

# Key Messages on Gender Based Violence, Teenage Pregnancy and Child Protection in the context of COVID-19



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## Table of content

<b>Introduction to this Message Guide</b> .....	3
<b>Purpose of this Message Guide</b> .....	4
<b>Intended Audience</b> .....	5
<b>How to use this Guide</b> .....	5
<b>Key Messages</b> .....	7
Gender Based Violence (GBV).....	7
Sexual Violence .....	8
<i>Sexual Reproductive Health</i> .....	10
Child Marriage & Teenage Pregnancy.....	10
Psychosocial Support; Managing stress .....	11
Parenting and family strengthening .....	13
<i>Supporting older children through the Coronavirus</i> .....	14

## Introduction to this Message Guide

Experience the world over has shown that during times of crisis such as COVID-19, leading to a disruption of everyday life patterns, there is an exponential increase in Gender Based Violence (GBV) including Teenage Pregnancy and child and forced marriages. This situation worsens existing vulnerabilities, overburdens and exposes women, girls and Persons living With Disabilities to more risks, and increases insecurity and tensions in the households. GBV is one of the greatest challenge communities face during emergencies. Child protection systems - laws, policies, regulations and services across all social sectors, especially social welfare, education, health and security are weakened and disrupted<sup>1</sup>.

During the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone from May 2014 – November 2015, more than 14,000 teenage girls became pregnant, including 11,000 who were in school before the outbreak (UNFPA report, February 2018). Other forms of violence against children and women were also exacerbated during the Ebola outbreak due to mainly inadequate parental supervision, high levels of stress and lack of family income. Teenage pregnancy and child marriage have long lasting negative impact not only on the girl's life and development but also on families and communities. According to the 2019 DHS 40.5% of 19-year olds are already mothers and 44.9% of them had started having babies; further jeopardizing their health and future.

In Sierra Leone violence against women and children is widespread and widely accepted in homes. Over 50% of caretakers believe a child needs to be physically punished similarly over 50% of women aged 15-49 believe a husband/partner can beat his wife. According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2017), between 1 - 14 years, 86.5% of children have experienced some form of violent discipline in the household. GBV places women and girls at greater risk of domestic violence and abuse and has an adverse effect on a young girl's social, mental, physical health and well-being. It makes it more difficult for them to realize their full potential.

Abuses are mostly caused by spouses, household members, familiar visitors to the home and even humanitarian actors. This breakdown makes the community itself a dangerous place to live, calling for special attention and care for women and children. The more prolonged the crisis, the more complex the response can become, underlining the need for a coordinated prevention and response effort. The social and mental health impacts of prolonged closure, loss of wages, social isolation and stay-at-home orders are huge, triggering or aggravating anxiety and depression. Young people, particularly teenage girls, need continued access to education about their sexual and reproductive health rights to make free and informed choices for their empowerment and wellbeing.

Humanitarian actors across all sectors - water and sanitation, health, nutrition, logistics, education, protection – need to work together to uphold the rights of those at risk of GBV and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_58001.html](https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58001.html)

mental health disorders, bearing in mind that Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) is an essential part of the COVID-19 response<sup>2</sup>. They should provide relevant and lifesaving information to communities; support them to participate in decisions that affect their lives and enable them to provide and receive timely feedback from the authorities concerned. The messages underline the importance of survivor-centred principles and healing approaches.

## Purpose of this Message Guide

The aim of the Gender Based Violence, Teenage Pregnancy and Child Protection Message Guide is to broadly support the Government of Sierra Leone's national COVID-19 response. It brings to the fore critical information on ways to prevent GBV and preserve mental health during the Coronavirus disease outbreak in Sierra Leone. By laying emphasis on the newly created and existing reporting channels, it aims to equip individuals, families and communities with the resources they need to prepare, assess, respond and cope with the stress and difficulties that may arise during such times. It is hoped that this Guide will encourage them to stick to some key positive behaviours to enhance their wellbeing and safety during COVID-19.

