**Report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl, 50th session of the Human Rights Council**

**UNESCO submission**

**Summary**

Over 190 countries closed schools for part of 2020 and/or 2021 to stem the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting 1.6 billion learners worldwide. In response, UNESCO established the multi-stakeholder Global Education Coalition, leveraging close to 200 partners to promote learning continuity and the safe return to school. [*When schools shut: gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures*](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000379270) (2021), published by UNESCO, sets out preliminary evidence on the barriers and challenges affecting girls´ right to education during the pandemic, as well as on early government and civil society responses to address them.

Key challenges identified include increased household responsibilities reducing time for learning; lack of access to high-tech remote learning technologies; deterioration of mental health outcomes; reduced protection from violence, early and forced marriage, and early and unintended pregnancy; and reduced access to nutrition and other health-related education and support services often provided by schools. Education sector responses have been largely gender-blind, with lack of sex-disaggregated data being the norm, yet early evidence suggests that interventions that explicitly address the gendered barriers to participation in remote learning and the return to school may help stave off adverse outcomes for gender equality.

**Introduction**

When the COVID-19 pandemic unfurled, learners across the world lost access to in-person education and the many social, health and protection benefits of attending school. At its first peak in March 2020, school closures affected 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries. The consequences of this educational disruption are far-reaching – particularly for the most vulnerable learners, and especially girls with intersecting factors of disadvantage. Early predictions from UNESCO estimated that 11 million girls were at risk of not returning to school, in addition to the 130 million girls who were already not enrolled prior to the crisis (*How many students are at risk of not returning to school?* Advocacy paper, 2020[[1]](#footnote-2)).

Education is a fundamental human right. The right to education is non-derogable: **States are not permitted to temporarily limit its enjoyment during a state of emergency** unless it falls under the exceptions provided by Article 4 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and is fully justified. Moreover, in all circumstances, states are bound by the principle of **non-discrimination**. The UNESCO **Convention against Discrimination in Education** (**1960)** provides that “‘discrimination’ includes any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or both, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education”. States therefore have the duty to ensure that even during a pandemic or other emergency, the right to education is guaranteed for all.

To ensure continued access to education when schools closed, many states acted quickly to deploy different forms of remote learning, including ‘high-tech’ (online platforms and portals), ‘low-tech’ (radio and television broadcasts) and ‘no-tech’ (textbooks and take-home packages) learning. Other forms of remote learning included in-person peer learning groups and self-guided learning. The *UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures* conducted from April to June 2020 (First Round of Data Collection, June 2020)[[2]](#footnote-3), found that 110 of the 118 countries surveyed had policies to provide at least one remote learning modality for learners at the pre-primary to upper secondary levels, with the third survey showing that over half of countries provided more than five modalities of remote learning (Third Round of Data Collection, June 2021).

The extent to which these modalities and the delivery of remote education in practice met learners’ needs has depended on a range of factors, including in many cases their gender. Indeed, while school closures are detrimental to all students, pre-existing gender roles, limitations and expectations shape the specific barriers and risks experienced by girls and boys.

To understand how gender affected the lives of students during COVID-19 school closures, UNESCO, with funding from the Global Partnership for Education and within the framework of the Global Education Coalition’s Gender Flagship, published the **global report** [***When schools shut***](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000379270.locale%3Den) (2021)[[3]](#footnote-4). This report – based on a literature and data review, a survey of organizations, key informant interviews, and focused quantitative and qualitative research in five countries (Bangladesh, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Mali and Pakistan) – sets out the ways in which gender has influenced and circumscribed the lives of students during schools, as well as steps taken to develop effective responses that secure educational continuity for all and mitigate the negative gender-based effects arising from the loss of health and protection services provided by schools. The findings of this report as they relate specifically to girls provide the basis for this submission. It is important to underline that **lack of sex-disaggregated data has significantly limited the education community’s ability to track and monitor gender disparities in claiming the right to education during COVID-19: this must be addressed as a priority.**

1. **Challenges and barriers faced by girls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**

*When schools shut* (2021)found that girls have been disproportionately affected by school closures. The following challenges and barriers, *presented here together with the way in which they relate to the four elements of the right to education*, were of particular relevance to girls:

