommended](#) nonprofits and funders create tailored messaging for girls and use technology to minimize isolation. He also suggested making “concrete plans to provide socio-economic and psychological support for girls during and after the emergency,” and giving girls direct cash transfers throughout the crisis.

WFG notes that media like radio and television, and physical resources like flyers can be a crucial means of contact for girls without internet access. Non-digital resources can also be important distance-learning tools for girls who are offline.

FUNDECOM, which works to prevent sexual violence against girls and women in Nicaragua, [advised](#) WFG that giving smartphones to girl leaders “so that they can connect to rapid-response domestic violence support via WhatsApp groups” could save lives. Shelters and social services providers who offer counseling and emergency extraction for women and girls need increased support. Teen girls’ and young women’s sexual and reproductive health needs must be met—during and after a disaster, it is often more difficult to access bathrooms, sanitary supplies, undergarments, birth control and abortion. Women and girls in refugee and migrant communities face even greater challenges in these areas. Girls and women can also face compounding inequity based on their race, differing abilities, LGBTQ+ status, and other traits and identities.

Of course, direct hygiene support like hand-washing supplies and community education initiatives are also crucial for girls and other people in places where these resources are lacking. Shining Hope for Communities, (SHOFCO) a grassroots organization in Nairobi, is providing hand-washing stations, food and education programs in response to the pandemic. Participants in its Women Empowerment Program, which teaches business skills to women with HIV, are making and distributing soap.

Plan International, the women's rights organization MADRE, and other groups that partner directly with local communities are also offering these kinds of services. In Yemen, MADRE partners with Food4Humanity to support access to potable water stations and sanitation supplies. It also supports emergency healthcare services and communications campaigns in local languages in several countries.

MADRE Executive Director Yifat Susskind tells us her organization continues to fund the work its girl grantees identified before the pandemic, as well as new, girl-led emergency projects. She says it is making funding flexible, reducing paperwork and devoting "time and resources to regular, transparent communications with grantees, whether it's by email, phone calls, video calls, texting and more." She says it's important for the philanthropic sector to take girls' perspectives into account.

WFG points out that feedback loops with frontline community leaders are necessary to ensure girls get what they need, that hungry girls receive food and menstruating girls get appropriate supplies—not vice versa. During Ebola, "most [INGOs] failed to implement feedback systems into their programs, meaning that there was no way for girls to let them know what they really needed," Josephine Kamara, founder of Women of Wonders Sierra Leone, and advocacy and communications coordinator at Purposeful, [wrote](#) in the WFG series. Partnering with feminist and youth-

centric grassroots groups, like those often reached through WFG and women's funds, can keep lines of communication open.

The African Women's Development Fund, South Asia Women's Fund and Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, among many others, serve as intermediaries, grantmakers and partners for women's and LGBTQ+ organizations.

"Supporting women's funds is one of the most effective ways for donors to get resources to southern women's rights organizations and movements, especially those considered too small or risky by mainstream funders," [according to](#) a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Prospera Deputy Director Alexandra Garita says that when philanthropies give women's funds unrestricted support, "they are able to organize virtually, [and] develop hotlines and other essential services to prevent and attend to [the questions and worries of girls and women], and create advocacy and communications campaigns about what is happening in their communities." She specifically mentions FRIDA, the Central American Women's Fund, the Urgent Action Funds, and "the many national funds" like Fondo Semillas in Mexico, Lunaria in Colombia, Bulgarian Women's Fund and filia in Germany.

Dena Kimball, Kendeda Fund executive director and fund adviser for its Girls Rights program, recommends funders who are new to the Global South, "Pick a trusted intermediary with a track record of working with girls' and girl-led organizations at the community level." If funders do choose to work with larger relief organizations, Kimball recommends asking them how girls' perspectives are taken into account. "If girls and women are not central to the planning and execution of relief efforts in a community, it's safe to assume their needs are not going to be adequately addressed."

## **An Opportunity for Larger Change**

Though destructive, disasters do provide an opportunity for innovation, reflection and growth. As various grantmakers step up and demonstrate their ability to offer more sizable and flexible support, many have identified this crisis as an opportunity for sector-wide (if not society- or worldwide) reform.

Kagwiria of WFG says the pandemic “teaches us that responses can often be limited by unnecessary red tape, [but] when it really counts, approaches to funding can be simple and still be highly effective.” She hopes that after this is over, “we will recognize that the limitations placed on actors in the philanthropic sector are self-made and [so can also] be eliminated by us.”

Some U.S. funders are likely still planning out their girl-centric responses. The [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#), which supports girls and women around the globe through several of its portfolios, and which is deeply invested in scientific and medical [responses to the virus](#), says it is “actively working through [its] response on COVID-19” pertaining to women and girls, but is not ready to give more details at this time. NoVo, a WFG member that has long focused on supporting empowerment for women and girls, especially in the Global South, declined to contribute to this story, as did Give Directly, a leader in cash transfers.

Some philanthropists may plan to address girls’ needs after the pandemic is quelled—but activists who have seen previous outbreaks say this will be too late. Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey [tweeted](#) in early April that he would devote about \$1 billion to “fund global COVID-19 relief. After we disarm this pandemic, the focus will shift to girls’ health and education, and [universal basic income].” On the domestic side, Dorsey is already starting to address women’s needs on a smaller scale: He teamed up with [Rihanna](#) to help domestic violence survivors in Los Angeles with a \$4.2 million joint [grant](#). (We’ll be covering more domestic COVID-19 funding for women in an upcoming article).

Susskind of Madre says, “We must guard against a dynamic... that allows this global emergency to turn into a rationale for de-prioritizing work with girls.” In a recent brief, MADRE [described](#) this era as perilous but potent, stating that historic crises represent opportunities to move social justice forward. Whether the funding adjustments and swells in social movements that accompany this pandemic will endure is yet to be seen.

Frett of Global Fund for Women says she is “continuously awestruck... crisis after crisis, how women, girls and social justice groups design and lead their own solutions.” Along with saving lives, funders who support girls’ and women’s safety and power-building during this time can invest in a more gender-just future that may be able to sustain any progress made.