



Executive Director's Report

December 2020



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Dear GEM Community,

I arrived at GEM in early March, just days before the first lockdown of COVID-19. Soon after that the world watched the murder of George Floyd in horror, an event which brought centuries of seething injustices endured by Black people to light. Despite the massive global protests and public outcries, the lives of Black and Indigenous people continue to suffer from the excessive use of violence by law enforcement. Meanwhile, leaders south of our border masked their inaction in protecting those most vulnerable to COVID-19 by shifting attention and redirecting blame. This opened up the floodgates for vitriolic attacks and unprecedented violence against East Asian people in Canada and around the world. Without a doubt, this has been a year we will never forget.

2020 has been devastating for those most vulnerable in our society. COVID-19 has exposed the inequities of health for those facing poverty, for women, for the aged, and racialized people. Economic insecurity, increased caretaking responsibilities, and domestic violence are just a few examples of how women and girls are disproportionately impacted by this pandemic. These are the communities that GEMgirls come from.

Immediately following the first lockdown, GEM redirected its focus to understand the impact COVID-19 has had on our mentees. We led surveys, focus groups, and conversations to assess how our mentees were faring. The results were startling. Before COVID-19, roughly 30% of GEMgirls identified as struggling with mental health. Post-pandemic, this percentage has doubled to over 60%. Uncertainty about their futures, missed milestones, isolation from remote learning and physical distancing, parents' loss of income, and – in some cases – the loss of loved ones has taken a tremendous toll on the mental health and wellness of GEMgirls.

We also reached out to our mentors to determine how COVID-19 had affected them. Thankfully, all of our mentors were able to commit to fulfilling their mentorship duties, enabling us to successfully close our 2019-20 cohort. Throughout spring, we held regular check-ins and online sessions to support GEMgirls in navigating their loneliness and isolation. This kept them motivated and focused on their futures.

We worked to reframe our programming from an in-person model to fully virtual delivery. Over these past months, we successfully:

- redirected staff to work remotely;
- pivoted our program to ensure that mentors and mentees are able to connect with one another without any health risks;
- redeveloped our large-scale workshops and interactive curriculum to be delivered online in a meaningful way; and
- successfully redeveloped the recruitment, screening, interviewing, and matching processes for mentees and mentors to be conducted online.

The virtual transition of the program allowed us to increase the number of mentees admitted in the new cohort by 54% for a total of 120 mentees this year. This is a significant jump from 78 mentees in 2019-20. Despite this increase, we were still forced to turn away 133 girls (50% of applicants) due to lack of funds.

Notwithstanding the disruptions of COVID-19, we have been busy with several new and exciting projects including:

- establishing a new look and building a new website to showcase GEM's work;
- developing a comprehensive privacy policy to ensure the responsible transfer of personal information;
- hiring four summer policy interns to support vital research – two graduate students from the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto and two undergraduate students;
- conducting an alumnae study to assess the longitudinal impact of GEM's program;
- establishing GEMLab, the first Canadian centre for research and collaboration on mentorship, gender, and inclusive economic growth;
- developing a pilot-project for an evidence-based peer-facilitated mentorship model for women in the workforce commissioned by MAGNA International's Women's Resource Group;
- establishing policies and resources to support the growing impact of mental health of girls from COVID-19; and
- engaging a new roster of corporate partners and sponsors to host our 2020-21 GEMinars including RBC, Google, HP, LinkedIn and Cisco.

With the successful onboarding of our new cohort, we are closely monitoring this first-ever virtual program year. To support our administration of a fast-growing program, we are in the process of implementing two new tech platforms that will help support the digital recruitment, screening, matching, management, and curriculum delivery.

Looking ahead, we will:

- continue to refresh GEM’s curriculum and skill-building activities to ensure the highest level of leadership and professional development for GEMgirls;
- continue to build GEMLab as the leading centre where leaders, experts, practitioners, policy makers, and the community can convene on mentorship, gender, youth, and inclusion; and
- expand and diversify our fundraising revenues to allow more girls to access GEM’s life-changing program.

I look forward to the exciting work ahead at GEM, and working with GEM’s dedicated team: Rebecca Hazell leading programming; Kayla Calder leading engagement; Emma Murray supporting program and policy projects; and Kelly Nguyen on graphics.

A sincere thank you to GEM’s Board of Directors for their leadership and support throughout 2020. I’d also like to recognize RBC for generously funding our mentorship program, and the Citrine Foundation for their transformative gift. My heartfelt thanks to all of our generous donors and sponsors for financially supporting our work, and GEM’s volunteers, and mentors for their time and commitment. Together, our community will continue to fuel GEM’s trajectory, allowing more marginalized high school girls access to mentorship.

To quote a GEMgirl I recently spoke with, *“Thanks to GEM, I feel like I can tackle the world. I’m so hopeful and filled with optimism that my future will be bright.”*

Thank you for being a part of her journey.

Sincerely yours,



Wendy Sung-Aad
Executive Director