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## The impact of COVID-19 on opportunities for adolescent girls and the role of girls' groups

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### Executive Summary

COVID-19 has disrupted lives, networks, and institutions across social, economic, and health dimensions around the globe. We examine how the pandemic has affected adolescent girls and young women in particular, and explore how group-based programs for girls in low- and middle-income countries have been affected by and are responding to the pandemic.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected adolescent girls and young women across multiple outcomes, including education, livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health, sexual- and gender-based violence, the burden of unpaid care, and early and forced marriage. These heightened barriers to economic and social opportunities and the resulting loss of human capital have the potential to derail progress towards gender equality unless recognized and addressed.
2. Girls' groups may offer potential pathways of resilience for girls during system shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, though more evidence is needed on their effects and how they function when social connectivity and mobility are heavily restricted, limiting program implementation.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped how girls' groups function and has expanded their roles. Insights shared by 12 girl-centered programs revealed the following:
  - Program implementation has been most affected by mobility restrictions, such as lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, which undermine the defining strategy of meeting with participants in groups.
  - Mentors—especially those from the communities in which they work—play a fundamental role in programming, and in reaching girls.
  - Gender disparities in ownership of and access to digital devices have limited technology's role in providing solutions.
  - The most vulnerable girls, such as those living in abusive households, are also the most difficult to reach and support.
  - As households report critical unmet needs (e.g., income loss and food insecurity), programs' roles have expanded to include a greater emphasis on facilitating the provision of basic services and resources for girls, their families, and their communities.
  - Organizations that have invested in girls' and women's economic empowerment may be better positioned to support innovation among mentors and their community, drawing on existing programs or models to support income generation and small businesses.
  - Girls' access to distance-learning resources during school closures varies by setting. Some programs have been able to support and supplement girls' learning during the pandemic—for instance, by providing written materials for learning.
4. Girls' groups offer a unique opportunity to identify and deliver interventions to vulnerable communities during crises, and many programs have seen a shift and expansion in their roles during the pandemic. Evaluating the success of these efforts will require adaptive research strategies, but programs have demonstrated their potential to achieve the following:
  - Use mentors to reach girls during the pandemic—including those without phone access—in order to provide essential support and services.
  - Deliver critical information on COVID-19, aid (e.g., masks, food), learning materials, psychosocial support, and program materials in person, and sometimes digitally.
  - Facilitate income generation or support business entrepreneurs.
  - Connect regional efforts with community action involving mentors and girls.
5. We urge decision makers, donors, and researchers to invest in generating data and evidence to assess how COVID-19 is affecting adolescent girls and young women, and to evaluate the potential roles and effects of girls' groups in the immediate and longer-term.

<sup>1</sup> Population Council

<sup>2</sup> American Institutes for Research



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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in pervasive disruptions across social, economic, and health dimensions in all communities. Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) are particularly affected by interruptions to essential services, and by the loss of protective environments and social support networks as schools and youth programs close. The impacts of COVID-19 are especially acute among poor and marginalized populations, and the pandemic is quickly evolving in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The number of new COVID-19 cases has risen sharply across many LMICs, which as of late June 2020, represent nine of the 10 countries with the highest number of cases reported daily: Brazil, India, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Iran,<sup>3</sup> South Africa, and Russia (John Hopkins University, 2020). To control the spread of COVID-19, many countries have implemented prevention and mitigation measures, from national lockdowns to stay-at-home orders and curfews. However, implementing these policies—as well as guidelines on social distancing, hand washing and personal protective equipment (PPE)—is not feasible in all communities (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2020; Poole et al., 2020; Shuchman, 2020). Moreover, strategies that are intended to slow the spread of COVID-19 collaterally cause unemployment, education disruption, food insecurity, and reductions in health services and supplies among already vulnerable populations. These consequences intersect with gender and age in distinct ways. Placing programs that promote gender equality on hold for 4 years due to the pandemic could remove \$5 trillion from global GDP by 2030 (Gates, 2020). In many settings, women and girls are also at increased risk during an epidemic (or pandemic) because they are responsible for caring for children and the elderly at home, and often account for more than half of the healthcare workforce (Wenham et al., 2020).

Despite the bleak circumstances, there is potential for adaptation and resilience. Adolescent girls' groups offer protective and supportive spaces in which participants can build the foundations for health, social, and economic success. These groups may also provide mechanisms or assets that girls can draw upon in order to cope during system shocks and mitigate adverse outcomes. A number of commentaries have been written on the pandemic's gendered effects on development issues, such as schooling and sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV) (Burzynska & Contreras, 2020; Tang et al., 2020), and the Evidence Consortium on Women's Groups (ECWG) has examined the impact of the pandemic on women's groups (de Hoop et al., 2020). However, there has not yet been a multisectoral analysis of the potential effects on livelihood and economic

<sup>3</sup> Iran is in its second wave of the epidemic (June 2020).

opportunities for AGYW living in LMICs, or the role girls' groups may play in mitigating adverse impacts. In this brief, we examine how AGYW's social and economic opportunities are being transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic and explore the innovative efforts of organizations working with these populations to adapt to the shifting context, with an emphasis on group-based approaches for AGYW.

We begin by summarizing how COVID-19 has affected AGYW across multiple outcomes, including food security, livelihoods, education, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and SGBV. We then present insights from experts in AGYW programming in a diverse set of LMICs on how COVID-19 has affected their participants and group activities. Lastly, we share key themes and discuss implications for policy, practice, and research.

