

# **COVID In Her Voice**

## **A Girl-led and centred Participatory Research Study**

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Listening to the Voices of Girls**



The true and long-term impact of COVID-19 is not yet known. This is especially true of those most marginalised, including girls. But what we do know is that girls' lives have dramatically changed because of the pandemic. In cities, girls have always been invisible citizens; the lockdown and curfews have further denied them access to the communities where they live, study, and work.

In this pivotal moment, one year since COVID-19 began to take hold, we have the opportunity to “unlearn” what has not been effective until now and build back in a more inclusive manner. At EMpower, we believe that girls are experts on their own lives and best positioned to provide meaningful guidance to practitioners and policymakers. We sought to better understand their current realities and to hear directly from them about their concerns and priorities. So we set out to intentionally listen to girls, centre their voices, entrust them with decision-making responsibilities, and invest in them.

With support from the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), we created the EMpower Leaders Lab, a three-month participatory action research project. Through the initiative, 25 girls from urban areas in India were trained as leaders and then went out and interviewed 153 other girls in their communities. The girl leaders were in charge of the design and implementation of the research and analysed their findings.

The respondents not only shared how their lives have been impacted by COVID19, but they also gave advice about how best to think about COVID-19 reconstruction. Our biggest learning from the girls has been that they are looking beyond the short-term; they are urging us to effect systemic change—as schools, markets, economies, and societies gradually reopen.

This research aligns with multiple policy frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which we have used to frame the findings as well as the girls' advice. The report shares the insights of girls from cities throughout India on how to build a more just and equitable world and shows us girls' potential and right to author their own futures.

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# What Did We Do?

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**This project comprised 4 phases:**

## Phase I - Launching the Leaders Lab

Twenty-five leaders, aged 13-24 were selected to be the first members of the Leaders Lab from Ahmedabad, Alwar, Bareilly, Delhi, Lucknow, Mumbai, and Pune.

## Phase II - Designing and Vetting the Research Plan

EMpower staff engaged with seven girl leaders to develop the questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 48 close-ended and three open-ended questions. EMpower then curated and facilitated two sets of online masterclasses to equip the girl leaders with technical and soft research skills.

## Phase III - Field Research

The girl leaders conducted research in their communities, interviewing six girls each.

## Phase IV - Data Analysis and Insights

EMpower presented preliminary trends and findings to the girl leaders for their analysis in a masterclass, and the girl leaders ultimately decided what was featured in the final report. EMpower staff also engaged a group of sector specialists, who provided their perspectives and insights on the preliminary findings, which were incorporated into the final report.

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# How has COVID 19 affected girls?



## Intersections with the Sustainable Development Goals

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**SDG 5: Gender Equality**

**SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities**



**Before the lockdown I only had to help my mother in the evening but now I am expected to work with her all day. – Age 22, Pune**

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing gender inequities for adolescent girls and young women. The lockdown increased unpaid care work, early marriage, exclusion, neglect, and the closing up of spaces for mutual support and solidarity.

**80%** of girls said that household chores continue to be their responsibility.

**42%** of girls believe that the pressure to get married has increased due to COVID-19.

### Analysis by the Girl Leaders

The leaders highlighted that COVID-19 has led to additional restrictions on girls, worsened by pervasive myths, rumours and incorrect information. Because many of the girls didn't have phones and couldn't meet their friends, they were more reliant on adults or other family members.

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## SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

### Mental Health

Nearly half reported negative thoughts and less motivation to do activities that they would otherwise enjoy.

“I feel depressed and helpless, not wanting to do anything. I am constantly worried and scared like never before.” –Age 16, Mumbai

**90%** of girls reported experiencing mental distress and despair.

### Analysis by the Girl Leaders

The leaders noted that most respondents reported at least one mental health challenge. None of them had any information on coping mechanisms except expressing a desire to talk to their friends or teachers, instead of their family members.

### Physical Health

“Earlier, we would visit the nearest government hospital. But the lockdown prevented this. Also, private hospitals were out of reach as they are expensive.” –Age 22, Delhi

**53%**



Of the respondents who needed to visit a doctor during COVID-19 and the lockdown, 53% reported that they could not visit when they needed to.

**95%**

had access to masks and sanitizers

**33%**

believed they could not maintain physical distancing

**27%**

reported they had less access to sanitary products due to COVID-19

### Analysis by the Girl Leaders

The girls agreed that because of COVID-19, resources were diverted from routine health services, which further limited the ability of marginalised communities and vulnerable individuals to access basic healthcare. Additionally, the girls and their families faced economic burdens that diminished their capacity to obtain and afford health services and menstrual products.

