**Introduction**

The ITU thanks the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the invitation to provide information on the “Call for Submission for a report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl”.

**Information requested**

1. The most important challenges and barriers that girls have been facing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic at each level of education and in relation to the four elements of right to education (availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability):

Around 1.6 billion children globally do not have access to the Internet at home. School closures during the Covid-19 pandemic have hit these children the hardest. Lack of connectivity means exclusion, marked by the lack of access to the wealth of information available online, fewer resources to learn and to grow, and limited opportunities for the most vulnerable children and youth to fulfil their potential.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Girls face disadvantages in acquiring ICT skills, whether in school or at home, based on a study on adolescents in eight African countries by UNICEF. Adolescents who are not equipped with ICT skills will have difficulty navigating online learning platforms and are at risk of not being able to access online services as adults. Being equipped with ICT skills is essential particularly given the importance of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition to school, the home environment can be a critical space for developing and practicing ICT skills. In the same UNICEF study, in more than half of the countries analysed, adolescent boys’ use computers and the Internet more frequently than girls. Gender norms that limit girls’ use of digital technologies may contribute to this gap.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Gender norms may prevent girls from acquiring ICT skills. Parental restrictions are among the most common barriers to digital access for children, and in many countries, concerns about girls’ online safety and the fear that girls will become exposed to content that goes against their community’s values, mean girls are discouraged from using the Internet.  In addition, girls may be socialized from an early age to believe boys are naturally more suited to the ICT field, leading girls to doubt their abilities and caregivers and teachers to invest less in girls’ opportunities to develop ICT skills.[[4]](#footnote-4)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls have been disproportionately facing many barriers to access digital education. These include lack of availability, affordability and quality, as well as problems finding the trainings and courses that are adapted to their needs. In addition, internet access has played a critical role during these times and yet, almost half of the world’s population remains online.

1. Concrete measures taken to respond challenges and barriers faced by girls at each level of education and in relation to the four elements of right to education, as a part of the short-term responses to, and mid- and longer-term recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic:

Giga initiative: to address availability challenge for young people (including girls)

Giga, the joint ITU and UNICEF initiative, is working to connect every school in the world to the Internet and every young person to information, opportunity and choice, and a core principle for Giga is to ensuring equitable access to connectivity and digital solutions for all. Giga works through four pillars – map, connect, finance and empower. A problem cannot be fixed until it can be seen, and the first step is to map schools and their connectivity levels. To date Giga has mapped the locations of over 1m schools in 41 countries[[5]](#footnote-5).

Giga works with a range of partners to bring meaningful connectivity to schools. Giga support governments in selecting the most appropriate solutions to connect schools and designing competitive procurement processes. Giga is currently working with governments in 19 countries to actively connect schools and has already connected over 3,000 schools to the Internet. For example, last year Giga successfully connected 110 schools in Kenya reaching ~42,000 students and teachers across every geographical region of Kenya. Whilst in the Eastern Province of Rwanda, Giga aggregated the demand for connectivity across 63 schools, of which 13 were in refugee camps without access to electricity, and launched a common bid to connect them to broadband internet, securing a 30% to 55% reduction in the average price per Mb paid by schools in the procurement process.

Connecting every person in the world could cost US$428 billion or more. Much of the funding already exists but it is not always well aligned. Giga therefore works with governments to unlock public funds for use in delivering connectivity and to attract private investors by reducing the risks in harder-to-reach areas. To date Giga has raised over US$22 million – and leveraged an additional $200 million – to catalyse future efforts in accelerating connectivity and is now working on mobilisation of Giga-sourced capital.

Finally, Giga works with ITU and UNICEF programmes, such as ITU’s digital skills programme[[6]](#footnote-6), Generation Unlimited[[7]](#footnote-7) and Reimagine Education[[8]](#footnote-8), to ensure that, once connected, young people are empowered with the tools they need to shape their own futures.

EQUALS Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age (to provide digital education including to girls)

Founded by EY, GSMA, ITU and W4, and powered by the EQUALS Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age, this initiative aims to provide access to free gender transformative foundational IT skills training and e-mentoring for 1 million women and girls by 2026. The overarching goal is to increase the talent pipeline of girls and young women in STEM/STEAM leading to employment and/or internship opportunities. This digital literacy initiative aligns with the Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality, and is a commitment to the Generation Equality, a ground-breaking and multigenerational campaign to realize women’s rights for an equal future.

HER DIGITAL SKILLS brings together three exciting EQUALS projects into one comprehensive programme:

* **Tech4Girls Workshops**: Basic introduction to the technical knowledge and education needed for careers in technology through hands-on workshops, designed to inspire underserved girls and young women (10-25 years) to pursue tech studies/careers;
* **EQUALS Badges**: Access to free, gender-transformative IT skills training & an EQUALS qualification (foundational, advanced & expert Badge) boosting women’s chances of pursuing further training/studies and accessing formal employment in the ICT sector; and
* **Tech4Girls E-mentoring**: Connecting established companies from among the tech and mobile industries with young women to increase interest, involvement, and awareness of the overall role of industry in bridging the gender gap in leadership.