## Methods and Hypothesized Pathways

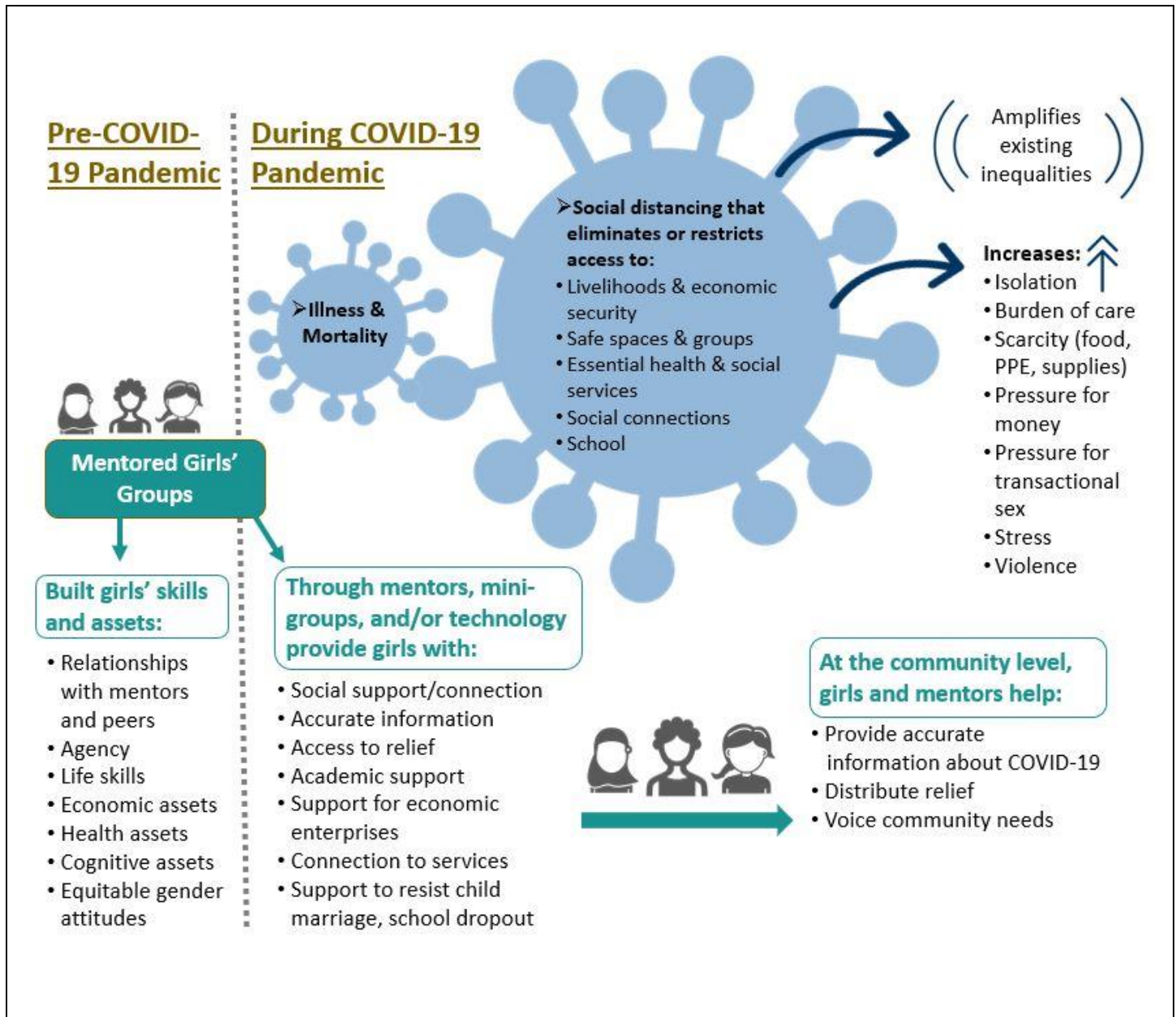
We performed a rapid literature review on the effects of COVID-19 and past external shocks on AGYW<sup>4</sup> and group-based programs for adolescent girls, highlighting findings from phone surveys conducted between April and June 2020 among cohorts of girls and their households, as well as interviews with experts in girl-centered programming on how COVID-19 has affected AGYW and program implementation. Informal interviews and e-mail exchanges were conducted remotely in June and July 2020 with leaders and senior staff from nine non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and we drew on three case studies presented at *Adaptations in Crisis*<sup>5</sup> (April 2020; Population Council 2020b). These individuals represent diverse programs in multiple countries, including Bangladesh, Benin, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Niger, Mozambique, and Tanzania. This brief analyzes relevant data and experiences that can contribute to our understanding of COVID-19's impact and the role of girls' groups during crises. We hope the brief can spark new directions in research and inform the field's response to the pandemic by sharing both challenging and creative program experiences. We note the following limitations: Phone surveys were conducted with existing cohorts of adolescent girls and are not representative at the country level, sampling bias is possible due to unequal access to phones, and the groups represented by experts are a selected sample.

Despite the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19, there are several possible avenues through which girls' groups can make a difference. Figure 1 depicts the potential pathways that we set out to explore in our analysis. We hypothesized that the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced or eliminated the supportive social networks available to girls through school closures, social distancing protocols, and interrupted group meetings. For individual girls, having been and being part of a group may provide resources and assets that can be drawn upon for support and to mitigate the consequences of COVID-19. Evidence also suggests that community engagement and trust are essential components in controlling and diminishing the effects of disease outbreaks (Lau et al., 2020; Marston et al., 2020). Girls' groups may offer a valuable route through which to connect with and involve the community in prevention, relief and recovery efforts, as well as potentially lessen the pervasive impacts of COVID-19 on AGYW. At a very basic but essential level, the relationships forged in groups prior to the pandemic may evolve and provide an important point of contact for accurate information, emergency resources, or simple human interaction. Achieving any of this when a fundamental organizing principle of girls' groups—meeting together in groups—is forbidden or discouraged as part of government mitigation efforts is a daunting task. As COVID-19 continues to evolve into an incomparable public health and economic crisis, it is unclear whether these groups can effectively work to empower girls and improve well-being during such an emergency.

