

Safe Spaces and Girls' Groups Brief

Adolescent Girls Resource Pack



VIOLENCE
AGAINST
WOMEN
AND GIRLS
HELPDESK

Overview

Girls' groups are an increasingly common component of school- and community-based programmes, and evidence suggests that they can be effective in improving outcomes and wellbeing of adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries. Most programmes that use this delivery model utilise a girls-only space (often called a "safe space") where girls meet regularly with a leader (e.g. mentor) who uses a variety of methods to address sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), violence against women and girls (VAWG), HIV, life skills, economic empowerment and other topics. These safe spaces should be ones where girls feel physically and emotionally safe, have freedom to express themselves, and can develop their own agency, leadership and capacities.¹

In the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, it is important to consider how to continue these "safe spaces" whilst adhering to public health measures including social distancing and avoiding gathering in groups. Many programmes already employ a variety of approaches using online platforms, mobile phones, radio and TV. These remote approaches will be increasingly relevant throughout this crisis as a way to connect with girls and continue to provide these vital life skills. Guidance has been developed to provide practical support to service providers running safe spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, which outlines the importance of trying to keep the safe spaces running, where possible, through limiting numbers and adapting activities.²

In this brief, we focus on the two main types of girls' group programmes: community-based girls' groups, and school-based girls' clubs or gender equality clubs.

Much of the guidance and good practice below should continue to be adhered to in the current global crisis, making adaptations to respond to the public health measures as appropriate.

Guidance for practitioners

The most effective girls' group programmes combine the following 6 elements:

- **Multisectoral strategies** that seek to improve girls' self-confidence, health, education, and social connectedness as key mutually reinforcing "assets";
- **Target multiple levels of girls' environments** (boys, male and female parents or caregivers, community members, and wider institutions);
- Are run by carefully selected and well-supported **female mentors**;
- **Adapt programming** to the local context and to the different needs of a diverse range of adolescent girls;
- **Address gender norms and power dynamics** both through the curriculum and wider community engagement; and
- **Employ participatory methods.**³

The following general design features are emerging as good practice.

1. Girls-only safe spaces⁴

These bring adolescent girls and older female mentors together in girls-only groups to build the relationships and critical support that girls often lack. A girls-only safe space allows girls to share openly and participate, making the clubs an effective site for building self-confidence, retaining

information, and developing skills. In some communities, female and male parents and caregivers are more likely to allow their daughters to attend a single-sex programme. The space needs to be accessible (including for marginalised girls such as those with disabilities, or married girls), and acceptable to parents and caregivers, other gatekeepers, and girls themselves. Ways of connecting girls through online platforms or mobile discussions forms can be explored, whilst being mindful of the digital gender divide that exists.⁵

2. Female mentors⁶

Mentor profile and performance is critical to programme success. Mentors are women, ideally young women, from the local community who have navigated challenges like the ones programme participants are experiencing, and who are able to proactively and sensitively engage girls. In school-based clubs, mentors are generally teachers. Mentor roles should include delivering core content, serving as role models, and linking girls who disclose violence to GBV response services. In the current crisis, mentors can continue to engage with girls through mobile messaging and phone calls, as appropriate. Adequate training, supportive supervision, and opportunities for mentors to interact all enhance mentor effectiveness and retention. It is important to consider appropriate compensation based on the commitment required from mentors.

3. Curriculum content⁷

All girls' group programmes include core life skills content, such as building confidence and self-esteem, communication skills, building positive relationships with friends, family and intimate partners, and health and hygiene (including menstrual health and hygiene, and sexual health). In addition, evidence suggests that there are two other elements important for increasing participation, impact, and sustainability of change: (1) gender transformative curriculum content that explicitly addresses gender norms and power dynamics in relationships, especially sexual relationships, and (2) programme components that address girls' economic empowerment, either directly (e.g. cash and asset transfers) or indirectly (e.g. financial literacy or vocational training).

