**PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE ADOLESCENT GIRLS DURING COVID-19**

1. **Objective and relevance**

This intervention aims to support the sexual and reproductive rights of vulnerable girls during COVID-19 in the Machakos county in Nairobi. The intervention will ensure the continuation of extraordinary activities due to the covid-19 restrictions, including lockdown of learning institutions and movement restrictions. It is well-documented that Covid-19 situation has left especially young women and children in a very vulnerable situation facing many [Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) challenges](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_Preparedness_and_Response_-_UNFPA_Interim_Technical_Briefs_Adolescents_and_Young_People_23_March_2020.pdf). This is compounded further by the pressure exerted by the current COVID-19 pandemic on the social systems. The “stay-at-home” order for Adolescent Girls and Young Women have aggravated gender gaps in education and lead to increased risk of [sexual exploitation](https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063342), [defilement](https://africa.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/04/covid-19-and-the-link-to-violence-against-women-and-girls) and teenage pregnancies. In Kenya, 152.000 teenage girls became pregnant over a period of three months in lockdown due to covid-19 – a 40% increase in the country’s monthly average. Teenage pregnancy has large-scale health, social and economic consequences, particular for adolescent girls retaining them in a cycle of poverty. The girls are at risk of stigma, violence and rejection from families, peers and communities.

In this intervention the two partners 100% for the Children (100%) and Positive Life Kenya (PLK) wishes to respond to the gendered fall out for the pandemic that are affecting in particular adolescent girls and help slow down the growing sexual reproductive health crisis in the wake of the pandemic. We have prioritized to protect vulnerable teenage mothers including psychosocial support services to ensure safety during and post- COVID-19.

*The immediate objectives of this intervention therefore are to:*

* Protect pregnant adolescent girls from stigma, violence and rejection under the covid-19 crisis
* Support the girl’s way back to the communities through re-integration activities, as well as community level advocacy activities.

*Background and relevance*

The COVID-19 outbreak was first reported in Kenya in February 2020. The Kenyan government departments and ministries were not prepared for this pandemic. Restrictions and lockdowns were immediately put into place. Kenya was closed for international flights - and internally movement restrictions and social gathering was prohibited. Schooling has been deferred to 2021. During the pandemic a lot of resources are being pulled away from routine care services and are redirected to covid-19 responses. One area affected is sexual and reproductive health. As a response, Kenya now face a growing sexual reproductive health crisis especially affecting adolescent girls.

The pandemic has had a great impact on women’s and girl’s rights and equality and will continue to have for many years to come. Already the country has observed an increase in cases such as domestic violence, intimate partner violence, teenage pregnancies, as well as child abuse. The closure of schools, movement restrictions, and poor access to health care facilities due to COVID-19 are expected to make these numbers increase over the next couple of months. For now, it is reported that approx. **3966** girls aged **10-19** years in Machakos County reported being pregnant.

Globally, pregnancy and childbirth complications are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19. Of pregnant teenagers who survive childbirth in Kenya, only 2% go back to school. Teenage pregnancy limits the opportunities for future employment and perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Besides the direct consequences such as unfinished education and health issues, teenage mothers frequently suffer from social stigma, facing rejections from their families, peers and communities. The pregnant adolescents are expressing feelings of stigma, fear, shame, pity, confusion and rejection and are further at risk of ending up in violent relationships. This may lead to a vicious cycle of mental stress, depression and suicidal thought among pregnant adolescents and teenage mothers. It is crucial to shield and protect the pregnant adolescent girls against the risk of stigma, violence and rejection during this time of crisis. High numbers of pregnancies among adolescent girls are not unknown to Kenya. For many years now, Kenya has had problems with teenage pregnancies as a result of poor sexual reproductive health education and cultural believes in abstinence. As described earlier, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis puts further pressure on this. The Kenyan Government has agreed to strengthen the sexual education in the Kenyan schools under the new school reform, but now with the schools closed actions have to be taken to protect pregnant adolescents.