<sup>4</sup> AGYW is defined in this brief as girls and women aged 10 to 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Adaptations in Crisis* is a webinar presented by the Population Council's [Adolescent Girls Community of Practice](#), focused on disseminating information on different models and experiences of girls' programs during COVID-19 (Population Council, 2020b).

Figure 1. Hypothesized Pathways: COVID-19's Multisectoral Impacts on AGYW and the Roles of Girls' Groups in Relief and Recovery



## The Multiple Impacts of COVID-19 on AGYW

Evidence continues to emerge on the diverse consequences AGYW are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Box 1). Though effective biomedical solutions to COVID-19 are on the horizon, extended seclusion and decreased learning and economic opportunities are poised to have a lasting impact on the lives of AGYW. This is most worrying for AGYW who are living in poverty and those who are often invisible, including migrants, refugees and internally displaced people, domestic and sex workers, and girls with disabilities. Disruptions to schooling, livelihoods, and health will have lasting effects on girls' social and economic opportunities and well-being if they are not addressed. The loss of human capital among AGYW resulting from these interruptions to education and life-skill development will be an additional barrier to girls'

success in the 21st century economy (Obama & Gates, 2020), persisting long after the pandemic has passed and undermining future efforts to achieve gender equity and equality.

**Social Connection and Support:** Social distancing and lockdowns are designed to reduce social interaction and mobility. While they are critical tools for tackling COVID-19, these policies further constrain what is already often limited mobility for girls, increasing their isolation and amplifying their vulnerabilities, such as the risk of domestic violence. They eliminate social support, such as girls' groups or safe spaces; and they make it difficult or impossible for girls to access health and social services. How girls experience this day to day – from minor stress to intensified exploitation – depends on preexisting inequalities and vulnerabilities.

**Education:** Girls' educational attainment is a vital investment in their future earning power (World Bank, 2018). As of late June 2020, school closures due to COVID-19 were affecting almost 900 million learners (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). While education sectors and governments have issued strategies for remote learning, many students do not have the digital resources to benefit from these strategies. For example, the Young Lives in India survey (Young Lives, 2020) found that 66% of 18-year-olds who were previously in school had their education interrupted, and only 28% of youth whose education had been disrupted could access online classes or learning resources. In LMICs that offer remote learning, most use radio and television broadcasts to do so (Center for Global Development [CGD], 2020). While technology is a useful (albeit untested) mechanism for supporting distance education, it risks intensifying existing learning disparities, especially considering gendered differences in access (Girl Effect & Vodafone Foundation, 2018; GSMA, 2020; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2017). Women in LMICs are 8% less likely than men to own mobile phones, and are 20% less likely to use them to access the Internet (UNICEF & International Rescue Committee [IRC], 2020; GSMA, 2020). Boys are also 1.5 times more likely than girls to own phones (Girl Effect & Vodafone Foundation, 2018). In an April 2020 survey conducted by CGD, the majority of education providers (69%) reported that girls would be more negatively affected by school closures than boys (Akmal et al., 2020). For many girls, financial and social barriers to enrollment will be exacerbated once schools reopen.

**Livelihoods:** COVID-19 and the associated policy responses have devastated the livelihoods of many communities. Travel restrictions and market closures have disrupted economies and the informal and low-income work predominantly conducted by women and girls (CARE, 2020; World Bank, 2020). As a result, girls and their households are reporting diminished income, loss of work, and heightened food insecurity (Archarya et al., 2020; Amin et al., 2020; Population Council, 2020). As AGYW seek to secure income and meet critical needs, they may engage in labor that increases their risk of exploitation. For instance, several garment factories have been forced to close in India, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka due to reduced supply and demand, raising concerns about potential increases in child labor and human trafficking as low-income workers try to meet essential needs, including through transactional sex (Asia Floor Wage Alliance [AFWA], 2020).

### Box 1. Insights From Population Council Surveys of Adolescents in Kenya During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Abuya, 2020)

- Seventy-eight percent of respondents were skipping meals or eating less compared with the pre-COVID-19 era, with 10- to 14-year-olds the most affected.
- Slightly over half of girls reported difficulty accessing their preferred menstrual hygiene management product.
- Twenty percent of adolescents reported increased tension with their romantic/sexual partner during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Most respondents reported learning at home during school closures, but 28% had not been given lessons by their schools and 33% could not access their lessons.
- Boys were significantly more likely than girls to report using a computer or tablet to access learning material.

**Unpaid Care:** AGYW's burden of unpaid care is expected to intensify during the pandemic, as seen during the 2014 Ebola outbreak (Plan International, 2015). Household care needs can serve as an additional barrier to girls' ability to progress in the labor market (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2018) or potentially return to schools once they reopen. Women and girls in Bangladesh and Kenya report unequal or increased household responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Box 2). Adolescents also contribute significantly in caring for younger siblings, and about half of the education providers who participated in a CGD survey reported domestic work as a significant challenge for girls' continuing education, (Akmal et al., 2020).

### Box 2. Insights From Household Surveys in Bangladesh and Kenya During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Burden of Unpaid Care

- Twenty-two percent of girls in Bangladesh reported increased workloads and chores around the house during lockdown (Amin et al., 2020).
- Women in Kenya were more likely than men to report cooking, cleaning, and childcare responsibilities (Population Council, 2020).