4. Wider community engagement⁸

Although young people, and particularly girls, are the main target group for club-based programmes, there is growing recognition that programmes must also work with female and male parents, caregivers and community 'gatekeepers', given their power to make decisions that affect adolescent girls' lives, and to challenge inequitable gender norms. Programmes, therefore, increasingly hold outreach and education sessions for parents and other community members and, in some cases, have provided classes, e.g. [Ishraq](#) in Egypt, [Biruh Tesfa](#) in Ethiopia, and [Speak Out](#) in Rwanda.

5. Access to GBV response services⁹

Girls' groups often explore reproductive health, safety, and other life skills topics, and can thus result in high levels of disclosure of GBV by adolescent girls. Establishing linkages to quality, survivor-centred GBV response services and referral mechanisms should be part of all girls' group programming. Signposting girls to hotlines and available online reporting or support services will be critical during periods of restricted face to face activities. For programmes working with younger adolescent girls, this should be underpinned by child protection principles that ensure the programme acts in the best interest of the child. Mentors should have background checks, and be trained to recognise violence, and use reporting and referral mechanisms. Programme budgets need to be sufficient to pay for these services where required and where girls' families cannot or will not pay. Programmes also need to routinely assess whether locally available GBV response services meet minimum standards and invest in multicomponent programming (inclusive of GBV response) when operating in contexts without a viable, safe and accessible GBV response system. For longer-term girls' group programming, it is critical to invest in strengthening of community and government systems and services in contexts where these are weak, hard to access or unsafe, to ensure a sufficient level of capacity to handle referrals and provide adolescent-friendly services and response.

6. Boys¹⁰

The importance of engaging with men and boys to shift attitudes and norms related to gender equality is increasingly acknowledged. Programmes should consider running additional activities with adolescent boys to decrease backlash and accelerate norm change. Where appropriate, having some mixed sessions is valuable to enable boys to hear girls'

perspectives and to support a more gender transformative approach, with some evidence of results around boys' improved gender equitable attitudes and improved relationships.

7. Gender norms and power dynamics¹¹

Girls' lives are shaped by gender norms and power dynamics that create barriers to their participation in and benefit from girls' groups. Challenging these gendered power dynamics is crucial and should be considered at all stages of the programme cycle. Programming should consider potential barriers to girls' participation (e.g. disproportionate care work burdens, restrictions on girls' mobility, digital gender divide) and develop spaces where all girls feel safe (emotionally and physically), have the opportunity to express themselves freely, are able to identify their own issues, and can develop and exercise their leadership skills.

8. Programme delivery approaches¹²

How programmes are delivered is just as important for impact as what is delivered. There are four well-evidenced delivery approaches that increase reach, impact, equity and scale impacts:

- **Community-based programmes can help reach marginalised adolescents**, such as girls who are married, out-of-school, and/or girls with disabilities, who are most at risk and who are likely to be overlooked without intentional efforts to reach them. Many of these girls miss out on school-based programming. The Population Council Girl Roster¹³ is a useful tool to understand girls' communities and identify at-risk girls.
- **Frequent meetings** (at least once a week), over a longer time frame (a year or longer) delivered in "segments" or modules (with breaks in between, for example during school vacations) improve outcomes for girls. Girls are more likely to attend regularly and participate more actively when others in the group share their distinct characteristics, such as age or marital status, and when they are both involved in the design of the programme, increasing programme relevance, and engaged through a learner-centred, interactive pedagogy.
- **Facilitator training, refresher training and regular support/ mentoring for facilitators are important** for providing the space to critically examine facilitators' own attitudes on gender, power and girls' rights, and to continue to develop their skills to provide the participatory methods, safe spaces and critical reflection necessary to support transformational girls' groups. Without this training and support, it is common for facilitators to reinforce stereotypical gender attitudes instead of more egalitarian ones, and to default to non-participatory styles. Training and support in quality control and monitoring is also essential.
- **Identify platforms to reach girls at scale.** Promising approaches include utilising school-based classes that address gender and power dynamics and extra-curricular clubs (which can reach a greater number of girls, including those out of school, who are generally more likely to face higher risks of adverse outcomes than in-school girls), and engaging community service providers, such as health workers.

