

COVID-19 and Girls' Rights: A Series

Part Seven: STEM and Digital Media



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.





Feminist Approach to Technology in Delhi. Credit: Mansi Midha.

As education, work and friendships move increasingly online due to COVID-19 social distancing measures, digital equality is more important than ever. Girls' access to and safe use of digital technology can mean the difference between continuing their education and dropping out of school, accessing domestic violence services and continuing to live with abuse, maintaining peer support and emotional isolation or being informed about disease prevention and unintentional spread of infection. Around the world girls are also using their science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), media and leadership skills to protect their communities. We spoke with three organisations from three global regions about the importance of girls' digital engagement and empowerment, and how they are facing the pandemic.

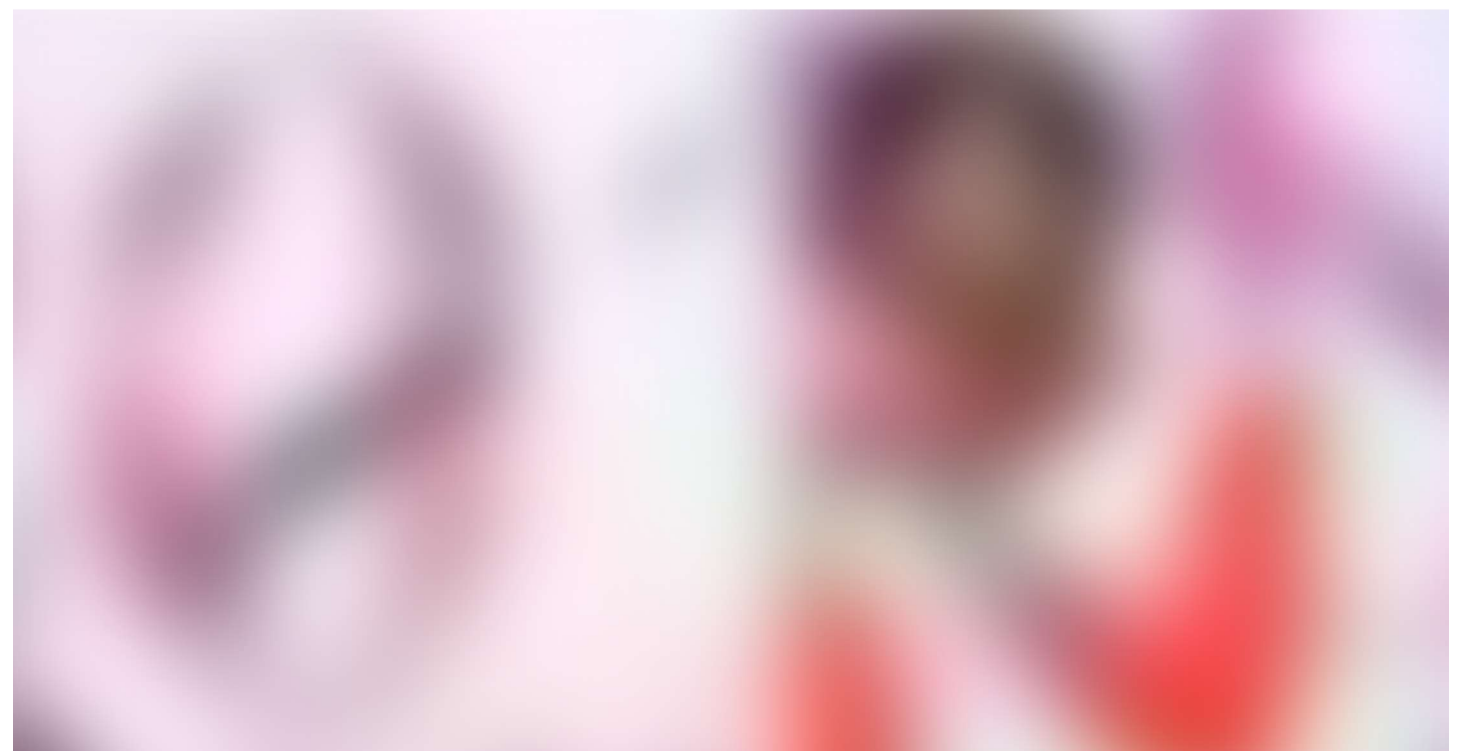
Girls' Voices Initiative, based in Nigeria, was set up in 2013 to promote a girls' rights movement through digital literacy and citizen journalism, so girls can tell their stories to advocate for a better and fairer future. Using the power of digital storytelling to mobilise communities, Girls' Voices Initiative wants to help girls pursue their education and become active members of society. Girls are taught coding, research and design in order to help them come up with tech solutions to social issues affecting their communities. **Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT)** was established in 2007 in India to promote the inclusion of women in STEM. FAT envisages a world where the use, creation, access and innovation of technology is gender neutral. The organisation's flagship project, the Tech Centre, offers technology classes to women and girls. These are combined with workshops on women's rights, feminism and sexuality. **Arab Women in Science and Engineering (AWSc)**, was founded by seven Arab women researchers in STEM in Israel to address the persisting gaps in opportunities for girls and to help them to thrive in STEM fields. It raises awareness of the issues facing women during their studies and careers, and exposes them to the world of entrepreneurship. AWSc provides training on technical skills like coding, as well as in leadership and public speaking through a series of workshops and courses.