**Violence, Early and Forced Marriage, and Sexual and Reproductive Health:** Disruptions to essential health services (e.g., family planning), early and forced marriage, transactional sex, and work that increases time spent with men all contribute to increased risks of adolescent pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and violence. Sierra Leone saw an increase in early pregnancy rates during the 2014 Ebola outbreak—in some communities, by up to 65% (Plan International, 2015; Giannini, 2020). Pregnancy can cause further delays in school re-enrollment and diminish the likelihood that girls will be able to continue their studies. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, disruptions to and delays in obstetric care also resulted in a higher incidence of negative outcomes, including miscarriage (World Bank, 2020; Chattu & Yaya, 2020). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020) reports that COVID-19 has already disrupted family planning resources, limiting the services available at health facilities and affecting supply chains for contraceptives. Cases of early and forced marriage may also rise due to financial pressures and food insecurity, as families seek to reduce the number of people in their household. Families may also see marriage as protection against stigma surrounding out-of-wedlock pregnancies and surviving sexual violence (UNICEF & IRC, 2020; Girls Not Brides, 2020). Communities are already reporting increased pressure for marriage (Batha, 2020; Seo, 2020), and UNFPA (2020) estimates that the pandemic will result in 13 million additional child marriages over the next decade that

### Box 3. Key Insights From Household Surveys in Bangladesh, Kenya, and India During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Conflict and Violence

- Eighteen percent of adolescent girls in Bangladesh reported experiencing violence, and 28% reported increased violence in their surroundings. Percentages were higher among older adolescents and married girls, and lower among younger and unmarried girls (Amin et al., 2020).
- A third of participants in Kenya reported increased household tension, and a quarter reported an increase in arguments due to COVID-19. Women were more likely than men to report these experiences (Population Council, 2020).

would not have otherwise taken place. Global reports of SGBV against women and girls are also increasing as household mobility is restricted and tensions run high (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). Barriers to accessing help or safe spaces amid lockdowns and stay-at-home orders further increase girls' risk (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [UN Women], 2020; UNICEF & IRC, 2020; Erskine, 2020). While phone surveys can help to capture reports of household conflict and violence during the pandemic (Box 3), the sensitive nature of these data, and the risk of girls being monitored while taking the surveys, mean that results may be underreported and should be interpreted with caution.

## Girls' Groups: Impacts, Adaptations, and Opportunities

Girls' groups can offer protective and empowering spaces in which participants can develop economic assets; develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills; build connections; and foster rights, equitable gender norms,

and civic participation, all of which may be protective for AGYW during external shocks. While evidence from past crises is scant, one example from the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone shows that in highly disrupted villages, the group-based Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents (ELA) program offset loss of literacy and numeracy skills, decreased pregnancy risk, and mitigated school discontinuation after the crisis, relative to villages without the program (Bandiera et al., 2018). Longer term follow-up found that the impacts—reduced pregnancy risk and increased school enrollment—persisted well after the end of the Ebola outbreak and years after schools had reopened (Bandiera et al., 2020). As this is one of the few documented examples that quantitatively measured the potential protective effect of girls' groups during system shocks, and as the COVID-19 pandemic becomes less comparable with Ebola, the applicability of these findings should be interpreted with caution.

While it is too soon to evaluate whether girls' groups have offered protective effects to participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have documented what groups are doing through interviews with and presentations by experts from 12 girl-centered programs working in a diverse set of countries (Table 1). These experts have generously provided their insights on the impact of COVID-19 on their programs and participants, as well as adaptations and innovations they have implemented during the pandemic.

Overall, the program experts reported the following:

- Program implementation has been heavily affected by COVID-19, particularly organizations' ability to meet and connect with participants due to mobility restrictions.
- Mentors are playing a critical role in reconnecting with and supporting girls, and are especially valuable when based in the same communities as the girls they serve.
- While some programs are using technology to connect with girls (including mobile phones), unequal digital access often makes this an inadequate solution.
- Programs' roles—and in some cases, girls' roles—have expanded to include a greater emphasis on facilitating the provision of basic services and resources to girls and their communities, as households face critical unmet needs during the pandemic. For instance, programs are distributing face masks and food, and are linking girls with family planning services.
- Girls' access to distance-learning resources during school closures varies, as does programs' ability to support girls' learning during the pandemic. Many girls lack regular (or any) digital access or access to quiet spaces, and face external pressures that force the focus away from education (e.g., a need to generate income).

We explore these insights in the following sections of this brief, along with specific case examples from the programs. Information is current as of June/July 2020.



**Table 1. Girl-Centered Programs Included in This Analysis**

Program (Country)		
<u>Abriendo Oportunidades</u> (Guatemala)	Education as a Vaccine ( <u>EVA</u> ) (Nigeria)	<u>REPACTED</u> (Kenya)
<u>Keeping Girls in School to Reduce Child Marriage in Rural Bangladesh</u> (Bangladesh)	<u>Girl Move Academy</u> (Mozambique)	<u>Nurturing Minds: Secondary Education for Girls' Advancement (SEGA) and Msichana Kisasa</u> (Tanzania)
<u>Batonga</u> (Benin)	<u>IMAGINE</u> (Niger and Bangladesh)	<u>Vijana Amani Pamoja</u> (Kenya)
<u>Biruh Tesfa</u> (Ethiopia)	Integrated Education for Community Empowerment ( <u>IECE</u> ) (Kenya)	<u>The YP Foundation</u> (India)

## Program Implementation and Reaching Girls

### Group Meetings and Girls' Social Networks During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The supportive social networks available to girls during the pandemic have been limited by school closures, social distancing protocols, and interruptions to group meetings. The extent to which programs have been able to resume group meetings, and girls have been able to maintain their social support networks, vary by setting and population. Programs report great variation in girls' experiences, ranging from mental stress to increased invisibility that enables violence and exploitation. The YP Foundation reported that several of its participants in India, who have little opportunity to leave their homes during lockdowns, are reporting high levels of stress and a lack of support during the pandemic. Girls who were exposed to more progressive and empowering topics during pre-pandemic group meetings (e.g., on SRH and gender equality) are now forced to remain at home with conservative family members. In Addis Ababa, Biruh Tesfa participants include domestic workers who have mostly been unable to connect with other group members. Resurging invisibility leaves these girls increasingly vulnerable to employer exploitation and abuse. The program's ability to support these girls is dependent on who they live with, whether they have access to a phone, and their ability to meet (while taking precautions). The program quickly realized that due to the abusive environments in which some of their participants work, reaching out to migrant domestic workers could place them in danger. Moreover, as families lose jobs or see their income decline, they may fire their domestic help. Girls who have been fired during the pandemic are now on the street without a place to sleep, and some must try to secure essential needs through transactional sex.