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## SDG 4: Quality Education

“I am not able to understand the online lessons and I can't speak to teachers and classmates to clear my doubts.” –Age 17, Ahmedabad

**64%**

of girls and young women do not have the space or get the time to study online

**28%**

of the girls attending school do not have the tools to learn online

### Analysis by the Girl Leaders

The leaders noted that many girls did not have the resources, technology, or equipment to attend digital school. They expressed having difficulty keeping up with their studies and could no longer interact directly with their teachers, or receive support from classmates. At the same time, the girl leaders mentioned that there are benefits to online learning because girls who might have otherwise been pulled out of school now have had the opportunity to continue their education.

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## SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

### Analysis by the Girl Leaders

The leaders noted that the respondents had limited access to money and increased household expenditures because everyone in the family was at home. The girls mentioned the additional expense of having to buy new phones resulted in increased economic burden. However, 82% of respondents felt hopeful about their career prospects. This is because civil society and the government became much more visible and were seen as positive forces in the community during the lockdown.

**“ I am applying for jobs but not getting any. There are no jobs due to the lockdown.**

**–Age 21, Lucknow**

**82%**

of respondents wish they could approach someone for career counselling and employability advice

**28%**

of respondents said they had to discontinue skills-training because of COVID-19

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## SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

**“ I can't even go to the community toilet near my home due to COVID lockdown rules. I faced violence when I tried to access the toilet. I have to go to another community to access the toilet, which is far from home. –Age 22, Mumbai**

### Advice from the Girls

Mobility for girls has always been an issue, but the limited access to public transportation during the pandemic—especially buses, trains, and auto-rickshaws—further constrained them. The girls also shared that the fear and threat of violence intensified the restrictions on their life choices and freedom.

**49%**

reported decreased mobility and faced more barriers

**26%**

respondents believe there has been an increase in GBV

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## What advice do the girls have for us?

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The respondents came up with 37 pieces of advice, which the girl leaders prioritized, the priority recommendations are:



### SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

We believe that these two goals lie at the core of the girls' recommendations and are central to achieving all the other SDGs.

#### With Communities

Develop informed perspectives on gender equality that value girls, their decisions, and choices.

#### With Girls

Enable girls and young women to know and exercise their rights and freedoms.

#### SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing

##### Mental Health

Invest in counselling girls and young women to deal with depression and stress.

##### Menstruation

Make sanitary pads more widely available and affordable.

Reduce the shame and stigma around menstruation.

##### Healthcare Facilities and Access

Invest in counselling girls and young women to deal with depression and stress.

#### SDG 4 Quality Education

##### Financial Support

Provide free good quality education for girls beyond Grade 8.

##### Safe Schools

Invest in educational infrastructure, including girls-only schools.

##### Digital Education Access

Advance access to digital education.

Invest in blended learning options beyond the pandemic.

#### SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth

##### Training

Invest in technical, skills-building and employability training and include self-efficacy and leadership training as part of the curriculum.

##### Job Creation

Develop policies and programs focused on job creation.

Consider job opportunities for those with disabilities and those who are less literate.

##### Right to Work

Acknowledge the value of women's (paid and unpaid) work and ensure equal pay for equal work.

#### SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities

##### Infrastructure

Improve basic infrastructure, including: housing, clean toilets, safe and affordable transportation, streetlights, water supply, and electricity.

##### Public Safety and Mobility

Enhance law enforcement to prevent sexual abuse and violence against women and girls by engaging the police, increasing patrolling, and acting against perpetrators.

Invest in community interventions to enhance girls' safety and mobility, enabling them to access opportunities and resources without the fear of violence or sexual abuse.

Engage with community members, boys, and girls to end victim-blaming and ensure that GBV is not normalised.

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## What can the global community do to support girls?