Challenges

Girls' Voices Initiative, FAT and AWSc highlight four key impacts of coronavirus on the lives of girls and their communities that cause great concern: increased rates of domestic violence, interruption to girls' education, increased domestic caring

responsibilities undertaken by girls and loss of family income resulting in reduced access to food and supplies.

It is a gravely accepted fact that COVID-19 has already and will continue to exacerbate and deepen existing societal problems and inequalities. Existing poverty places additional strain on girls and their families under the pandemic. “Many people in our communities are struggling with basic food supplies”, says the Executive Director of FAT, Gayatri Buraghain. During times of crisis families living in poverty are forced to dedicate their efforts to basic survival over things like their daughters’ education. Dr Hanan Khamis, Biomedical Engineer and Co-Founder of AWSc, warns that of the girls who are lucky enough not to be married off, many will still experience significant interruption to their education as they become “occupied by ‘helping’ their parents and taking care of their brothers, as the second responsible female in the house, leading to losing focus on their self and their education.” Girls’ Voices Initiative tells us that girls without access to digital technology are even more at risk of domestic violence as they are unable to reach domestic violence hotlines and online services. Carolyn Seaman, Founder and Creative Director of Girls’ Voices Initiative tells us, “In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have been closed and children are stuck at home as the only measure to keep them safe. However, this safety measure also presents a huge potential to negatively impact girls in the long term as many of them are likely to be married off coming out of the pandemic and this will further increase Nigeria’s already alarming indices of out-of-school girls which is currently among the top five in the world with an estimated over 5 million girls out of school.”



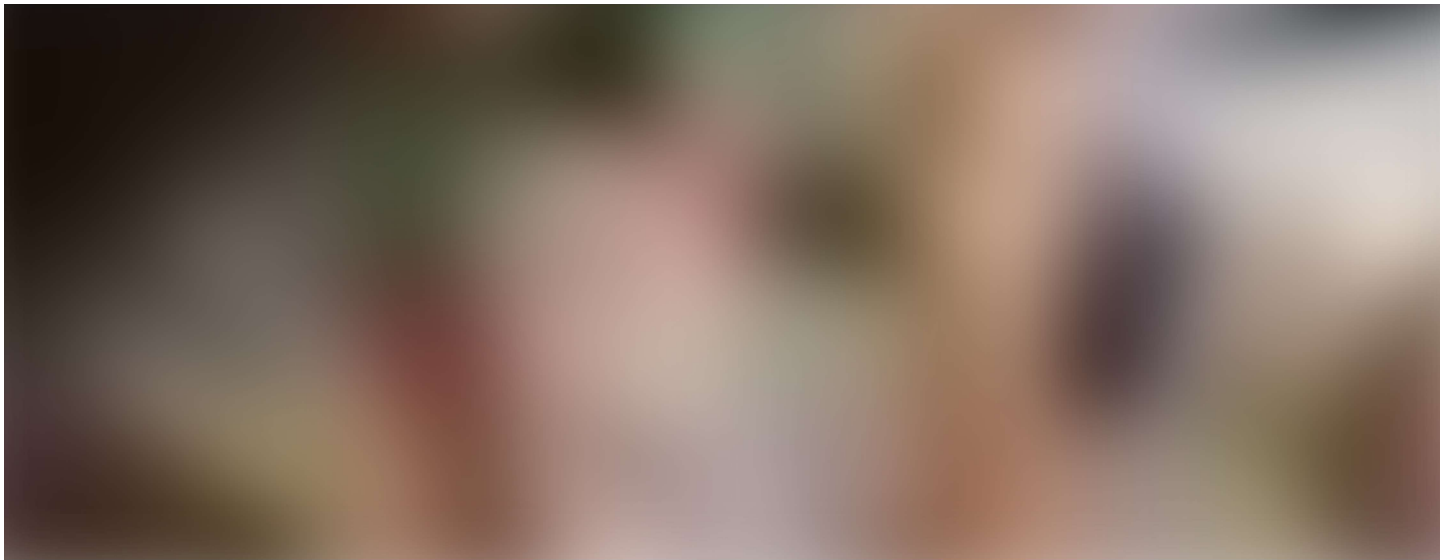


A representative of Girls' Voices Initiative, Nigeria.