Thus, while all programs' field operations have been significantly truncated during the pandemic, their feasible roles and ability to actively support girls are shaped in part by the vulnerabilities of their participants. Like Biruh Tesfa, CARE's IMAGINE project has had difficulty connecting with their participants in Bangladesh, even over the phone. In other settings, mentors can more easily connect with girls. Group meetings for the Population Council's "Keeping Girls in Schools to Reduce Child Marriage in Rural Bangladesh" program were initially halted due to lockdown. With wide coverage of mobile phones in households at program sites, it was possible to initiate remote learning sessions in July through conference calls of three girls at a time. This has allowed girls to reconnect with their peers and mentors, as well as access a virtual safe space. Girls meet twice a week for 15 minute sessions and learning on life skills, SRH, COVID-19, financial literacy, and English. The program initially ran into difficulty with scheduling sessions using household phones due to parent availability, but this was resolved by implementing more flexible scheduling options for sessions. Some countries have loosened their COVID-19 restrictions since April 2020, enabling programs to resume meetings, albeit with smaller group sizes, social distance protocols, and less frequent meetings compared with the pre-COVID-19 era.

In Nairobi, Integrated Education for Community Empowerment (IECE) notes that where housing is closely packed together in informal settlements, the girls are still able to interact with their friends, and those with phones can connect over social media outside of meetings. During group meetings, girls have been able to discuss their mental health and coping strategies during the pandemic. Vijana Amani Pamoja, also based in Nairobi, paused its group meetings during March to July, but its participants were able to connect with friends and family and access social networks. In July, the program was able to resume home-based meetings in which 5 to 10 young mothers meet with a mentor in their neighborhood. Batonga, a girls' and women's empowerment organization in Benin, also had to suspend its regular girls' clubs. The program instead implemented "mini clubs" in each village where they work so that the girls could still connect and access social support (though these groups are smaller, and meetings are socially distanced and of shorter duration) (Hone 2020).

REPACTED, a Kenyan community-based organization serving youth in Nakuru county, has mentors who live in the communities, which means that they are continually engaged with youth. Groups were able to resume smaller meetings in April, with some schools allowing groups to gather in their spaces during closures. Meetings are now held at least once a week and generally allow for 10 participants. At first, some parents were hesitant about allowing their children to join due to ongoing concerns about COVID-19, but the number of youth returning to the program is increasing and had reached about 50% of pre-COVID-19 levels by late June.

COVID-19 greatly affected Education as a Vaccine's (EVA) programs in Nigeria, but the organization was able to resume some of its activities as of June. EVA offers safe spaces for girls, with meetings facilitated by girls in the community; life skills and vocational training; and advocacy and support for educational attainment and the elimination of child marriage. The program links community efforts with "champions" (older leaders in the community, such as traditional leaders and health care workers). The program reconnected with its mentors in April and resumed the girls' safe spaces (with smaller group meetings) in June.

## Mentors' Fundamental Role in Programming and in Reaching Girls

Mentors play a central role both in programming and in reaching out to beneficiaries and communities. For instance, to successfully regain contact with program participants, mentors in Nairobi traveled to reach girls living in informal settlements who did not have access to phones. The Population Council's Secure Futures program works with partner organization Vijana Amani Pamoja in Nairobi, Kenya, on programming geared towards pregnant adolescents and young mothers. The coaches (i.e., mentors) continue to conduct home visits and check on pregnant women and new mothers to ensure appropriate ante- and postnatal care. Coaches who receive reports of increased conflict and violence in homes during these visits, or during phone check-ins, can refer the AGYW—and potentially their partners—to counselors from a partner organization for psychosocial support, and can offer mechanisms for coping during this highly stressful period.

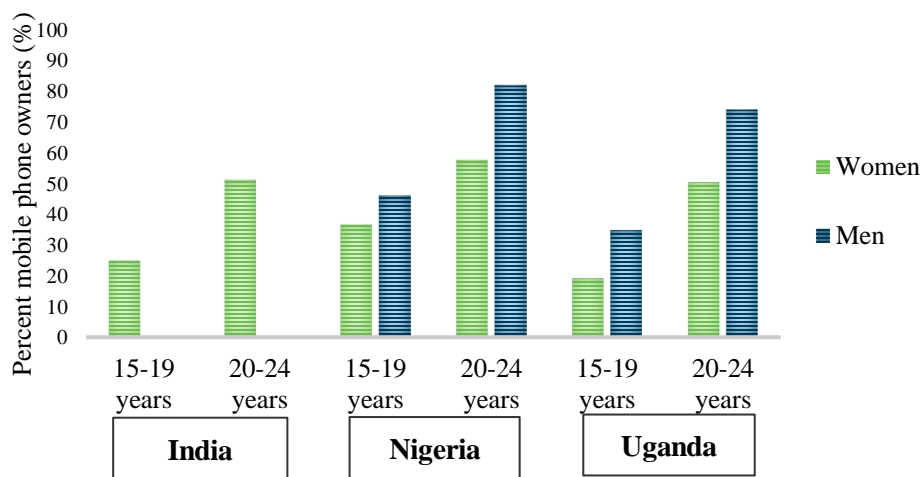
Female mentors from the Batonga program in Benin also conduct home visits, giving out hand soap and advice on COVID-19 transmission. The program prioritized training mentors in COVID-19 resources and creating informational packets to disseminate in communities at the start of the outbreak in Benin. In Tanzania, Secondary Education for Girls' Advancement (SEGA) runs a community-based program and girls' club called Msichana Kisasa, which had to halt large group meetings due to the pandemic (Landskroner-Eiger 2020). However, mentors have consistently visited girls' homes—maintaining social distancing—in order to offer emotional support and information on COVID-19, including to communities that face barriers in accessing timely information.