The project site, Mlolongo town slums is a fragile context. Mlolongo town is located along the busy Mombasa highway – 19 Kilometers from the Capital city of Nairobi. The town is the main stop over for long distance trucks transporting goods and cargo from the port of Mombasa to the greater East Africa countries e.g. Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Rwanda and DRC Congo. Poverty rates in Mlolongo are approx. 61%, and continue to be aggravated by pressure on land due to the high population of in-migrants, who come to look for work. Most of the inhabitants in the area are unemployed and those that manage to find work generally earn less than US $2-3 a day selling fruits and vegetables or working as casual unskilled laborers. In the absence of viable income activities, theft, child prostitution, illiteracy and diseases fuel the cycle of poverty. The high demand for sex from the truck drivers facilitate a fast track for young teenage girls into commercial sex work to supplement their family’s income. During COVID-19, the adolescent girls living in the area are extremely exposed and vulnerable due to high pressure on the household income.

In collaboration with the local communities, PLK has overtime developed coping methods such as, traditional governance and leadership; family and community involvement; agriculture and food security survival tactics, social groups and peer counselling Those have worked well, at the individual and community level. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic the community is losing their coping strengths, as they have gone into emergency survival mode. One of the effects of this collapse of traditional coping mechanisms and social cohesion in the community is a reduced demand and access to services and psychosocial support from available helpline services. This further reduces the protection for pregnant adolescent girls during this time of crisis.

1. The partnership/collaborators

100% for the Children (100%) was established in Denmark in 2008 to work towards improving the living conditions and strengthening the rights of the most vulnerable children and youth in Kenya and Ghana. 100% does not only work with providing access to basic services like health and education, but increasingly to give youth influence in decision-making processes through advocacy and capacity building. 100% for the Children has moved from a focus solely on children in difficult circumstances to a strengthened youth perspective, with a focus on empowering young people from marginalized areas to actively shape their societies through youth leadership, capacity building, campaigning, and advocacy work, peer-to-peer efforts, etc. 100% is also actively engaged in SDG work, aligning all its projects to relevant SDGs, and working with partners to strengthen this focus.

For the last two years, 100% have worked with youth-inclusive SRHR and GBV- services in Kenya with the aim of building strong active citizenships based on critical independent thinking among children and youth through inclusive SRHR services enabling them to claim their rights.

Positive Life Kenya (PLK) offices are Located in Machakos County, Mlolongo town. Project activities and service delivery are fused in the 7 forgotten slums of Mlolongo. They are huge slums with a population of over 3 million people. PLK will be the Kenyan partner overseeing the intervention implementation and overall financial management in Kenya. PLK will facilitate all the activities in the urban slum environment of Mlolongo, Nairobi.  PLK will be reporting both narrative and financially to 100% on a quarterly basis.

Initially called Living Positive Mlolongo, the organization began as a Community Based Organization (CBO) in 2010. Since 2010, the organization has expanded its support services to many slums of the Machakos. This organization was renamed to Positive Life Kenya in 2015. Today Positive Life Kenya works with a long variety of empowering and sustaining efforts. The organization creates awareness, works with skill-based programs for youth and women, supports the local community through communication and advocacy about the prevention of HIV. PLK’s vision is to see families living with dignity and free of poverty. Their mission is to break the cycle of poverty by educating and empowering marginalized families to build healthy environments for their children to thrive and create lasting change.

Positive Life Kenya has worked with rescuing children and youth through a rescue center in the past, particular children and youth with special health care and support needs. At this center over 350 children and youth have received help. Raped, molested and girls rescued from prostitution have a safe place here, where they are provided with education, feeding and counselling. This intervention will be the first time that PLK works specific with pregnant girls in response to the high number of pregnancies as a result of covid-19 lockdown. They will build on years of experience of working with youth skills, increasing reproductive knowledge among vulnerable women and provide guidance for youth from the slum areas. For instance, PLK have an empowerment project where former commercial sex workers are trained in tailoring, knitting and soap-making skills as well as financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills.