Adaptation

During this period, girl-led and -centred organisations are continuing to find creative ways to provide services and opportunities to girls despite the pandemic. When the coronavirus broke out, FAT was in the process of transitioning its structure to total leadership by girls and young women who have graduated from its programmes. However, as the crisis developed, the organisation was forced to shift attention to protecting the immediate community and providing tools for participants to become community leaders in the face of the pandemic. FAT has begun to conduct leadership training via Zoom — aimed at preparing participants to face upcoming challenges caused by the virus — and it is working to bring more and more girls online to join the digital training.

AWSc runs online webinars for girls to engage in scientific discussions and attend seminars on the virus and its impact, giving them an opportunity to learn about the science of the crisis while helping them to connect with one another and access peer-to-peer support. AWSc has also provided training in time management, working from home efficiently and financial management during crisis online, with webinars as well as specific channels for girls to access study support and guidance in shaping their futures. Dr Khamis of AWSc believes that girls' educations can be protected by bringing more lessons and educational resources online and providing girls with the technology to access them. Digital technology and media access not only increases girls' education level and career prospects but is vital to keep them emotionally connected to peers, provide them with psychosocial support and other life saving information and services.



Arab Women in Science and Engineering (AWSc), Israel. Credit: Nadine Qadour.

As Seaman tells us, Girls' Voices Initiative understands that, "we now live in a digital world where digital skills not only empower you positively but also position you for increased opportunities." Girls' Voices Initiative provides coding and technology-driven programmes to promote girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Girls collaborate with the organisation to host hackathons. However, when schools closed, they were forced to take their collaboration onto digital platforms like WhatsApp where the organisation continues to provide them with guidance and organising tools. Girls' Voices Initiative ensures girls continue to connect from home to do maths quizzes and puzzles to keep them exploring their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

Girl-led Solutions

A vital role that girl-led and girl-centered organisations play is supporting girls to be community leaders. During this period of crisis girls have stepped up to protect their communities from the pandemic. As one of the countries hardest hit by the impacts of COVID-19, India has seen widespread social and economic challenges relating to the virus. A team of 75 participants in FAT's youth leadership programme has launched a multilevel campaign to protect their communities. The campaign **कोरोना नहीं, करुणा!** 'Compassion, Not Corona!' is focused on dissemination of accurate information, checking in on harder-to-reach community members such as those who do not have access to phone or internet, distributing food and supplies, promoting anti-discrimination and protecting one another from violence.