Mentors were also vital for the Population Council’s “Keeping girls in schools to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh” program as it transitioned to remote learning sessions for girls. Community-based mentors were mobilized to collect phone numbers and assess the feasibility of remote, over-phone sessions. Along with life skills, emotional support, and information on COVID-19, mentors also received training on expanding their roles to supporting girls’ education and learning aligned with school curricula during school closures in Bangladesh.

## The Uses and Limitations of Technology in Program Implementation

Efforts to maintain contact with the girls have been further complicated by their unequal access to mobile phones. Few girls own their own phones, and many lack access to household phones. This aligns with existing data on unequal access to technology, which varies based on poverty, gender, age, and setting. The Demographic and Health Surveys Program indicates that among AGYW aged 15 to 19 nationwide, only 26% in India, 36.6% in Nigeria, and 19.2% in Uganda own a mobile phone; and that 20- to 24-year-olds are more likely to own phones than 15- to 19-year-olds (Figure 2). While global ownership and access to phones have risen, women, girls, and people in rural settings remain less likely to have access than men, boys, and those in urban settings (Klapper, 2019; GSMA, 2020; Girl Effect & Vodafone Foundation, 2018; UNICEF, 2017).

**Figure 2. Mobile Phone Ownership Among Adolescents and Young Adults in India, Nigeria, and Uganda by Age and Gender (where data are available)**



Source: Demographic and Health Surveys India, 2016; Demographic and Health Surveys Nigeria, 2018; Demographic and Health Surveys Uganda, 2016

Girl Move Academy in Mozambique used weekly phone calls and text messages to check in on girls and their families after lockdown was implemented (Girl Move Academy Team 2020). Abriendo Oportunidades, a program that works with Indigenous girls in Guatemala, trained mentors to use Facebook and WhatsApp to connect with the girls and their households, for the purposes of collecting and communicating information. The program is also translating its curriculum for radio format, creating handouts and worksheets for the girls. Content will include information on schooling for girls and gender norms, as well as phone numbers and resources related to SGBV and reproductive health. The Batonga program began weekly radio broadcasts after its regular club meetings were suspended, enabling it to successfully deliver content on topics such as COVID-19 prevention, violence in households, and financial management.

The YP Foundation in India focuses on youth empowerment, leadership, and activism—mainly around SRH and SGBV—and trains older youth to be group facilitators. Groups were heavily disrupted by lockdowns and have essentially been unable to meet. Many of the girls do not have access to phones or are unable to use household devices discreetly without being monitored by family members. For instance, the program has offered online sessions around SRH education, but some girls are limited in their ability to openly engage with the content or ask questions (e.g., about menstruation, safe sex, or SGBV) due to a lack of privacy in their homes. The organization has also used Instagram to live stream a lesson on making reusable cloth sanitary pads, as some girls are no longer receiving sanitary products due to school closures, especially in rural areas. REPACTED has expanded its reach by posting recordings of its meetings on YouTube, after having to limit the size of in-person meetings during the pandemic. This allows other participants in the community to gather in small groups of three to five people and pool their airtime to watch the content on mobile phones.

The role of media in reconnecting with participants and sharing content varies across programs and settings, depending on community resources such as electricity, phone, and Internet access. Indeed, some programs have chosen not to invest scarce resources in digital outreach due to girls' limited access. Vijana Amani Pamoja considered implementing virtual meetings but decided against it because most of its participants do not have smart phones. Instead, the program is sending participants “push” messages on COVID-19 risk and prevention. Similarly, the IMAGINE project—which had to pause all field activities in Bangladesh in mid-March due to the pandemic—contemplated transitioning content to social media but decided against it because of low mobile phone coverage among the girls. However, it has been able to connect facilitators with some of the girls who have access to phones, and to send reminders that the girls can access family planning methods at pharmacies. The “Keeping girls in school to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh” program turned to relatively low-tech phone call based remote meetings, avoiding internet or digital app based platforms. A majority of households have access to mobile phones and the small group conference calls do not require smartphones, allowing girls in remote and low-resource families to still be reached.

## Supporting Critical Needs: Food, Livelihoods, and Health

### Girls' and Households' Essential Needs During COVID-19

Across multiple settings, girls and their households are reporting critical needs for food and economic support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Box 4). Several programs are hearing reports of increases in child labor and transactional sex in communities as families face economic devastation and rely on AGYW to contribute to household income or secure their own needs. The REPACTED program in Nakuru county, Kenya, previously offered a program designed to foster a savings culture among participants; today, households are focused on their day-to-day survival. AGYW in Nairobi who previously received income from washing clothes or doing other informal tasks have lost work, as people become more cautious about spending during the pandemic or are unable to continue paying for such services. Many of these girls in Nairobi also report that their households are not receiving food distribution or cash transfers, as programs vary in their ability to offer such support to families. Health and COVID-19 prevention supplies, such as masks and soap, are also noted as an urgent need. For example, IECE, which is based in Nairobi, conducted a rapid needs assessment and discovered that some households were sharing only one mask.

#### Box 4. Insights From Household Surveys in Bangladesh, Kenya, and India During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Essential Needs and Economic Security

- Half of adolescent girls in Bangladesh reported that their household earned no income during lockdown, and 20% indicated an urgent need for food (Amin et al., 2020).
- Households in India ranked food, money, and medicine as their top three critical needs. Fifty-three percent reported job or income loss, and 73% of migrant households in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar reported losing their job or main source of income (Archarya et al., 2020).
- Eighty percent of participants in Kenya reported that their children had skipped or restricted meals due to the pandemic, and 84% reported complete or partial loss of income. Women were more likely to lose their jobs or income than men (Population Council, 2020).