The Guide is also meant to serve as a coordination tool and a reference of accurate and standardized information for front line social service responders to be able to guarantee the same rights of women, girls, boys and men during COVID-19 as in non-emergency situations. Specifically, the Gender Based Violence, Teenage Pregnancy and Child Protection Message Guide aims to:

1. Facilitate coordination amongst partners of the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare to ensure effective, consistent, and credible communication;
2. Inform activities and materials designed to raise awareness, promote recommended behaviours, and mobilize community influencers and leaders to create a safe environment for women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic;
3. Serve as an information guide for humanitarian actors and particularly for front line service responders of the 116 rape and 117 emergency hotlines, Family Support Unit, Rainbow Centres and the One Stop GBV centres;
4. Support caregivers, girls and adolescents with information on ways to protect themselves and their families and access critical services in their communities.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://unicef.sharepoint.com/sites/EMOPS-AAP/DocumentLibrary1/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id>

## Intended Audience

The primary intended audience of this Message Guide are humanitarian partners implementing Child Protection and Gender activities across the 16 districts of Sierra Leone. The messages can also be used by other actors in the National Covid-19 Response, particularly the Risk Communication and Social Mobilisation, Psychosocial and Quarantine Cell Pillars.

The bulleted, simple to follow messages are directly useful to caregivers, young people and community leaders. They can easily refer to this practical source of information to gain knowledge on how to protect themselves and their families from violence, abuse and stress, and where to seek help.

The guide can be used by any person or group providing parenting, leadership and psychosocial support at community level including but not limited to religious, community and political leaders, teachers, local community radio stations, health workers including Community Health Workers (CHWs) and anyone who is interested in GBV and Child Protection issues.

## How to use this Guide

The Message Guide should be used as a reference document to support message development and as a coordination tool to guarantee message consistency. It brings together key information on GBV and mental health into one repository, in a simple and everyday language, to empower frontline responders, individuals, families and communities, with the knowledge required to promote their wellbeing and development. It can also be used to stimulate and support community dialogue or community engagement activities to raise awareness around GBV, mental health and child rights issues.

The information in this Guide should be carefully discussed with women and girls, in an age and context appropriate way, to enable them take action for their own protection. Messages are organised by topic with key information presented first followed by clear, brief and doable actions that people can take to prevent or report an abuse and safeguard their health. Messages may need to be further pretested with targeted communities and adapted alongside to fit local context and activity being implementation.

The messages need to be tailored according to the communication channel used, where necessary they can be expanded to give more information or shortened for other activities. This information should be shared widely and regularly, in various ways through multiple channels of communication.

*The messages can be shared in the following manner:*

- Radio broadcast, SMS, WhatsApp, social media
- Included as part of RCCE on COVID-19
- Face to face / phone interactions
- Added to any IEC materials / posters / leaflets (including as part of kit distributions)

*General Dos and Don'ts for awareness raising on GBV:*

- DO frame all messages in a way that respects and supports survivors.
- DON'T use language that could make the survivor feel she is to blame for the violence.
- DO your homework. Before beginning any awareness raising activity, know what services are available on the ground to support survivors who need help and what the procedures are for life-threatening situations.
- DO incorporate accurate, up-to-date information on response services for survivors into awareness raising activities related to GBV.
- DO NOT disseminate service-related information that is inaccurate or out-of-date. This can create further harm for survivors.

The Guide is a living document and is open to review and update throughout the response and recovery phases. Partners are advised to coordinate their work through the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs to avoid duplication and confusion. If you have any queries or feedback, please contact:

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## Key Messages

### Gender Based Violence (GBV)

- GBV is violence directed against a person because of their gender or identity. GBV remains one of the most common human rights violations within all societies.
- All girls and boys can be subjects of abuse. Generally, boys tend to be at greater risk of physical and armed violence while girls face greater risk of neglect and sexual violence and exploitation.
- Physical violence like beating can result in injuries and infections. Sexual violence like rape and emotional violence like shouting and insulting does harm. Armed violence involves the use or threatened use of weapons. Economic violence refers to caregivers holding back money or resources needed for the family to survive. All violence is harmful and has negative and lasting consequences!
- GBV is deeply rooted in gender inequality and remains one of the most common human rights violations within all societies. It affects women and girls, men and boys but most of its victims are women and girls more and it affects them dangerously.
- Men and boys can choose to avoid violence and treat women and girls with respect. If they are angry about something, they should step away from the situation breathe, and think before acting. This helps to calm them down.
- Violence is mostly carried out by people children know and should be able to trust and look to for protection. These may include parents, stepparents or a parent's partner, relatives, caregivers, boyfriends and girlfriends, schoolmates, teachers, religious leaders and employers. Violence of any form is never okay!
- Children who experience or witness violence often remain silent out of fear, shame or stigma. Some accept it as part of life. If you witness a parent/caregiver harming a child, call him or her aside to talk about the issue, calm them down, suggest other ways to punish the child or report to your Child welfare Committee or the nearest Family Support Unit (FSU).
- Stay at home is important to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but home is not always a safe place. We are all collectively responsible for protecting and creating a protective environment for women, girls and boys in our community by reporting acts of violence and abuse.

- Parents and community members should develop and talk about acceptable ways of behaviours within their community so children can live, play and work safely.
- If you are harmed or feel threatened, intimidated or harassed, you have the right to reach out to seek help. Do not keep quiet! Go to the nearest FSU or hospital; discuss with someone you trust and report to your local authorities including the Child Welfare Committee and religious leaders. The FSU are specialist units attached to police stations nationwide, with a mandate to investigate all forms of abuse.

**Violence is everyone's business and communities have a role to play in preventing it and supporting those who experience it. Do not keep SILENT, LOOK out and SPEAK up!**

### Sexual Violence

- Having sex with a child under 18 years is an abuse and an offence against the state!
- EVERYONE has the right to say NO to sex! Any sexual contact between two people must be fully and freely agreed by those two people, on EVERY occasion. Any forced sexual act where one person does not want it, is violence. This is a crime and brings great harm to women and girls.
- Most of the violence against girls happen in their own homes and girls are specifically exposed to violence if they are left unsupervised. The person who uses violence is always the one to blame! We should support women and girls who have experienced violence – not blame them!
- When a woman or girl tells us that she experienced violence, we should believe her and help her access Health or FSU services. In case of a rape, she needs to go to the hospital to get medicines within three days (72 hours) to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, like HIV.
- Asking for sex in exchange for food, money, or materials is an abuse of power and does great harm to women and girls as well as boys. This is corruption and should be reported on the Anti-Corruption Commission's free mobile hotline, 515.
- No one should force you to have sex or to touch someone else. Nobody should touch your child against his or her will. If this happens, you as a parent have the duty to report and ensure your child has access to care immediately.



- If you notice or witness any act of sexual violence happening in your community, you must SPEAK out to help the survivor and punish the perpetrator. Report ALL cases of sexual violence to the nearest FSU or hospital, your local authorities including the Child Welfare Committee or religious leaders or call the 116 Rape hotline for free on Orange, Africell or Q-cell at any time of the day.
- Parents and caregivers should talk to their children at an early stage about 'good' touch versus 'bad' touch. They should teach their children to talk to an adult they trust if they have experienced a 'bad' touch. They should believe and encourage their girls and boys to talk about people or situations that makes them uncomfortable.
- As a parent or caregiver, when a child comes to you with such information, you must take the child's claims seriously and immediately ensure that the abuse stops. You must report the abuse to the FSU, 116 rape hotline or the local authorities, and you must ensure the child receives protection services.
- Remember, you are strong, and rape isn't your fault. If you feel scared, alone or if someone is hurting you, talk to someone you trust.
- For psychosocial services, call the 116 Rape hotline to receive information on how to access psychosocial care or go to Ministry of Social Welfare Office in your district
- All victims of sexual and domestic violence should receive free medical examination, treatment and follow-up, as well as other social services like psychosocial support, protection and legal counseling.
- Rape is a crime in Sierra Leone and compromise is a crime too! By taking monies to settle a matter or not reporting rape cases, you have compromised and committed a crime! If you try to settle a sexual offence such as rape out of court, you will be sentenced and / or charged a fine.