* **Increased household responsibilities reducing time and energy for learning (*accessibility*):** Gender roles and expectations that regulate how girls use their time outside of school played a significant role in whether they were able to participate in, and benefit from, the different remote learning strategies deployed. Girls’ increased time spent at home often carried a greater burden of domestic dutiessuch as care for family members, cooking, cleaning, and supporting the remote learning of younger siblings – particularly in poorer families; this situation was documented in different contexts in Bangladesh, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Niger, Pakistan and Sierra Leone, among other low and middle-income countries.
* **Limited access to ‘high-tech’ remote learning (*availability and accessibility*):** The gender digital divide, which was recognized as a challenge prior to the pandemic, left many girls unable to meaningfully participate in technology-based remote learning interventions. Girls were disproportionately left out of high-tech remote learning due to limited *access* to computers, smartphones and other technological devices, often as a result of cultural norms that led to greater restrictions on and monitoring of girls’ use of devices, and lack of digital *skills.* For example, *When schools shut* cites a 2021 study of five countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in which 28% of male respondents said they always had Internet access to help with their studies, compared to 15% of female respondents; 30% of female respondents had Internet access rarely or not at all compared to 21% of male respondents [[4]](#footnote-5). UNESCO’s global report confirmed that girls were less likely than boys to own or have access to an Internet-enabled device. (Gaps in perceived or actual digital skills also affected teachers, in particular female teachers, contributing to reported higher level of stress.)

**Deterioration of mental health outcomes (*adaptability*)**: Worry, stress, anxiety and depression hinder students’ ability to concentrate and learn. Longitudinal data indicate that symptoms of depression or anxiety increased over time during periods of school closures, with girls appearing more likely to experience poorer mental health than boys in many settings examined in *When schools shut*. In some contexts, school is the only – or principal – source of interaction outside the family for girls. Lack of access to peer networks, and lack of support for girls’ emotional and physical well-being, also made it harder for girls to participate in remote learning and more likely that they will have experienced learning loss.

* **Reduced protection from violence, early and forced marriage, and early and unintended pregnancy (*accessibility, acceptability, adaptability*)**: Violence, early marriage and pregnancy greatly affect girls’ right to education, either because of legal barriers (such as legislation preventing pregnant girls and young mothers from participating in formal education), or because of gender stereotypes, stigma, and financial, health and practical barriers. *When schools shut* found mixed evidence of an increase in violence, early marriage and early pregnancy, with the expectation being that a clearer picture is likely to emerge in the coming months and years. However, there were indications that financial pressure stemming from the pandemic was leading parents to advance their daughter’s marriage; for example, in a study in Bangladesh, the percentage of girls who reported being married increased from 12% in April 2020 to 23% in September 2020 (Amin, 2020)[[5]](#footnote-6). Girls in crisis settings in 15 African countries, were also reported to be at greater risk of violence in a safety audit conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC, 2020)[[6]](#footnote-7), impacting their ability to participate in learning among other deleterious effects.
* **Reduced access to nutrition and other health-related education and support services often provided by schools (*availability and adaptability*):** School feeding programmes support children’s health and ability to learn and may act as an incentive for families to send girls to school. Students who are not attending in-person learning may also have reduced or no access to comprehensive sexuality education and services that are normally provided via schools. Schools may also offer information, support and supplies for menstrual hygiene management. These services have been impacted by school closures, impacting in turn on girls’ ability to learn in addition to the broader adverse health and protection outcomes.
1. **Concrete measures taken to respond to challenges and barriers, as part of the short-term responses to, and mid- and longer-term recovery efforts from, the COVID-19 pandemic**

The world was caught by surprise by the COVID-19 pandemic. Government’s responses, which evolved over time, varied from investment in remote and hybrid learning as a substitute for classroom instruction, to extension of the academic year, and prioritization of certain curricular areas (UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, 2021). The policy analysis undertaken for *When schools shut* found that these initiatives were largely not based on a gender analysis and rarely incorporated attention to inclusive approaches, although the response plans of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Pakistan (among others) identified gender-based barriers to educational access without necessarily addressing them through practical measures. Thus, in the UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank-OECD survey (June 2021 report), only 54 of 116 countries reported taking one or more measures to specifically support girls’ education during the pandemic, such as financial support, access to infrastructure and subsidized devices, tailored learning materials, and flexible learning platforms. As of September 2021, gender disparities in COVID-19 school drop-out were apparent in a few countries where schools have re-opened and sex-disaggregated data were available.

**UNESCO Global Education Coalition’s Gender Flagship - Leveraging partnerships for girls’ learning continuity and safe return to school**

In March 2020, UNESCO launched the COVID-19 Global Education Coalition: a platform for collaboration and exchange to protect the right to education during the COVID-19 school closures and beyond. As of January 2022, the platform brings together some 200 members from the United Nations family, civil society, academia and the private sector. Coalition members rally around three flagships, one of which is on gender equality. The Gender Flagship aims to support 5 million girls to fulfil their right to education with a focus on the 20 countries with the greatest gender disparities in education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics data). The target countries are Afghanistan, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Guinea, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Togo and Yemen. Efforts fall under three areas: data, research and evidence; advocacy and communication; and country-level action.

Steered by a reference group of representatives of governments, civil society and United Nations organizations, the actions of the Gender Flagship had directly reached 950,000 people by the end of 2021 with information and awareness-raising, capacity development, support to gender-responsive planning and evidence-based recommendations to decision-makers, such as the [Building back equal: girls back to school guide - UNESCO Digital Library](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000374094).