Key Evidence

Impact evaluations of girls' group programming often have mixed and non-comparable results. However, evidence reviews have found that girls' groups are most effective at improving beliefs and attitudes on gender and health compared to other outcomes. They are also effective, though slightly less so, in improving knowledge and awareness on gender, health, and health-related behaviour. They are least effective (in order of effect from greatest to least) on psycho-social empowerment, economic empowerment, education-related outcomes, and health status. E.g. 'Choices', a curriculum-based programme to shift gender-related attitudes and behaviours of mixed groups of girls and boys in rural Nepal, reduced girls' and boys' acceptance of gender-based violence.

Approaches that engage with girls' broader environments are relatively new, but there is emerging evidence that these approaches can encourage changes in attitudes, behaviours and gender norms.¹⁴ E.g. In Bangladesh, girls in communities where the BALIKA programme was implemented were between 23% and 31% less likely to be married as children.¹⁵

Programmes that aim to guide girls to the labour market tend to be single-sex vocational skills training programmes rather than girls' group programmes. Some of these include curricular elements like girls' groups, such as life skills training. They have been successful in increasing girls' employment, savings accounts, and household assets, and in decreasing economic abuse and food insecurity. Attempts to increase girls' earnings and savings have had mixed success.¹⁶ E.g. The EPAG programme in Liberia (for older adolescent girls and young women) provided six months of classroom-based technical and life skills training, followed by six months of follow-up support to enter wage employment or start a business. The EPAG programme increased employment by 47% and earnings by 80%.¹⁷



Evidence Gaps¹⁸

Key research questions based on evidence include:

IMPACT:

- What are the best ways to integrate boys into programming to promote more equitable gender norms? Should boys engage through mixed-sex groups or parallel programmes, and if so, when and how?
- Who are clubs including, what are the barriers to participation and how can these be addressed?
- What is the most effective way to engage male and female parents and caregivers, and husbands of married girls to ensure that the most vulnerable girls do not miss out, and to support positive parenting and gender norm change?
- What is the best way to strengthen broader linkages to the community – in particular, government officials, community and religious leaders, and health workers?
- What is the effectiveness of engaging girls through mobile technology and on-line platforms?
- To what extent are sports programmes effective in challenging norms about suitable activities for girls, and boosting girls' self-confidence?
- What are the differential impacts on diverse girls within girls' groups?

SCALE:

- What is the minimum package of elements required to have an effect, and what are optimal design models (including dosage, duration, and trade-offs between efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equity)?
- How can effective programmes be scaled sustainably, for example through government systems?
- What is the effectiveness of approaches to widening impact – such as encouraging participants to share knowledge with others?

SUSTAINABILITY OF IMPACTS:

- What is the durability of different effects?
- Can effects be transformative in the longer term?
- What would help sustain impacts for girls?

COST-EFFECTIVENESS:

What is the cost-effectiveness of girls' groups approaches compared to other potential approaches?¹⁹ This is particularly important when looking at issues such as child marriage, where are multiple approaches to achieving this outcome, and in regard to neglected girls' outcomes such as mental health and nutrition.

CASE STUDY: GIRL SHINE²⁰

Girl Shine was developed specifically for use in humanitarian settings. It has an additional focus on safety, identifying risks and dangers and ensuring protective mechanisms are in place.

The Girl Shine approach is asset-based and engages all key stakeholders in the protection of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings, including girls with disabilities, married girls, and refugee and internally displaced girls.

The five core components of the Girl Shine Model are:

1. A girls-only safe space allows for consistent access to programming and provides a trusted environment where girls can express and be themselves. Girl-only spaces help to reduce risks and prevent further harm during acute emergency responses
2. Life skills groups are at the heart of the programme, and are tailored to girls according to age, experience and situation.
3. Older adolescent girls and young women from the local community are recruited as mentors, expanding the safety network for girls and allowing for sustainability and ongoing solidarity.
4. Female and male parents and caregivers are engaged wherever possible, to reduce risk and help support girls to apply new skills and knowledge in their home environment. There is a parallel curriculum for parents and caregivers.
5. Wider community engagement is actively encouraged. Staff work with the community and service providers to enable girls to access the programme and other critical services.
6. GBV response services are required to be established before implementation of Girl Shine to ensure access to quality, adolescent girl friendly services.



Further literature:

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