### How Programs and Girls' Groups Are Responding

Across programs, organizations are responding to basic humanitarian needs. For some organizations, roles have expanded to include a greater emphasis on facilitating the provision of basic services and resources for beneficiaries and communities. IECE also runs several vocational school programs (including for fashion and design) for students who have returned home during the pandemic. In response to the need for masks, for example, IECE organized students and tutors to design quality face masks to distribute to their most vulnerable beneficiaries. It also invited girls to help make hand soap—another identified need. Girls and mentors from the Batonga program have also produced and distributed soap and face masks. In addition, Batonga has installed two hand-washing stations in each of the 15 villages in which it works, along with mentor-led trainings to ensure communities can properly operate them. Girl Move Academy in Mozambique prepared and distributed hygiene kits and hand sanitizer to girls in the week leading up to lockdown.

SEGA, which runs a girls' club and secondary school in Tanzania, sent emergency packages to their beneficiaries, including funding for household food, with the aim of alleviating pressure on girls that contributes to transactional sex. Some programs, like Biruh Tesfa in Ethiopia, are providing supplies like oil, pasta, and rice to the most vulnerable in their communities. Secure Futures and REPACTED have also delivered food and hand soap or connected vulnerable houses with relief efforts in Kenya. In Guatemala, Abriendo Oportunidades is sending its participants seeds and basic tools so that girls can start their own household gardens, recognizing that the pandemic has substantially threatened the livelihoods of Indigenous communities. A unique aspect of Abriendo Oportunidades is its [poultry farm center](#), which is entirely owned by a collective of its mentors (ages 22 to 33 years old). The young women sell their eggs locally below market price, providing an important source of food during shortages.

In Nigeria, EVA began to hear from its married girls that they were unable to access family planning services during the pandemic. In response, the program connected these girls with community champions who were also health workers, who were able to provide these services at home. EVA also connects pregnant girls with champions who can help them access maternal services at health facilities. Group facilitators continue to reach out to the girls to discuss pressures around marriage, while mentors target parents and other community leaders for discussions on discouraging early marriage.

While most aid is being implemented by the organization or mentors, the YP Foundation has seen some of its girls become actively involved in relief efforts during the pandemic. Several of the girls (around 16 to 19 years old) are currently helping to organize and distribute ration kits out of a community center in Delhi, India. These girls were already active leaders in their communities before the pandemic, but conducting relief work during the pandemic has given them greater legitimacy and recognition. The girls are happy to have the chance not only to get out of their homes, but also to help address critical needs and gain recognition from their

### Box 5. Insights From Household Surveys in Bangladesh and Kenya During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Education

- Most adolescent girls (90%) in Bangladesh have reportedly continued studying at home, and 26% are following lessons via television broadcasts (Amin et al., 2020), which dropped further (16%) as found in a repeat follow-up survey in subsequent months (Ainul & Amin, 2020).
- Only 15% of participants in Kenya reported that their children were using online schooling. Almost half said that their children used television or radio broadcasts (Population Council, 2020).

communities. Girls who previously received a small stipend from the YP Foundation have reported that this income now serves to secure essential needs for their families.

Vocational programs delivered through the IMAGINE project in both Niger and Bangladesh have continued to varying degrees, depending on country restrictions. In Bangladesh, restrictive lockdowns mean that any vocational training was paused between March and mid-July. However, girls who had already completed training in a telecommunications retailer program were able to

continue working and generating income during the pandemic with support from Robi, a telecommunications operator that partners with IMAGINE. In Zinder, Niger, where there have been few COVID-19 cases and limited restrictions, IMAGINE program activities are continuing as usual. This includes youth savings and loan groups, as well as several vocational trainings which support girls to pursue income-generation opportunities.

Vijana Amani Pamoja in Nairobi has been forced to halt its vocational programs during the pandemic but continues to think of ways to support participants. This includes asking how it can support those with existing small businesses, helping interested participants develop their own businesses, and conducting market research on which types of businesses are doing well in communities during the pandemic.

## Supporting Critical Needs: Education

Overall, there is an apparent mismatch between what makes sense for the education sector and government in terms of public health during the pandemic, and what is actionable by communities. Even if countries offer alternative resources for learning, there are students who are unable to regularly access the material or who cannot interact with it at all (Box 5). As one NGO leader noted, there is not a lot of studying going on in a one-room house with eight family members. Furthermore, as the YP Foundation explained, boys may have privileged access to learning material over girls in households with limited digital devices. There is significant concern that students' education will be delayed by years, or may end entirely, as they fall behind in their studies, face an increased risk of pregnancy, or face growing pressures to join the labor market. Programs may be in a position to supplement or support students' education during school closures, but this varies by setting.

SEGA's secondary school in Tanzania serves girls who would otherwise be unable to attend school due to poverty or other challenges. When forced to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school sent materials for remote learning to its students and to girls in its community-based adolescent club, Msichana Kisasa. However, some girls in Msichana Kisasa reported difficulty studying at home because they needed to earn an income. The school's students have since returned to campus, following the school's reopening in late June 2020.

Schooling for Indigenous communities in Guatemala is highly dependent on teachers' coordination efforts. Many children have not received school supplies; youth who have received worksheets from school typically live near their teacher or have a very engaged teacher. An estimated 80% of older girls who participate in the program have had no contact with schools, and much of the content provided by the Ministry of Education is still not ready to be broadcast on radio and is only available on television. In Nairobi, IECE estimates that 90% of its girls have not interacted with a teacher or a book since lockdown. Classes are offered online or over the

radio, but in informal settlements, crowded households mean that girls must compete with other members for radio time.

In other regions of Kenya, like Nakuru county, classes are primarily delivered online and are not accessible for many of REPACTED's youth. The program tries to continue communicating the importance of completing school to youth and their parents, and helps to distribute educational resources where it can. In Ethiopia, Biruh Tesfa is developing worksheets to support girls' education (including simple handouts listing the alphabet), as half of the girls have never been to school.

