

Looking at COVID-19 through a gender lens

By Geraldine Matchaba, Head of Corporate Affairs and Brand & Marketing at Standard Chartered

Our world has undoubtedly been changed forever by the COVID-19 pandemic, as all efforts are focused on slowing down the spread and mitigating the impact of this silent enemy that has spread across the world like wildfire. Not only have there been many lives lost, but there have also been many businesses and millions of jobs impacted, which in turn directly affects millions of families. It doesn't help that most countries around the world were already in distress with high levels of unemployment and devastating droughts as a result of climate change, which were already making it very difficult for families to put food on the table. As the world tries to deal with this pandemic, I can't help but think about what will happen to the efforts that have been made to help empower adolescent girls over the past few years.

Empowering girls, empowering communities

What makes this demographic more important than all the others? This is not just about the fight for women's equal rights or the fight for equal pay, although those are valid and ongoing necessary discussions. This is about giving the adolescent girl a decent and fair start in her life, so she can have a better shot at being successful. So, with the current global crisis we find ourselves in, will the cause to empower young women remain on the world's agenda or will this slide down to the bottom of the priority list?

Standard Chartered Bank has been running a young girls' empowerment programme called Goal, which is our flagship programme under Futuremakers. Futuremakers by Standard Chartered is our global initiative to tackle inequality and promote greater economic inclusion for young people in our communities especially those who are disadvantaged. The Goal programme specifically aims to equip young girls with the confidence, knowledge and skills they need to fulfil their economic potential. The programme was launched in New Delhi in 2006 with just 70 girls. I count myself fortunate to have been part of the team that was involved in the launch of the pilot programme, along with my colleagues and a very perceptive NGO partner who believed that together we could make an impact on these young girls and their community.

Developing confidence and vital life skills

Sometimes when the challenge seems insurmountable, what you need are individuals and partners who simply believe that you can still make a difference, regardless of the arduous journey ahead of you. In a country of over a billion people, what impact can you really make by just reaching 70 girls? Fourteen years later, Goal is now active in 24 countries, including South Africa (since 2015), and has impacted nearly 600,000 adolescent girls globally between 2006 and 2019, – and that number is growing. This means that over half a million families are also impacted, as these girls carry the message back home. When you empower a girl, you empower a community.

Goal is based on face-to-face interaction with these young women which presents a challenge during the pandemic. The programme is run by Goal Champions who have graduated from the programme themselves and this is one of the elements that makes Goal sustainable, as it focuses on the 'train the trainer' approach. After completing the one-year programme, the girls come out with confidence and skills that they would otherwise have not acquired – our post programme scores have proved that every single time. In 2019, we commissioned a global development think tank called Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to assess Goal's impact. Over 18,000 girls were surveyed and there were over 300 interviews and focus groups with the young girls, parents, teachers, community leaders and the boys in those communities. The research found strong evidence of Goal's positive and lasting impact on the girls as we found a 14 per cent increase in self-confidence, 28 per cent increase in knowledge about health and 18 per cent increase in knowledge about savings and finance.

The gender gap and GDP

Then COVID-19 happened to all of us, accompanied by varying levels of lockdowns, and along with that a halt to the valuable face-to-face regular sessions that a lot of these young Goal girls look forward to – an opportunity to be in a safe environment, playing sport with their peers and learning about their rights, the importance of understanding reproductive health, saving money, and many other life skills.

Data is always important when presenting such arguments. According to one of the Goldman Sachs Global Economic papers, GDP growth rates rise if education pushes more women into the labour force. This makes gender equality not just an imperative but a valid economic argument. It seems the 'poorer' a country, the higher the literacy differential between females and males.

Apart from the inhumane forced child marriages that are still happening in this modern day and age in some countries, research also tells us that most girls without a secondary education are likely to have their first baby at a younger age, and in turn, there is a higher chance that this child will die before they are five years old. Chances are also higher that these young girls will have many more children than they can afford to raise in a way that they would like to. It becomes an ongoing vicious cycle and we need to do everything in our power to break that cycle – one girl at a time.

Looking toward the future

We need to remember that these adolescent girls are still very much a vulnerable group and we should not divert our attention away from them as we try and manage the ongoing pandemic. The two need not be exclusive. In fact, we have seen how gender-based violence has escalated during the lockdowns in many countries, including here in South Africa, and I shudder to think how much of this has been directed towards young girls by the very people who are meant to take care of and protect them.

In the last few years, there has been an ongoing debate in some quarters that we mustn't leave the boys behind as we empower the young girls and this a valid discussion to have. As a mother to a teenage son, I totally agree – my intention is to raise a well-rounded young man who will be a responsible member of society and who respects women.

In fact, in some of our markets where Goal has advanced, we do have boys on the programme, but the reality is we need to double our efforts on uplifting adolescent girls to get them just to be on an 'equal footing' with the boys. Research has also proved that in countries where education levels are low, the economic performance of that country is equally impacted. What is the saying – when you empower and educate a girl, you empower a community. What's not to love about that?

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