

Putting the emphasis on girls and young women

The COVID-19 pandemic also represents a considerable challenge for the NGO sector. While the spread of the disease has to be checked, existing programmes need to be continued as far as possible. In this respect, Plan International is concentrating on those affected worst by the crisis: women and girls.

By Anabela Brandao

As a global crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on the lives of all people throughout the world. However, girls and women are most severely affected – especially those living in crisis areas. Not only because more women have an occupation which exposes them to higher risks of getting infected with COVID-19, e.g. in the field of health and nursing, but also because existing problems, inequalities and power relations are aggravated in crisis situations. Girls and young women are particularly affected by the long-term, secondary effects of the pandemic, which are however decisive as regards their opportunities to participate.

The experience gained during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in the years 2014 – 2016 and during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that the current crisis will have a considerable social and economic impact on the lives of women and girls. In times of crisis, girls and young women generally face higher risks of being affected by gender-based violence, being forced into early marriage, getting children early or dropping out from school. This lowers their prospects of leading a self-determined life – even more so than before the pandemic. That is why Plan International always pays special attention to the gender-specific needs of girls and women when implementing its protection and relief measures to respond to COVID-19.

Hygiene activities: dignity kits and hand-washing stations

In its transnational programmes, Plan International focuses on gender-sensitive and gender-specific activities to cover these needs. A key emphasis is put on hygiene and infection control. By providing and distributing so-called “dignity kits” (containing soap, gloves or toothbrushes, but also menstrual hygiene articles), Plan International does not only help people in low-income countries keep minimum hygiene standards and reduce the risk of infection in case of a strict curfew or interruption of supply chains, but also responds to the issues which adolescent girls and women face during their menstruation.

The use of social networks, if available, and radios operated by means of cranks or solar energy ensures that communities and project beneficiaries have access to information and awareness-raising messages. Pedal-operated, non-contact hand-washing stations including soap are being installed for essential institutions and public facilities, such as health centres, schools, distribution points or child-friendly spaces. By providing materials and soap, individual households and facilities are able to construct low-cost “tippy taps” to protect themselves against the virus through hand-washing.

Health workers in the project areas receive protective equipment including soap, disinfectants, masks and gloves, among other things. Furthermore, members of community committees and local partner NGOs are trained on how to prevent infection and how to deal with COVID-19. In order to help girls and young women exert their sexual and reproductive health rights and their right of self-determination, relevant health services are being strengthened and equipped. This means that they can better respond to the needs of adolescent girls and young women.

Social contact restrictions have rendered aid tools which usually help girls and women claim their rights, empower one another or get support in emergencies hardly available. For example, they are not able to attend girls’ clubs, mother meetings, saving groups or similar social gatherings. Furthermore, it is now hardly possible to address claims to political decision-makers. Events, rallies and demonstrations do not take place. At the same time, society as a whole, politicians and authorities pay less attention to topics which are not directly related to the corona crisis – as a result, willingness and capacities of the responsible bodies to commit themselves to other issues



Fifteen-year-old Kaligueta lives in Boussouma department in the Centre-North region of Burkina Faso. She has just taken part in an awareness-raising session on COVID-19. Given the high risk of transmission in a region that hosts tens of thousands of internally displaced people, Plan International is focusing its attention on ensuring that the communities are aware of the disease and know how to stay safe.

Photo: Plan International

have been reduced. This makes it difficult to raise awareness of the hidden effects of the corona pandemic for girls and women.

Protection against gender-based violence

In times of crisis, all forms of gender-based violence increase, especially domestic violence. As a result of protective measures such as social isolation, girls and women are more frequently affected by violent assaults within the family. The COVID-19 pandemic makes it more difficult – or even impossible – to end such violent situations. An exit is only possible when affected girls and women can make outsiders aware of their situation – e.g. at school, during home visits of trained social workers or during organised leisure time activities, such as girls’ and youth clubs. However, the contact restrictions have extremely reduced these opportunities. As a result of the lockdown, we hear alarming facts, e.g. an increase in appeals for help via hotlines, from Latin America and the Caribbean region where domestic violence was a severe problem even before the crisis.