**Don't underestimate the power of your voice as a community to let women and girls know it is not their fault and where they can get support!**

## *Sexual Reproductive Health*

- Make smart decisions about sex! Your choices affect you and your sexual partner. Every time you have sex, there is a risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections like HIV. Keep your partner and yourself safe by using a condom every time you have sex.
- The ability of a girl to control her own fertility is fundamental to women's empowerment and equality. Having children by choice, not chance, changes lives, communities and countries. If a girl can plan her family, she can plan the rest of her life.
- All young women and girls have the right to make decisions about their bodies and to decide if, when and how to have sex or a child. When girls stay in school, postpone marriage and delay having children, it builds their capacity to get good jobs and become better parents in the future.
- Men too can play a supportive role as partners in respecting a woman's right to make the final decision about matters concerning her like childbirth, use of contraceptive and sex.
- Sexually active boys and girls should continue to visit the clinic to get their family planning products and seek reproductive health care. For a brighter, healthy and prosperous future, go to the clinic and talk to your health care provider about your sexual health.

**Women and girls must be involved in the decision-making process and should be comfortable with recommended actions!**

## Child Marriage & Teenage Pregnancy

- Marriage below the age of 18 years is against the law. Younger people below this age have not developed the maturity and practical skills for a successful marriage and to make informed decisions.
- During crisis situations such as COVID-19, some families may want to encourage their girls under 18 to get married to get quick money from bride price or to avoid issues such as rape from the community or simply to pave a better opportunity for the girl. When girls get married under 18, they are at higher risk of violence, and of injury and death during childbirth.

- A girl who marries early is at increased risk of early pregnancy, domestic violence, sexually transmitted infections (STI), depression and anxiety. She has reduced opportunities for education and employment.
- During the Ebola period in Sierra Leone, over 14,000 girls got pregnant forcing them to drop out of school and driving them, their families and communities further into poverty.
- Pregnancy at a young age is harmful and dangerous to a girl's growing body. Abstaining from sex is the safest way to avoid pregnancy, and dangerous diseases like HIV.
- Abstaining from sex until you are older and ready will help you focus on your dreams and goals and will spare you a lot of worry.
- Boys and men, fathers and sons, have a big role to play in preventing child marriage. They should try to learn more about the dangers of child marriage and take responsibility not to exploit women under the age of 18.
- It is your responsibility as a community to refuse the marriage of girls under the age of 18! Report ALL cases of child marriage to the nearest FSU, your local authorities including your religious leaders and the Child Welfare Committee!

**Support your children to Think, Dream, Choose!**

#### Psychosocial Support; Managing stress

- The COVID-19 pandemic has created a wide range of problems for people, limiting our daily interactions with families and loved ones and making us feel more and more lonely, anxious and vulnerable.
- It is normal to feel sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry. People of all ages all over the world are equally affected. These feelings are a standard response to a difficult situation.
- Situations of anxiety and stress often creates tension even within the family – do not take it out on your loved ones or others. By making each other feel safe and secure, caregivers can help to reduce the tension.

- Taking care of yourself will help you to care for others in need:
  - Don't be ashamed to ask for help from family and friends or discuss with a trusted person. It's important that you take care of yourself, so you can help others.
  - Focus on the things you do well and be patient with yourself.
  - Try to re-establish your daily routines such as sleeping, eating regularly
  - Do not consider taking drugs or alcohol to bring your stress down. They could cause you to act irrationally or violently to your loved ones. Violence in any form is NOT useful to help people to recover.
  
- By working together, you can help each other to cope.
  - GIVE help to others
  - ACCEPT help from others
  - LISTEN to others, provide them comfort
  - TALK with people you trust
  - PARTICIPATE in community and social activities
  
- Too much information can increase anxiety and stress. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
  
- To reduce stress levels and make the most during such hard times:
  - Take breaks from reading or listening to news stories, especially social media
  - Spend less time with people who create fear in you
  - Connect with other people. It is very important to stay in touch with friends and families that don't live in your home. Call, text or WhatsApp to talk with people you trust about your concerns and feelings
  - Try to keep a routine as much as possible
  - Exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep
  - Avoid too much alcohol and drugs
  - Focus on you, activities that you like, things that you didn't have time to do before like telling stories, reading books or watching movies
  - Be kind to yourself and others. Reach out to those who are most affected including young and elderly people, pregnant women, people with disabilities, widows and children who have lost their parents.
  
