

WAGGGS POSITION PAPER

THE SAFETY OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

We are living in extraordinary and challenging times. The [COVID-19 virus](#) is having a huge global impact on people's physical and mental health, as well as the economy. Around the world, people are adjusting how they live, work and play.

Moreover, this global pandemic is exposing the existing inequalities across our societies.

It highlights the specific risks and vulnerabilities that girls and young women face because of deep-rooted inequalities and traditional gender roles. It is making it harder, and in some cases impossible, for women to access essential services to support their sexual and reproductive health and protect them from gender-based violence. Gender-based violence in itself can be seen as a socially-constructed virus and no country is immune. It has a serious and life-altering impact on the physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health of women and girls everywhere.

As the largest voluntary movement geared entirely towards girls and young women, **WAGGGS believes in a world where all girls are valued.** We seek to create a safe and supportive environment in which girls can develop their potential, free from judgement, stereotyping and violence. Yet we see that - as with so many crises - COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting girls and women.

**GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
CAN BE SEEN AS A SOCIALLY-
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70% of the global health workforce are women. Women, who today are not only at the frontline of the response to COVID-19 but who are also often bearing the care-giving responsibilities at home. In so many societies too, despite this responsibility of care, women and girls have fewer decision-making powers within a household. Within its confines, they are less likely to have their needs met and may be burdened with additional household chores, while they themselves maybe ill.

We have already heard from girls in Uganda participating in the [WAGGGS Girls as Drivers for Change project](#), that during this period of lockdown they have been asked to work with their family and may not be allowed to return to school, whilst some face early forced marriage.

As the largest voluntary movement for any girl and every girl, we are committed to the empowerment of girls and young women, and alongside our 150 national Girl Guide and Girl Scout Member Organisations, we place girls and young women at the heart of our decisions and actions. As a global movement, Girl Guiding and Girl Scouting has the power to break the shroud of silence and support girls and young women to articulate their rights to live lives free from violence and with access to health, education and safe spaces.

SAFETY OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

It is estimated that currently a third of the global world's population is on lockdown. For many women and girls this also means they are confined with an abuser with no escape. According to the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report](#) on global gender based homicide every year, gender-based violence affects more than 1 billion women worldwide and in 2017, it is estimated that globally 87,000 women were killed by their intimate partner or family member. This is three times more than the number of women who have died as a result of COVID-19 to date.

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'[STOP THE VIOLENCE](#)' is our global flagship campaign to end violence against girls and women. Since 2011, Girl Guides and Girl Scouts around the world have been tackling violence against women and girls in their communities through advocacy, education, awareness raising, community action and research. Through our Voices Against Violence curriculum, we are reaching out to 30 million people in over 100 countries to break the culture of silence on violence and take action to end it.

This work is more important than ever. As we navigate the gender impact of COVID-19 we are supporting our Member Organisations to adapt their national campaigns and support girls and women in their countries at this challenging time.

SAFETY ONLINE

Nearly two billion women across the globe are unable to access the World Wide Web at all – depriving them of opportunities to learn, earn and have their voices heard. For those who can, the web is just not safe enough. Our new research, in partnership with the [Web Foundation](#), reveals that half of young women and girls globally surveyed have experienced online abuse, including threatening messages, sexual harassment and the sharing of private photos and videos without permission. 87% of young women surveyed think the problem is getting worse.



WAGGGS' [Surf Smart programme](#) is a non-formal education curriculum designed to inform young people about how to connect positively online, protect themselves from online threats and respect their rights and reputation on the internet. In this time when many Girl Guide and Girl Scout groups are moving their activities for girls online, we are [gathering their advice and good practices](#) to support safe online spaces for girls to stay connected during COVID-19.

SAFETY AT HOME

To mark 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence in 2017, WAGGGS' #GirlsAreUnsafe campaign asked girls to draw and share the places where they felt most unsafe. Their voices were

amplified by the results of our global poll on violence. [The hundreds of drawings and data received](#) are a stark reminder of a daily reality for girls across the world. Places where we assume girls should feel safe, such as homes and hospitals, were pictured as the places they felt most unsafe.

We know that when it comes to sexual violence the majority of perpetrators are someone the victim knows. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to self-isolate at home, meaning that during these tough times, households may become an unsafe space too. In many parts of the world, the rates of domestic violence cases have seen a sharp increase. The Girl Guides of Sri Lanka are using a [social media campaign](#) to share helpline services for victims of domestic abuse.

We continue to offer support to our Member Organisations that are delivering the Stop the Violence Campaign by giving them the tools to raise awareness about the issue and offer support for women affected in their countries. The [GBV Help Map](#) provides referrals to local support services in every country. This crowdmap contains a visual directory of verified organisations around the world that offer specific services to survivors of violence - legal, medical, educational / employment, emergency help, and also lists police, ambulance, consular and refugee specific services.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION



Nationwide closures of schools, universities and other educational institutions are impacting over 89% of the world's student population. Several other countries have implemented localised closures affecting millions of additional learners. Most youth organisations have also been forced to reduce or stop their services.

For girls, particularly adolescent girls, the suspension of both educational and non-formal education activities can have an even greater impact. Where girls are being asked to stay at home and become caregivers, they may be forced into early marriage and deprived the opportunity to return to school at all. We also anticipate the long-term economic impact of COVID-19 making it particularly hard for young women at the early stages of their careers to access employment.

At WAGGGS, we know that access to a rounded education is a right for all children and access to non-formal education and youth services is a vital part of giving girls a wider range of opportunities for their future. The enabling environment of Girl Guiding and Girl Scouting is particularly critical for girls to develop the self-confidence, resilience and 21st century skills they need to navigate this changing world.

We are seeing WAGGGS Member Organisations around the world responding to this need with innovation and commitment, [using their expertise](#) in the [Girl Guide and Girl Scout educational method](#) to provide virtual activities and adapting their programme so girls can take part in from home, helping give a sense of purpose and meaningful connection that will support their wellbeing at this confusing time.

ACCESS TO A ROUNDED EDUCATION IS A RIGHT FOR ALL CHILDREN

OUR CALL TO ACTION

In today's world and in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we – as the largest voluntary movement for girls and young women worldwide - call upon Governments, institutions and decision-makers to address prevalent inequalities and gender-based violence through the following actions:

- Fully fund frontline women's organisations providing services to women and girls suffering violence
- Provide information in the best accessible way at local and national level on how women and girls experiencing violence can get help.
- Produce public service announcements targeting men perpetrating violence to send a clear message that they will be prosecuted and that violence against women and girls will not be tolerated.
- Emphasise the importance of supporting girls' right to education and that the current situation due to the virus should not put girls at a disadvantage.
- Prioritise supportive policies and investment to address inequalities in access to digital equipment and accessible educational opportunities particularly for girls and vulnerable young people
- Specifically ensure that girls are given additional support to return to school safely
- Support non-profit organisations and youth services working with girls and young women to ensure their sustainability and capacity to support girls and young women in the new landscape created by COVID-19.
- Invest in data collection efforts to understand the nature and scale of violence against girls and track progress. Only 41 per cent of countries regularly produce such data, and data on girls is particularly limited.
- Adopt, strengthen and enforce laws and policies on gender-based violence. Do not allow perpetrators walk away with impunity
- Challenge harmful social norms, by working with faith leaders and communities, and organising public awareness and education campaigns that address inequality and condemn violence. Legislation alone is not enough.
- Integrate education on gender equality and healthy relationships as part of school curricula.
- Meet the needs of girl survivors of violence by providing services, programmes and responses that take into account the best interests of the child.