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EMpower worked with the girl leaders to conduct an exercise to map their priority recommendations against various stakeholders who could play an important role in actualizing their recommendations. They did this by coming up with specific asks and then prioritizing as follows:

### Reform.

Incremental changes that can immediately be made to existing policies, schemes or interventions

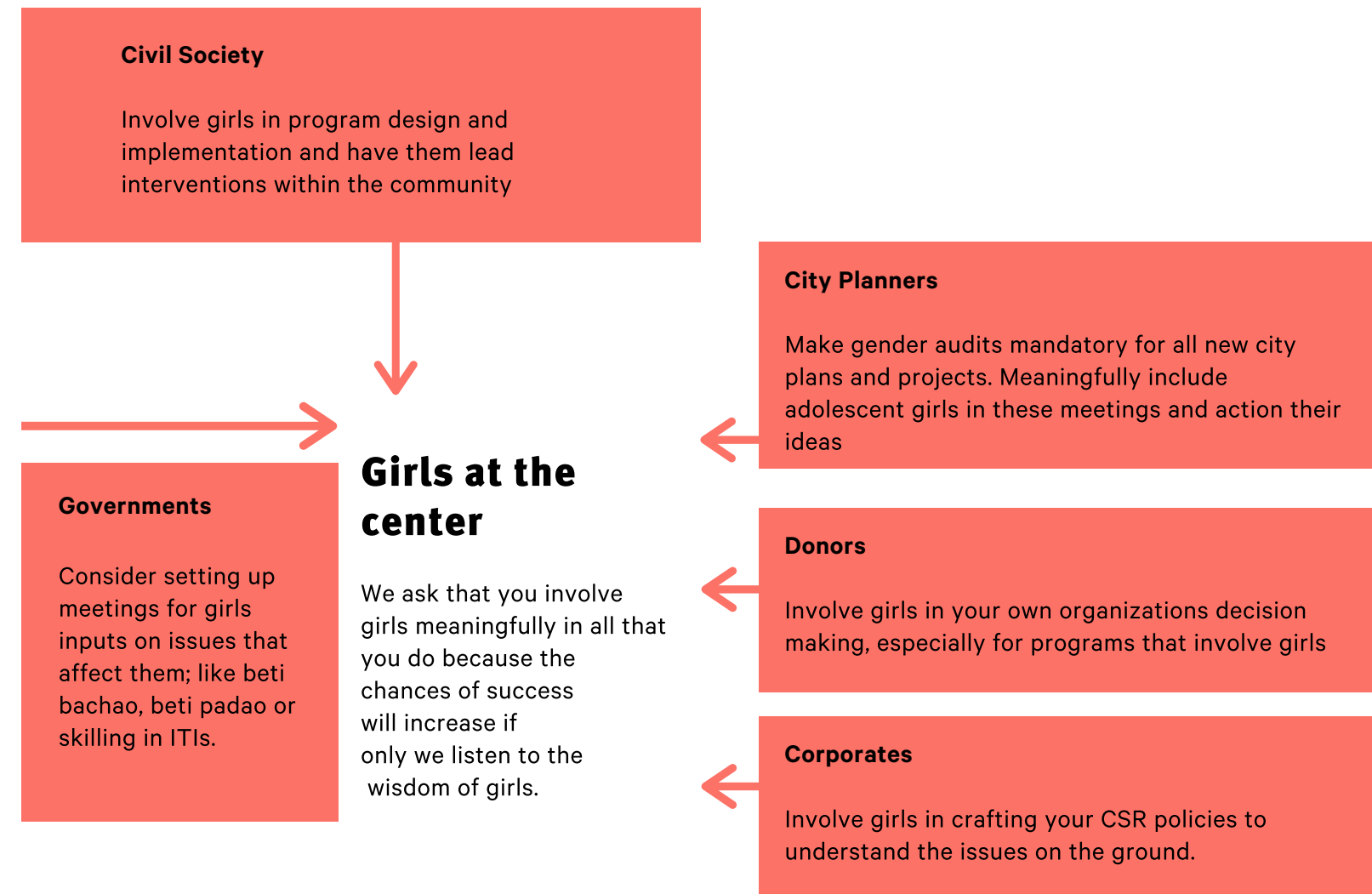
### Transform.

New ideas, which can be implemented if the stakeholders involved have the conviction to implement these

### Aspire.

Aspirational, visionary ideas – which can help to chart the direction of travel in realizing the vision of the girls advice and recommendations