EVA in Nigeria reports that education in its communities is essentially at a standstill. Different schools are trying to offer lessons through radio or television, but girls in more marginalized areas do not have access to the necessary equipment. In the interim, the program has instructed community mentors to continue sharing messages with girls, their families, and community leaders on the importance of re-enrolling girls in school once it resumes. The project notes that some of the teachers in these communities have started to organize home lessons for students.

## Key Takeaways

The connection that organizations have with their girls' group participants and mentors offers a unique opportunity to deliver interventions to vulnerable populations during crises. The ease with which programs have been able to reach girls during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the support they have been able to provide, have varied greatly depending on contextual factors, including access to phones and digital technology, the stage of the pandemic, and mobility restrictions. While further evidence is needed to determine how successful groups have been in supporting girls and offsetting negative impacts during this crisis, we present the following reflections based on the diverse set of responses we received from groups during the pandemic.

- **Mentors in these programs, many of whom are from the communities in which they work, serve as the cornerstone of programs' ability to connect with and support girls.** While the role of mentors—and their mobility—varies by program and setting, it is clear that they are an integral part of organizations' responses to the pandemic. In settings where mentors have greater mobility, they have been able to physically deliver or connect girls with crucial services (e.g., ante- and postnatal care) and reach girls who lack access to mobile phones.
- **The extended timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic means that group-based approaches must be reimagined going forward.** We continue to witness the spread of the coronavirus and the attempts of governments around the globe to titrate their response. It is possible that some groups may be unable to operate due to safety concerns or resource constraints. However, NGOs with roots in their communities have adapted nimbly. As restrictions ease in some settings, programs have started to resume group meetings—paying attention to social distancing guidelines—offering opportunities to deliver program curricula (e.g., around SRH and SGBV resources), and enabling girls to reconnect with vital social support and discuss their needs and coping mechanisms during the pandemic.
- **Adolescent programs and girls' groups are uniquely situated to help identify vulnerable households, facilitate aid, and ensure that key messages are maintained, including messages about gender equality.** Regardless of whether programs have been able to resume group meetings, organizations are disseminating information to communities both physically and through technology (e.g., COVID-19 prevention information), addressing unmet needs (e.g., for food, masks and hand soap), and facilitating services to offset vulnerabilities (e.g., psychosocial support, health services,

relief). Going forward, it will be important to document this expanded role, as well as organizations' ability to supplement government efforts and ensure that the most vulnerable are reached.

- **Organizations that have invested in girls' and women's economic empowerment may be better positioned to support innovation among mentors and their communities in response to economic needs.** Bolstering economic and food security is vital during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for households with low-income and informal workers, who are disproportionately losing income and lack social protections. This aid may alleviate the household pressure that contributes to the risk of violence, early and forced marriage, and truncated education among AGYW. Girls' groups and organizations that include economic interventions may be better equipped to respond to the economic implications of the pandemic.
- **Technology and social media offer opportunities to disseminate information and continue some group functions for girls during the pandemic. However, their effectiveness remains to be seen and may be severely limited by unequal mobile phone access and ownership.** Programs' ability to connect with and support girls during the pandemic has been constrained by girls' living situations and available resources, including digital access. Nonetheless, technology has afforded some programs supplemental opportunities to deliver their content, from simple "push" messages to lessons disseminated on Instagram.
- **Programs can facilitate the connection between regional or government efforts and on-the-ground community action.** This is essential during epidemics and pandemics. Going forward, it will be important to explore how program mentors and group participants can further collaborate with regional efforts and local health officials in disease preparedness and response. For instance, the YP Foundation in India has seen some of its girls involved in relief efforts. Mentors play a role in disseminating vital information on COVID-19, and several of the programs we spoke with mentioned that their mentors were already working as community health workers and contact tracers (or that this was a potential role for them in the future).
- **The current evidence base is limited, and the effectiveness of these new and diverse program approaches in crisis response and recovery remains to be seen.** There is an opportunity to gather essential information from current and past cohorts of program participants to generate insights into how vulnerable groups are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, what critical needs must be addressed, what interventions are feasible in communities, and which implementation models are effective for which outcomes.

## Areas for Investment Now

As countries implement social distancing measures and lockdowns, scale them back, and then reintroduce them, the learning agenda for group-based programs for AGYW continues to evolve and expand. While there are small-scale efforts to assess the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on AGYW, including methods for effective relief and recovery, research funding has been limited and woefully inadequate. We urge decision makers, donors, and researchers to invest in generating data and evidence to assess how COVID-19 is affecting AGYW, and to evaluate the effects of girls' groups during the pandemic.

**Identify Needs:** Identify the most urgent needs of AGYW—especially the most vulnerable—to ensure equitable access, and prioritize efforts to reach these girls so that vulnerabilities are not exacerbated and inequality is not further entrenched. What more can be done to respond to urgent needs? What roles can girls' groups, mentors, and organizations play in addressing these needs, and how can program partners and



donors be flexible and supportive? Possible methods for collecting data on these questions include rapid phone surveys with existing program staff, girls' group participants, and mentors; and key informant interviews in communities.

**Innovate and Pilot:** Develop and trial new ways to maintain AGYW's agency and access to essential information and services (e.g., education, SRH care, and SGBV resources) in a changing environment, maintaining an equity lens. As mentors play a critical role in ensuring a connection between programs, girls, and their communities, what role can they play in ensuring public health during the pandemic? Research methods for answering these questions include leveraging ongoing studies, administrative data, and girls' groups to conduct implementation science research; and monitoring and evaluating to facilitate and document adaptive learning (including course corrections).

**Long-Term Impact:** Investigate the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the social, health, education, and economic trajectories of AGYW, especially vulnerable and hidden AGYW. In addition, explore what features enable girls' groups to successfully weather the pandemic, and whether the skills and support girls gain from these groups are protective during system shocks like COVID-19. Rigorous impact evaluations (e.g., randomized controlled trials, natural experiments, and quasi-experimental studies) will be critical to understanding whether group-based approaches are effective during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what kind of approaches work best.

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