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COVID-19 and Girls' Rights: A Series

Part Five: SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS



WITH AND FOR GIRLS

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In this series With and For Girls shares learning, resources, knowledge and calls to action regarding the impact of COVID-19 on girls globally. It draws from the Collective partners, girl leaders at the grassroots level and the leadership team at Purposeful, within which With and For Girls is a programme.

The series will highlight how, in this global health and economic crisis, girls will continue to be the worst affected, and a multitude of issues will be exacerbated, whilst new concerns and inequalities will also arise. We talk to girls in organisations we work with that are responding to unique challenges under COVID-19 and we will highlight the vital work done by girl-led and girl-centred organisations that require urgent additional funding at this critical moment.





A girl participates in a sexual and reproductive health and rights class run by Asociación AMA in Guatemala.

Credit: Morena Perez.

Part Five of the **COVID-19 and Girls' Rights Series** explores the wide ranging and devastating impacts of COVID-19 on the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of girls. Girls who have access to accurate sex education and safe sexual health services attain higher levels of education, have greater access to economic resources and live longer lives than girls who do not. A girl's capacity to choose if and when to have children and to prevent or treat sexually transmitted infections is one of the greatest contributors to her ability to decide on her own future.

This week we spoke with two girl-led and girl-centred sexual and reproductive health and rights providers. Roots of Health provides girls in the Philippines with a range of sexual health services including free contraceptives, pre and post-natal care, STI testing, as well as sex education; it provides these services from both static clinics and within communities that it serves. Asociación AMA (AMA) is a sex education organisation that operates in primary schools to educate children on sexual and reproductive health and runs a Spanish-Mayan language sex education radio programme called The ABC of Sexuality. AMA also trains teachers in how to teach SRHR to children and adolescents and advocates for greater access to contraception and sexual health services.

Access to Services

Governments around the world are taking steps to curb the spread of COVID-19: social distancing measures include curfews, reduction in working hours, working from home, suspension of school and university classes, and closure of 'non-essential' businesses and services. Devastatingly, some services deemed 'non-essential' are those providing critical sexual and reproductive healthcare to girls. Roots of Health was forced to shut all of its static clinics three weeks ago when the government of the Philippines enforced quarantine measures. This means that girls' access to services such as STI tests and treatment, pre and post-natal care and access to contraception has been significantly reduced.



Roots of Health staff provide comprehensive SRHR education. Credit: Katherine Jack.

The Executive Director of Roots of Health, Amina Evangelista Swanepoel tells us, “We’ve been very concerned about the interruption to access to contraception that our enforced lockdown has brought.” During this period, while girls are confined to the home and cohabiting closely with others, and with reduced access to contraceptives experts predict a sharp rise in unplanned pregnancies. In the Philippines, where abortion is illegal and carries a prison sentence, such unplanned pregnancy will change a girl’s life forever.

Roots of Health is working to mitigate COVID-19’s impact on access to contraception by coordinating with the local City Health Office of Puerto Princesa to send clinical team members to deliver contraceptives directly to communities. The impact of government lockdowns on girls’ access to contraception is not confined to the short-term. Roots of Health expressed concerns that their stocks of contraception will diminish should shipping and movement of goods into their province remain limited.

Education and Training

Sexual and reproductive health and rights provision goes far beyond direct service delivery. SRHR providers are vital to the empowerment of girls to make informed

choices about their bodies and sexual activity. As it becomes more difficult to reach girls with accurate SRHR information, organisations are concerned that girls will be left to make decisions about their sexual health without full understanding of options or implications.

AMA works directly with girls but also conducts training with community leaders and teachers so that they can pass on SRHR education to their communities and students. The Guatemalan government has suspended classes at all educational level, meaning a halt to the programmes and training. Leslie Marily Mejía Castellanos, Executive Director of AMA tells us, “this represents a drop in the learning curve for teenage girls and the possibility that they won’t return to school, girls who are indigenous, rural and poor will be most at risk of not returning to education.” There is also great concern that a halt in SRHR training programmes for educators means that when schools do reopen, teachers will be less well equipped to share SRHR information with students at a time when it will be most important.

Information

As clinics shut and training programmes halt, sexual and reproductive health and rights organisations are working to disseminate accurate information to girls with the tools they still have available. Roots of Health is utilising Facebook pages to share SRHR information digitally, while they are using telephone hotlines to advise girls on their sexual health remotely.





Asociación AMA has launched a special Coronavirus season of their Spanish-Mayan bilingual radio programme The ABC of Sexuality. Credit: Morena Perez.

AMA works with hard-to-reach girls in indigenous, rural and poor communities. Mejía Castellanos highlights that the role AMA plays “is vitally important to strengthen the containment and prevention measures of COVID-19, especially in indigenous, rural, poor, remote and difficult to access communities, since they are most vulnerable where the government and NGOs have no physical presence.” She tells us that while the Guatemalan government has implemented a strong COVID-19 information campaign through social media, this mostly reaches urban populations, who have greater access to the internet and basic services, so girls in hard-to-reach communities rely on AMA to provide them with life-saving information. It is here that radio becomes an invaluable tool, since for many girls and families in indigenous, rural and poor communities, radio represents the main, and in some cases only, way they can access information and educational programmes.

In response to COVID-19, and the need to ensure that all girls have access to vital information about the virus and sexual health, AMA has launched a special Coronavirus season of their Spanish-Mayan bilingual radio programme The ABC of Sexuality. The broadcasts are for girls and their families to have access to timely information on containment and prevention of COVID-19, the importance of girls resuming their studies, prevention of violence and government regulations related to the pandemic.

Collapse

Should government measures to contain the virus be unsuccessful, as the Executive Director of AMA predicts, the healthcare systems already in poor condition will collapse under the strain of the pandemic. Such a healthcare collapse will be detrimental to the most vulnerable girls in indigenous, rural and poor communities. When struggling healthcare systems make difficult decisions about which services to resource, the fact is that those catering primarily to girls and women, such as sexual and reproductive healthcare services, are the first to be axed.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights organisations are facing extreme financial hardship, lack of resources and will potentially lose the trained staff essential to deliver

services because of an inability to pay them. Unless funders act now to support SRHR providers and educators, girls coming out of isolation with a range of SRHR needs, including unplanned pregnancies, untreated STIs and trauma of sexual and gender-based violence, will have nowhere to turn to.

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