- If you are feeling stress or overly anxious, or you see someone in your community displaying these signs talk about it with someone you trust, call the 116 Rape hotline to

receive information on how to access psychosocial care or go to Ministry of Social Welfare Office in your district.

### **Stay connected while staying away!**

#### Parenting and family strengthening

- Being a parent is the most important job in the world. It means spending time to play, listen and talk with your children. This makes them happier and smarter so school shutting down is also a chance to make better relationships with your children.
- Children too undergo stress that they sometimes cannot easily explain, they feel the disturbance, suffering and hardship, and this can cause them to act out. They need special attention and love to survive and grow well, learn and develop to their fullest potential.
- All children have the right to protection. They have the right to survive, to be safe, to belong, to be heard, to receive adequate care and to grow up in a protective environment.
- All children misbehave and that is NORMAL and okay. Parents need to be understanding and compassionate to ALL their children during these times. By acknowledging, respecting and supporting your child's ideas, actions and contributions, parents can develop a healthy bond with their children.
- Children are well capable of negotiating the challenges of daily life, but they also rely on others, particularly their families, to support them during difficult times. With their intelligence, creativity and friendly nature, children can be supported to overcome difficulties.
- Children rely on their parents to provide a sense of safety and security. Its important parents remember that they are the passengers and they are driving the car. And so even if you're feeling anxious, you need to monitor your own behaviour and must try to contain your emotions and avoid oversharing your fears with your children.
- A family is the first line of protection for children. Parents or other caregivers are responsible for building a safe and loving home environment. When parents and their children talk openly and freely about issues, sharing information and ideas from the home, school and community, they are more likely to assume responsibilities, develop confidence and good communication skills, and make informed decisions as they grow.

- Hitting or shouting at your child will make you and them more angry or sad. Children are much more likely to do what we ask if we give them positive instructions and lots of praise for what they do right.
- By speaking in a calm voice and by denying the child of certain privileges as a disciplinary measure, you can influence your child's behaviour.
- Setting time aside each day to spend with your children is free and fun. It makes children feel loved and secure and shows them that they are important. Read a book or look at pictures, dance to music or sing songs, prepare meals together, encourage them to come up with and lead in things you can do together.
- Your child may be scared or confused. Explain that COVID-19 has nothing to do with the way someone looks, where they are from, or what language they speak. Talk to your children about the disease, listen to their suggestions and take them seriously.
- Tell and show your children ways they can be kind to people who are sick and health workers.
- Check daily to see that your children are okay. Give them space to share how they are feeling and always answer their questions truthfully. Its fine to say, "I don't know". Let them know you are there for them. Remind them that you care and that they can talk to you anytime.
- For babies/toddlers, copy their facial expression and sounds, sing songs, make music with pots and spoons, stack cups or blocks, tell a story, read a book, or share pictures.

**Listen to them, look at them. Give them your full attention. Have fun!**

#### *Supporting older children through the Coronavirus*

- Young people are much more likely to do what we ask if we talk nicely to them and give lots of praise for what they do right. They may not show it, but you'll see them doing that good thing again. It will also reassure them that you notice and care.
- Young people especially need to be able to communicate with their friends. Help your teenagers connect through radio programmes, mobile phones, social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) and other safe distancing ways.

- Connect with them, talk about something they like sports, music, celebrities, friends, cook a favorite meal or exercise together. Encourage them to talk to you or someone they trust about their feelings.
- Encourage older children to help others; to support less fortunate people in their community to access services provided; to help their friends and younger children in educational activities including learning more about the COVID-19 disease and protective measures.
- When we model peaceful and loving relationships our children feel more secure and loved. Positive language, active listening and showing compassion help maintain a peaceful and happy family environment.

**Act together as a community and remember you are a model for your children, practice what you preach!**