To overcome the barriers to access digital education, the HER DIGITAL SKILLS initiative offers all three learning components to women and girls fully online and free of charge. Each project targets specific needs: the Tech4Girls workshops are designed for women aged 18-25 who need basic digital skills; the EQUALS Badges are for women seeking more advanced digital skills; and finally, the e-Mentoring target young women who are already establishing themselves in the tech sector. For each of these there is a waiting list, aiming to give everyone the same possibility and ensure equal opportunities to develop digital skills.

The workshops are held in different countries all over the world, to benefit as many women as possible. Indeed, starting 2021, the initiative was present in 20 countries (such as Pakistan, Burundi, Australia and the Pacific, Commonwealth countries, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Taiwan etc), and 4 continents.

Despite the COVID19-related challenges, the Tech4Girls workshops and e-Mentoring now count more than 3000 participants, and 94% of the participants found they improved their understanding of STEAM and possible career paths within STEAM. In addition, 94% of the mentors and 93% of the mentees stated they were satisfied with the e-Mentoring programme overall.

For the year 2022, HER DIGITAL SKILLS plans to reach even more women and girls, holding 20 more workshops (Mexico, Haiti, Ethiopia, Philippines, France, USA etc), and 4 e-Mentoring cycles. It hopes to engage 6000 participants from 30 countries across the 4 continents, and officially launch by the end of the year the EQUALS badges foundational skills on the ITU academy platform. Beyond 2022, the initiative plans to offer to HER DIGITAL SKILLS beneficiaries a Gamified Light Badge on the EY STEM App.

Connect2Recover initiative: to strengthen resiliency and increase digital inclusion during COVID-19 (the impact would include girls)

As part of the UN Secretary-General’s call to build back better after the pandemic, the ITU’s Connect2Recover initiative was launched with the support of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in September 2020. This initiative aims to help lesser connected countries, especially but not exclusively in the Africa region, including for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and the Small Island Developing States, to reinforce the digital infrastructure and ecosystems, to provide the means of utilizing digital technologies in education, healthcare and job creation in the wake of COVID-19 and in preparedness for natural hazards. Since then, Connect2Recover has received the support from the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications of Australia, and Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Republic of Lithuania, as well as Huawei and Vodafone.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Amongst the projects carried out under Connect2Recover include the collaboration with Giga to connect schools in the Eastern Province of Rwanda (which has already been mentioned above); the project to connect school and community and the provision of training in Haiti, resiliency assessments to address Internet congestion during COVID-19 in Armenia; post-disaster resiliency assessment in Haiti; as well as updating of transmission map for the Arab region. All these projects aim to strengthen network infrastructure and ensure availability of services so that everyone, including girls, is connected to the Internet.

In addition, Connect2Recover launched a research competition which focused on digital resiliency and digital inclusion to build back better with broadband leading to positive outcomes in education, healthcare, or job creation for COVID-19 recovery. This resulted in providing a grant to 15 selected research projects.[[10]](#footnote-10) Four relevant research projects focus on digital inclusion in the area of education and digital inclusion of vulnerable groups are as follows:

* Research Paper 6: A Policy Framework for Education Resilience - addressing digital divide through a case study of Bengenir, Nairobi and Cotonou.
* Research Paper 1: Making Higher Education Truly Inclusive – on access of marginalized groups to higher education in Australia, Philippines and South Africa.
* Research Paper 9: An Assessment of Digital Inclusion among the Vulnerable Persons in Developing Economies: A Comparative Study between Uganda and South Africa Economies – where the vulnerable groups of people include people with special needs, elderly, women, and people in remote places.
* Research Paper 11: Determinants of Digital Inclusion in Higher Education:  Exploring the Ethiopian context.[[11]](#footnote-11)

ITU’s REG4COVID: ICT initiatives during COVID-19 and in the recovery phase (which would include girls)

The Global Network Resiliency Platform (#REG4COVID) is a place where ICT regulators, policy makers and other interested stakeholders can share information, view the initiatives and measures have been introduced around the world designed to help ensure communities remain connected, during the COVID-19 crisis.[[12]](#footnote-12)