By means of informative messages transported by staff members, partners and volunteers, if possible, but also through the media, such as Facebook, radio programmes and posters, Plan International makes people in the project communities aware of the risks of sexual and gender-based violence for children, girls and women. The organisation sensitises members of community committees, especially those responsible for child protection, as well as community representatives, to the risks in connection with COVID-19. Furthermore, counselling services to address domestic or sexual violence as well as child protection are being established or expanded. These services include hotlines or mentors in the communities who can refer such cases.

Creating income security and preventing economic distress

In times of economic crisis, the risk of exploitation and abuse increases, including prostitution and forced labour. Unconditional relief services in the form of cash transfer or vouchers for girls and women as well as people from high-risk groups such as women-headed households help ensure provision with foodstuffs and non-food items. Furthermore, the distribution of food rations, especially for households with children under five years of age, contributes to food security.

Many women working in the catering or service sector are losing their income as a result of the protection measures against COVID-19. Creative solutions and the development of short-term income opportunities shall provide alternative sources of income for affected



By creating new income opportunities like producing sanitary pads or masks, Plan tries to help women and adolescent girls to secure their livelihood. With all the schools in Bangladesh closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 14-year-old Raziya decided to use her free time to make masks and help people protect themselves against the disease.

Photo: Biploby Rani Dey Roy / Plan International

women and adolescent girls – e.g. by their starting to produce sanitary pads or face masks. Not only can this improve their financial situation, it also helps them overcome supply shortages and problems in accessing hygiene articles which have become very scarce or expensive as a result of the pandemic.

If families have a secure income, it will be possible to prevent early marriage. Experience has shown that parents often use early marriage as a coping mechanism due to economic distress. During the Ebola crisis, the number of child marriages increased by 65 per cent in the severely affected areas of Sierra Leone. In the planning stage of all activities, girls and women are consulted to be able to consider their perspective when implementing the measures. In doing so, we make sure that problems and barriers are reduced and the activities respond to the actual needs.

Coordinated approach

As an international non-governmental organisation, we not only face the challenge of how to prevent the spread of the virus in the programme countries and to take care of the affected people, but we also need to carry on with existing programmes. In order to ensure that ongoing projects can continue and existing structures can be used to implement protection measures against COVID-19, all the COVID-19-based activities are coordinated with the ongoing projects. They are orientated towards existing standard activities which are adapted to the context, if necessary, and coordinated with other stakeholders such as local authorities, local organisations like women's or youth clubs or community committees. This includes programmatic additions in countries where we are already active in humanitarian aid. In the Lake Chad Region, for example, work



In Nigeria's Borno State, 1,400 adolescent school girls were provided with dignity kits to help them manage their periods during the lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The girls also received training on how to use the kits, which included six pairs of pants, a reusable sanitary pad kit and four bars of soap.

Photo: Nubwa Ibrahim / Plan International

with victims of gender-based violence by the terrorist group Boko Haram is expanded to include domestic violence, a problem that has been massively intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated curfews. To prevent people from becoming infected, trainings and advice that used to take place in larger groups are now replaced by door-to-door activities.

As Plan International has been a stakeholder in the international NGO sector for many years, the organisation is able to use a large network of existing structures in the programme countries when implementing the COVID-19 measures. Trust within the population and many years – or even decades – of experience in the communities help us plan the activities in accordance with the needs and carry them out effectively. In addition, Plan International has been publishing reports on the situation of girls and young women in crisis situations ("Girls in Crisis") for many years to give affected girls a voice and to consider gender-specific needs in the programmes.

The situation through COVID-19 is a global challenge – also for the NGO sector. Even though the long-term impacts on the programmatic work cannot yet be fully assessed, it is now important to react proactively and flexibly to the new situations and circumstances. Cohesion, exchange and transparency are the most important basis for this.

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