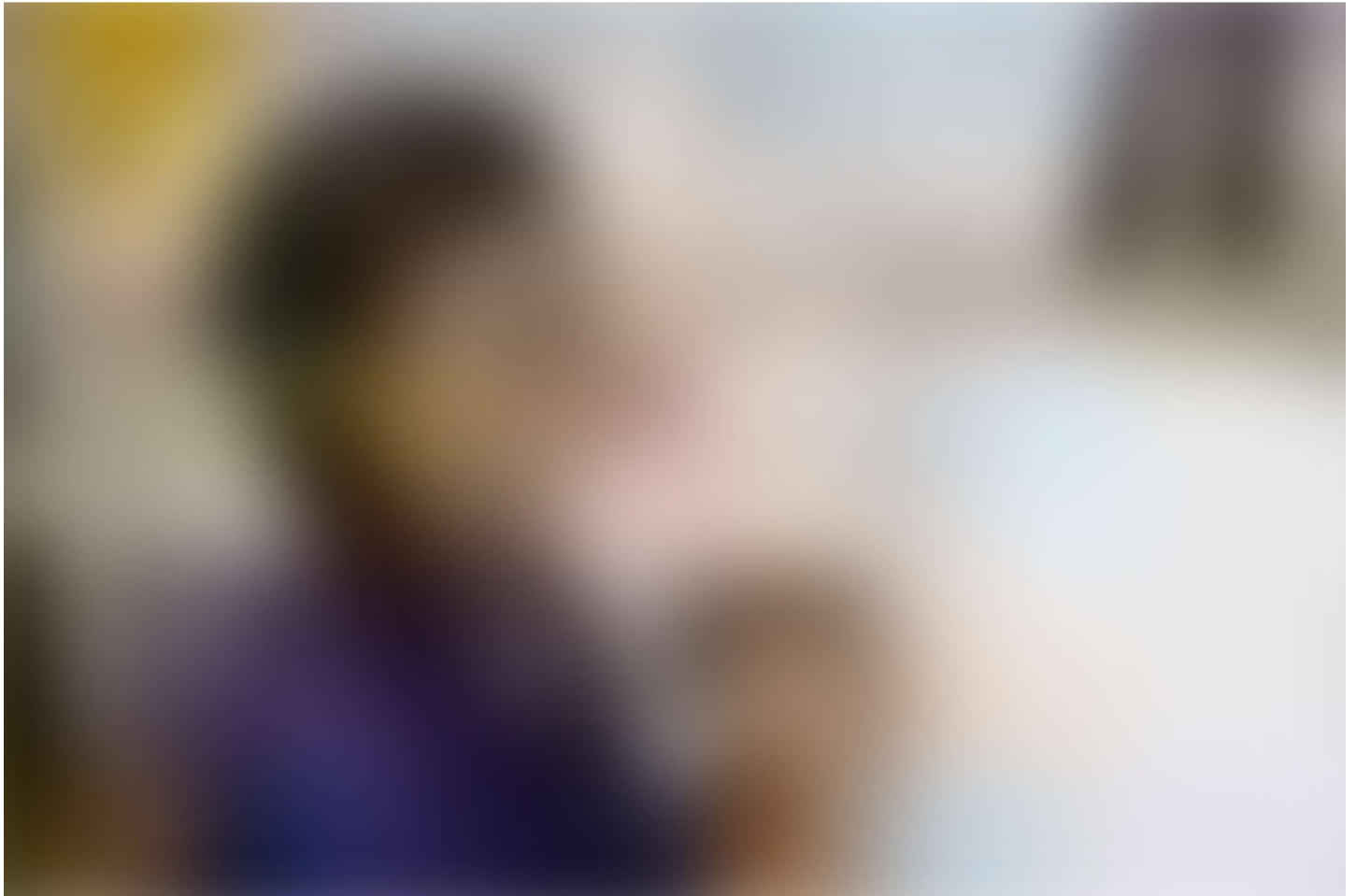
The campaign is divided into three levels:

Level 1 — Ensuring immediate family is informed through accurate sources, ensuring

the family has a plan for precautions to prevent the spread of the virus and accessing government and NGO support if the family is in need.

Level 2 — Sharing accurate information with neighbours and online, using information and technology to help neighbours and online contacts gain access to financial support if needed, and to encourage others to follow Level 1 steps for themselves.

Level 3 — At this level, participants reach out to community members who have lost livelihoods and use information to help the community gain access to support. They also gather the support of the community to intervene in cases of violence and discrimination, and encourage more people to join the campaign.



Feminist Approach to Technology in Delhi. Credit: Mansi Midha.

Hackathons conducted by Girls' Voices Initiative explore innovative solutions to critical social issues affecting girls and women, for example solutions to challenges in Nigeria's justice system especially those affecting girls like child trafficking, rape and sexual violence, drug abuse and corruption.


When the pandemic hit, the girls dedicated their focus on solutions to COVID-19, and have a project underway. Hackathon teams have developed apps to protect girls under lockdown during this time of crisis: one app helps girls to report gender-based violence and connect them to gender-based violence services across Nigeria, while a second app is dedicated to protecting girls' education — girls use the app to report when they are forced to drop out of school or get married, the app connects them to NGOs that can intervene to provide education opportunities, stop underage marriage or provide access to skills training for married girls. The organisation plans to pitch these ideas and demonstrate the prototypes. Seaman tells us, “We find their innovations really inspiring, especially since they will be equally valuable after the lockdown. After the lockdown is eased, we plan to work with the girls to strengthen their innovations so they can launch and get to work to help girls regain their power, and to challenge the violation of their rights by connecting with organisations and institutions that provide the necessary support services the girls need.”


Digital media plays a vital role in protecting girls and women from violence. Girls' Voices Initiative have trained female undergraduates in technical filmmaking and supported girls to produce short films and documentaries as part of a social impact film project. The films highlight social issues to educate people about the rights of girls and women. Some of the films produced highlight sexual violence and its impact on girls and women. They are being promoted online to educate people and facilitate online conversations, comments and discussions around the issue of sexual violence and how to better protect girls and women. The films also aim to educate other at-risk girls and women about how to access various services from counselling and psychosocial support services to shelter or pro-bono legal services, which are vital if girls are going to survive this period.

STEM Media Girls Feminism Community Organizing

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