ITU’s REG4COVID survey asked the question “What are your country’s plans for the post-crisis situation in terms of ICT policies and regulations?”. 39% of regulators responded and said that they planned to review universal service policies and financing to more effectively address the digital divide and 37% to institute digital training and skills enhancement for different segments of society.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Some important findings of the impact of COVID-19 which heightened digital divide, and the importance of addressing digital and social inclusion is provided as follows: “The critical importance of social inclusion issues for the sector is also well recognized. The issue of universal service will be heightened, new forms of digital divide, e.g. older users not being sufficient digital literate, gender divide, and the need for improved affordability for ubiquitous broadband for all citizens and residents. Inclusion and digital divide issues will be heightened due to the fact that the negative impacts of the pandemic will fall more heavily on the less well off.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

“In doing so, it is critical that the equity issues at stake in accessing telecommunication and ICT services in the post- COVID world are addressed. To the extent that improved access to telecommunications and ICT services can provide social inclusion, access to services, gender equality, access to education and, potentially, access to employment, these services have a valuable role to play in offsetting these negative equity impacts of COVID-19.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Global Satellite Operator’s Association (GSOA) shared that in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, there is a need to accelerate concerted action at all levels to close the digital divide, especially the gender digital gap. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the deep disparities in access to affordable and meaningful connectivity. Amongst others, GSOA advocates to leave no one behind: a people-centered approach to achieve meaningful connectivity through five areas: to close the digital divide by 2030, invest in affordable technology solutions, empower people everywhere, mobilize new financing models to reach the unconnected, and protect the most vulnerable online.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In addition, Asociación Colnodo shared on Community Networks for rural communities in Colombia. “From Colnodo we accompany processes of rural community networks of Intranet, Internet and mobile telephony, so that indigenous and rural communities that in Colombia have not been able to access quality communication services appropriate to their needs, can design build and maintain their own technological means of communication. During the confinement due to the COVID-19 health crisis, these networks have been a tool for women and men to access communication services where they were not previously available.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

In addition, the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker monitors policy measures enacted by governments worldwide to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, and highlights responses that have integrated a gender lens. It includes national measures that are directly addressing women’s economic and social security, including unpaid care work, the labour market and violence against women. The tracker is coordinated by UNDP with substantive leadership and technical contributions from UN Women. It is co-created by both entities and based on publicly available information, including media coverage, official documents, and other COVID-19 policy trackers. In some cases, information on measures was provided by UNDP and UN Women country offices. It can provide guidance for policymakers and evidence for advocates to ensure a gender-sensitive COVID-19 policy response.[[18]](#footnote-18)

There were also COVID-19 related initiatives that focused on the use of new technologies to enhance women’s opportunities in the Textiles and Apparel sector, and on coffee/cacao value chain;[[19]](#footnote-19) initiatives to introduce mesh networks and Pi recorders to help young women to share living stories from the community in Janastu, India.[[20]](#footnote-20) There was also a women-first digital catalyst model called eDost to address the lack of digital services for the remote village community and the lack of enterprising livelihoods for millennials especially for women.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Conclusion**

ITU’s mandate is to advance connectivity and digital inclusion, and to ensure that everyone, everywhere, benefits from the power of digital to enable social development and growth. As such, the Giga initiative works to connect every school in the world to the Internet and every young person to information, opportunity and choice. EQUALS Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age addresses the lack of digital education for women and girls by providing IT skills training and e-mentoring. Connect2Recover addresses network resiliency to ensure the availability of service to everyone for a COVID-19 recovery in key areas of education, healthcare, and job creation as well as addressing digital inclusion. Finally, REG4COVID shows that initiatives implemented during COVID-19 emphasised digital inclusion, the importance of closing the digital divide whilst being sensitive to gender equality and rural requirements, as well as empowering women through the use of technologies.

1. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/the-state-of-the-global-education-crisis-a-path-to-recovery?cq_ck=1638565414093> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/covid-19-and-education-the-digital-gender-divide-among-adolescents-in-sub-saharan-africa/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/covid-19-and-education-the-digital-gender-divide-among-adolescents-in-sub-saharan-africa/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/covid-19-and-education-the-digital-gender-divide-among-adolescents-in-sub-saharan-africa/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://projectconnect.unicef.org/map> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.decentjobsforyouth.org/campaign/digital-skills> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.generationunlimited.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.unicef.org/reimagine/education> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Pages/connect-2-recover.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Pages/connect2recover/research-competition/default.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Documents/connect2recover/research-competition/Connect2Recover-winning-projects-booklet-final.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://reg4covid.itu.int/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://reg4covid.itu.int/report-pandemic-in-the-internet-age/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://reg4covid.itu.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ITU_COVID-19_and_Telecom-ICT.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://reg4covid.itu.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ITU_COVID-19_and_Telecom-ICT.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://gsoasatellite.com/news/leave-no-one-behind-a-people-centered-approach-to-achieve-meaningful-connectivity/> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/CDS/REG4COVID/Display.asp?ID=54293> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Digital-Inclusion/Pages/events/eif.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://blog.janastu.org/covid-stories/> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://baif.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/BAIF-eDost.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)