**However, in order to realise any of these suggestions the very first step is a seat at the table...**



	Governments	City Planners	Civil Society	Donor Agencies	Corporates
REFORM					
<p><b>Modify curricula so that it:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• integrates mental health with sexual reproductive health</li> <li>• works with boys on the issue of GBV</li> <li>• includes “essential” (soft) skills and exposure to multiple career options</li> <li>• involves a blended learning option</li> </ul>	<p>Conduct audits of existing textbooks to identify gaps.</p> <p>Include new modules in the school curricula.</p>		<p>Co-author these curricula.</p> <p>Support and re-nforce curricula through your own programs.</p>	<p>Fund these programs as part of your strategy.</p>	<p>Offer internships and structure volunteering programs to reinforce these themes.</p>
<p><b>Engage girls in decision making, city-mapping and enable their visibility through campaigns.</b></p>	<p>Use the girls’ city mapping when assessing gaps in law enforcement and infrastructure.</p>	<p>Solicit girls’ advice while conducting infrastructural repairs in communities.</p> <p>Conduct a mapping of restrictions girls face in accessing public spaces to inform new projects.</p> <p>Make girls and women visible in public places through a campaign to claim their right to the city/public places.</p>	<p>Engage with city planners on new plans and projects to ensure that the voices of those at the margins are included in city plans.</p>	<p>Fund programs that facilitate girls’ voices to be heard and issues to be made visible to policy makers.</p>	
<p><b>Internships, job placements and connectivity to markets through multi-stakeholder collaboration.</b></p>	<p>Work with corporates to understand which skills are being sought in the market when designing programs.</p>		<p>Work with corporates to plan curricula and connect program participants to internships.</p>		<p>Work with civil society to create internship programs.</p> <p>Co-create the curricula based on what the market needs.</p> <p>Publicize vacancies with civil society organizations and government skilling programs.</p>
<p><b>Facilitate girls’ access to the internet.</b></p>	<p>Create subsidies for data packs for adolescent girls.</p>	<p>Create the infrastructure for free WiFi in the community.</p>	<p>Create a computer room where girls can get online and work with gatekeepers who limit girls access to technology.</p>		

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<b>TRANSFORM</b>					
<b>Invest in city health clinics.</b>	Invest in urban healthcare infrastructure across the country.	Create spaces for city clinics within the community in close proximity to where girls live.			
<b>Set up digital hubs in the community with charging stations and WiFi access, especially in smaller cities.</b>	Allocate a budget for digital hubs in the community.	Create spaces for digital hubs in the community.	Train teachers to conduct blended learning programs at the digital hubs.	Adopt digital hubs in the community and fund civil society programs in these hubs.	
<b>Mainstream messaging around mental health and menstruation.</b>	Actively begin judgment-free messaging in official communications.	Put up signs, posters, and commission wall painting in the community.	Work with families and communities to speak about these issues.	Include and fund these issues in your organizational strategy.	Volunteer in the community to speak about these issues.
<b>Establish girl friendly spaces within the community including skills training centers and violence-free spaces for girls to congregate.</b>	Allocate a budget for these centers.	Create girls-only spaces within the community in city plans.	Develop the curricula and run programs in these centers.	Adopt and fund these centers.	
<b>Provide well-maintained, safe, and free toilets in close proximity to the community.</b>	Ensure that free toilets are built and take responsibility for their upkeep.	Include plans for a sufficient number of free toilets in close proximity to where girls live.			
<b>ASPIRE</b>					
<b>Offer free, good-quality education and access to schools.</b>	Make secondary school free up to class 12.	Ensure that schools are in close proximity to the community.  When planning the location of schools, consider girls' transportation options.	Work with parents to ensure that girls are not withdrawn from schools.		
<b>Provide gender-sensitization training for all law enforcement divisions.</b>	Invest in gender-sensitization training for all law enforcement divisions with a mandatory annual certification.		Work with law enforcement on the training and annual certification.		
<b>Shift the narrative around equal work for equal pay.</b>		Fund artists to paint city walls to amplify the importance of equal pay for equal work.			Make salaries more transparent, devise formal mechanisms to declare equal pay for women and men in your organization.



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## Where do we go from here?

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As we think about post-COVID-19 reconstruction and different ways of supporting underserved communities, this moment provides us with a unique opportunity. The aim should not be to go back to the way things were, because the pre-COVID ‘normal’ was detrimental for many adolescent girls in India and globally. Now is the time to pivot, to not only listen to what girls are saying, but to leverage their deep insights and implement them in our work. While the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have caused deep hardship for many, rebuilding also gives us a chance to create better realities for girls, families, and communities.

At the heart of transformative change lies partnership, therefore we invite you to:

- 1. Use this information**
- 2. Support and fund girl-led decisions**
- 3. Build a coalition of like-minded partners**

As funders, practitioners, policymakers, and academics, we must act on girls’ recommendations and allocate resources to support them. Only when we heed girls’ advice, can we expect the “next normal” to address systemic gender inequities.