For example, the global [Keeping Girls in the Picture campaign](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/girlseducation) implemented through the Global Education Coalition has sensitized more than 400 million people to the importance of girls’ return to school. The campaign targets girls, communities and education stakeholders at country and regional levels, with a specific focus on South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Campaign materials in 10 languages were launched through a dedicated website, including a comprehensive social media pack, inspiring videos, toolkits for youth advocacy and community radios, testimonials from the field, other resources to engage youth networks and communities, and more. H.E. Dr Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi, and Nadia Nadim, champion for girls’ education and professional football player, also raised their voices for girls’ education through a Facebook Live interview on the International Day of the Girl Child 2020. Over 30 influencers from across the world, including Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, joined the campaign. National roll-outs to reach the most marginalized communities are now being implemented in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia.

At country level, examples of measures taken by governments and civil society partners can be highlighted against the backdrop of the four elements of the right to education:

* **Enhancing or introducing remote learning solutions *(availability and accessibility*)**: *When schools shut* highlights Rwanda’s action in including language in its COVID-19 response plan that recognized disparities among learners, including by gender, and committed to taking these into account when planning the delivery of remote learning. Most NGO partners surveyed in *When schools shut* also reported that they were taking action to fill gender gaps through provision of devices, supporting the availability and distribution of content, and teacher training on remote learning strategies.

In reporting to the Tenth Consultation on the implementation of the UNESCO Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education (*report forthcoming*)[[7]](#footnote-8), Cuba and Portugal reported that educational content was broadcast via television for students at different levels, as was the case in many other countries. In North Macedonia, free Internet access for primary and secondary school students was provided, while in Finland virtual courses were offered free of charge to all degree students. In Germany, flexible application and admissions processes were established for undergraduate students, and financial aid was provided with interest borne by the state for certain student loans. New Zealand provided computers and computer literacy training for newly arrived refugee families with school-aged children, and Romania rolled out an initiative aimed at identifying providing pupils with needed digital resources. These initiatives did not include a specific gender focus but are expected to have contributed to promoting girls’ right to education during the pandemic.

* **Mobilizing families to prioritize education in girls’ daily lives (*accessibility and acceptability*):** In Rwanda, government messaging urged parents and guardians to recognize that increased domestic chores for girls could lead them to miss out on learning. Kenya is implementing the 4Ts – ‘Trace, Track, Talk and reTurn’ back-to-school campaign to track children at household level who have dropped out and accompany them and their families to support their return to school; as of July 2021, the programme had reached 1,424 girls of whom 84 per cent (over 92 per cent of whom were pregnant, parenting or married) had returned to school. A small-scale cash transfer programme in an informal settlement in Kenya showed promise in increasing the likelihood of secondary school girls’ returning to school.
* **Adapting content to students’ needs (*accessibility and adaptability*)**: Honduras integrated a gender approach into key resources including the Learning Passport hosted on the government’s online learning platform. Rwanda included language in its response plan to ensure that pregnant and parenting adolescents are re-integrated into national education systems. As an example of measures taken to support children including girls with disabilities, Peru reported to the abovementioned Tenth Consultation on the implementation of the UNESCO Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education having adapted educational materials for the early, primary and secondary levels to accessible formats, and broadcast radio content aimed at supporting families caring for people with special educational needs.
* **Establishing alternative mechanisms to guarantee continued access to nutrition, health and protection services during school closures (*adaptability*)**: South Sudan’s plan sets out the establishment of gender-based violence referral systems that link schools to health and other services; the plans for Malawi, Pakistan and Somalia refer to risk mitigation for gender-based violence and other forms of abuse. Several States reported to the Tenth Consultation on the implementation of the UNESCO Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education on measures taken to address the issue of mental health during school closures by establishing mental health hotlines or similar tools which address girls’ needs without necessarily targeting them specifically: for example, Romania’s “Ambassador for Community” support line provides personalized counselling to students, teachers and parents in the context of COVID-19.

**Other sources**

UNESCO. Her Atlas online tool: <https://en.unesco.org/education/girls-women-rights>

UNESCO Observatory of the right to education (online tool): <http://www.unesco.org/education/edurights/index.php?action=home&lng=en>

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2. UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank. Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures. [First Round of Data Collection (June 2020)](https://tcg.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/07/COVID-SURVEY_technical-note-20200702.pdf) and [Third Round of Data Collection (June 2021)](https://covid19.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2021/07/National-Education-Responses-to-COVID-19-Report2_v3.pdf). UNESCO Institute for Statistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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7. UNESCO. 2022. From rights to country-level action. Results of the Tenth Consultation of Member States on the 1960 Convention and Recommendation (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)