**The previous and current collaboration**

The partners have collaborated for several years to facilitate children and youth in expressing their own voices on reproductive and GBV issues - using child/youth inclusive innovative approaches. The results from this work clearly indicate a continued need to involve the youth in more dialogue-based work, especially when discussing sensitive matters related to SRHR/GBV education. Currently, the partners are involved in a project (Breaking the Silence, 19-2448-UI-sep), which aims to roll-out SRHR/GBV education and life skill information in 34 schools in Baringo county and the Machakos affecting more than 4000 students and 68 teachers in accordance with the new Kenyan school reform. Unfortunately, COVID-19 put the intervention on hold leaving thousands of children and youth without the necessary knowledge, skills to protect themselves and to speak up when needed.

1. Target groups, objectives, and expected results

This intervention aims to support the sexual and reproductive rights of vulnerable youth during covid-19 in Mlolongo slum in Nairobi by protecting pregnant adolescent girls from stigma, violence and rejection from their communities. This intervention’s target group therefore consist of

* 50 pregnant adolescent girls identified by PLK. The girls will be protected through a safe house and receive education in the period while efforts of reintegration will be pursued.
* 200 family members, peers and community members from the girl’s local communities targeted through the community forums.

Secondary target group for this intervention is

* 14 elders from the small communities to support the reintegration of the teenage mothers

The intervention will prioritize teenage pregnant girls 12- 18 years of age. The most vulnerable will benefit i.e. those living in the streets, those who have recently been married off (early marriages), and those living in deplorable conditions in the slums and not able to access basic needs and health services. This project will not discriminate the girls whatsoever, be it on culture, religion, tribe or any other ungenuine reasons. PLK works closely with our social workers and community health volunteers who live in the slums. They will help with the identification of the target group. These selection criteria have been chosen, because of recent developments in the community, where pregnant girls are living in the streets or with friends. Many of them have been chased from their homes. They loiter in the streets engaging in prostitution and begging for food without protection. They don’t have access to pre-natal care and reproductive health rights - and are often victims of sexual violence. PLK are also getting reports from the community that there is an increase in early marriages due to desperation.

In other to achieve the purpose of this intervention, a coordinated set of activities have been curated. These activities are delineated for each of the immediate objectives of the intervention as follows:

1. **Protect pregnant adolescent girls from stigma, violence and rejection under the covid-19 crisis**

*Protect the pregnant teenagers through a safe house*

This intervention will protect pregnant teenage girls from stigma, violence and rejection by referring them to a safe house operated by PLK. At the safe house, the rescued girls will be offered medical prenatal and postnatal care services. During their stay, the girls will receive age appropriate education or get enrolled in PLK’s vocational training center for skills/trade training. This to secure that the girls can either reenter the schools once they open and after they have had their child or get involved in an income generating activity based on the skill they have learned.

They safe house is already active and being operated by PLK with the help from trained safe house mothers. The girls are in urgent need of social protection, legal support, and reintegration, but often have no knowledge of where to get assistance. A part of the activities connected to the safe house will therefore also be to map out stakeholders that can help with referrals. This will be under the responsibility of the project coordinator from PLK. During their stay at the safe house, the girls will also receive life skills training related to becoming a mother in the near future. The girls will be trained in parenting skills, including child development, family budgeting, health and nutrition, and other skills to promote the long-term well-being of their children.

Many of the adolescent girls have been expelled from their family home. Some are living in the streets – and some have engaged in early marriage to escape a desperate situation. It is important to break this circle, which is why this intervention proposes to protect the girls by offering, that they stay together, at the safehouse. It is anticipated, that the girls will benefit from being together in a safe environment - and that this shared experience can facilitate a strong identity among the girls, which will continue after this project ends. Furthermore, from PLK´s experience, the reintegration process that involves counselling and meeting families and community authorities for acceptance can be long. The safe house will protect the girls while this process is ongoing.

***Expected outputs***

1. Improved security and mental health for pregnant adolescent girls.
2. Improved referral and linkages and other social support /protection services for school-aged pregnant adolescent girls.
3. Improved maternal health among school-aged pregnant girls and their babies.

***Indicators***

1. A minimum of 50 teenage girls are rescued and referred to a safe house until they are able to be reintegrated into the community again.
2. A minimum of 50 teenage girls have received age appropriate education or skills training.
3. **Support their way back to the communities through re-integration activities as well as education.**

The pregnant adolescent girls and teenage mothers are exposed in the communities. Therefore, after giving birth, Positive Life Kenya will work on reintegrating the girls to their families and providing additional support for the new teenage mothers. To do this the intervention will conduct community forums to inform and facilitate the acceptance of the youth mothers back to the community. The reintegration process will involve village elders, chiefs and other authority figures. The aim with the community forums is to change the mindset of parents, peers and community members in the slum communities in Mlolongo. At the community forums, the need for the girls to be able to come back home and stay and to carry on with their education will be raised to create awareness on these matters.

The 50 girls, the safe house mother and social workers from PLK will all take part in the community forums. It is the strategic provision of service delivery during their stay at the safe house that enables the girls to participate in the community forum and advocate for reintegration into the communities. The social workers from PLK will use the dialogue at the community forums, as well as the issues being raised in future advocacy work connected to their activities under the ‘Breaking the Silence’ (19-2448-UI-sep). 100% has documented success from Ghana in using community forums, as an inclusive dialogue-tool geared towards getting the understanding from local communities and authorities to the challenges facing vulnerable groups. In this intervention pregnant adolescent girls. From Ghana, we know that the community forums have been effective in encouraging open discussions between the stakeholders, because they provide a space, where young girls feel safe to express themselves. Furthermore, the community forums will be facilitated by PLK, which will add to their capacity. PLK will involve stakeholders, village elders and the families. This will be done through advocacy related meetings and continuous sensitization meetings on the importance of accepting girls back to the community. Leveraging of resources will be done to ensure community contribution in kind, this will foster the sense of ownership hence sustainability of activities, when this intervention ends.

The community forums will be conducted in accordance with the current COVID-19 restrictions in Kenya.

***Expected output***

1. Improved reintegration of teenage mothers back into communities.
2. Improved physical and mental wellbeing for the teenage mothers because of acceptance from family, peers and community.

***Indicators***

1. A minimum of 50 teenage girls has participated in the community forums and reintegration efforts has been started.
2. A minimum of 14 elders supports the reintegration of teenage mothers into society.

*Expected impact for the whole intervention*

Protection of teenage mothers will lead to healthy pregnancies, safe childbirths, the continuation of education among teenage mothers, and reintegration of the young mothers and their children into the community. In the long run this will hopefully facilitate a desired break the negative cycle for young girls getting pregnant – missing out on education, not being able to support themselves and being excluded from their communities.

The intervention is based on a strategy of inclusion. In this strategy the safehouse plays an important role in creating a shared experience among the target group. It is hoped that this could manifest in a shared group identity, which would empower the girls to serve, as encouraging role models in the community after the intervention ends.

Another important impact of this project will also be to give legitimacy to PLK in the community. It is anticipated that this intervention will strengthen the organizations position, as this is a concrete example on how the organization assist girls in the community during a time of crisis.

1. Intervention-related information work in Denmark

For this project, we will use our platforms (webpage, newsletter, and social media) to inform the danish citizens about the 'hidden' side effects of covid-19, such as teenage pregnancies. We will tell some of the saved girls' stories to show how a global pandemic can lead to a national sexual reproductive health crisis affecting children, and in particular girls, for many years to come. We will also use this project's information work to inform people about the importance of sexual and reproductive health even during a crisis.