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Addressing the gender dimensions of COVID-related school closures

Introduction

Experience tells us that public health outbreaks have distinct gendered impacts, and that preparedness and response efforts must understand the gender dimensions of these crises to avert widening inequalities and seize opportunities to advance gender equality.

The COVID-19 pandemic is no different.

Most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in recent months in an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19. In April 2020, schooling was disrupted for 1.3 billion students from pre-primary through secondary in over 190 countries. Now, in 46 countries, 735 million students, including 356 million girls, are uncertain when they will sit in a classroom again. This includes those who have been involved in distance learning for the past 6-9 months during the COVID pandemic, as well as newly enrolled students. Some 23.8 million children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary), including over 11 million girls, may drop out due to the pandemic's economic impact.

As governments consider whether to continue distance learning, or reopen schools, they must consider the risks of exacerbating disparities, and how to address the potential for disengagement and drop out among both boys and girls when schools reopen.

While this is a crisis situation, it can also be seen as a window of opportunity to 'build back equal' through gender-responsive measures that transform education systems, prioritize resilience, and address the key bottlenecks and barriers to girls' education.

Defining the topic and related key issues

This unprecedented disruption to education has potential immediate and longer-term effects on education and gender equality, particularly on the most marginalised, including the following risks:

Exacerbated burden of unpaid care impacting on learning: According to the International Labour Organization, women do three-times more unpaid care work than men. School closures are expected to further exacerbate girls' and women's unpaid care work. During the Ebola crisis, an increase in domestic and caring responsibilities led to limited learning at home for girls compared to boys during the epidemic, and increases in school drop-outs among girls when schools reopened. SDG Target 5.4 sets the direction for action, but the pandemic's impacts on the economy and social protection systems may deter progress and further impact on education.

Heightened risk of gender-based violence (GBV): A recent literature review found spikes in GBV during past epidemics, with the most common forms being intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation and abuse. Extended quarantines and other social distancing measures linked to COVID-19 have already increased reporting of GBV, including violence directed at women and girls. This increase is occurring while services, including those related to the rule of law, health and protection, are being diverted to address COVID-19. Beyond the psychosocial and physical impacts, UNESCO reports that the experience or the witnessing of violence can have immediate and long-term implications for learning and well-being and the further perpetration of school violence.

Particular risks for adolescent girls: School closures can put adolescent girls at increased risk of different forms of abuse. During the Ebola crisis, school closures led to increases in early and forced marriages, transactional sex to cover basic needs and sexual abuse, while adolescent pregnancy increased by up to 65% in some communities. Learners in disadvantaged households, crisis-affected areas and places with limited supervision of children will face heightened risks of such violence.

Potential for widening gender digital skills divides and an opportunity to close them: More men than women have access to and use the internet in all regions of the world, and the digital gender gap is growing, particularly in developing countries. Women in numerous countries are 25% less likely than men to know how to leverage ICT for basic purposes, such as using simple arithmetic formulas in a spreadsheet, and gender gaps grow as tasks become more complex. In contexts where digital solutions to distance learning and internet are accessible, there is an opportunity to close longstanding gender digital divide and build the digital skills of girls and boys alike and ensure all learners have the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe online.

A crisis within a crisis: For children living in refugee camps or who are internally displaced, school closures will be devastating. Conflict often reinforces existing barriers to education which in turn tend to reinforce gender disparities. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports that, in Ethiopia and Kenya, for every ten boys, seven refugee girls are enrolled in primary school and four in secondary school. Emergency response plans based on comprehensive gender analyses will be needed to ensure psychosocial support, reliable sources of food, and interventions to ensure the continuity of education and return of all learners when schools reopen.

Exacerbating boys' disengagement from education: Gender disparities to boys' disadvantage appear at different levels of education in many parts of the world, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Europe and North America. Boys' disengagement from education is strongly linked to poverty leading to demands for work, disaffection with school, and underlying gender stereotypes and social norms. Gender-responsive distance learning approaches must consider boys' participation, motivation and learning, while school return plans address the factors which may further steer boys away from fair and equal opportunities in education.

Retention of female teachers: Teaching is frequently a female profession, particularly at lower levels of education. Nearly 94% of teachers in pre-primary education, while about half of those in upper

secondary education, are women. Female teachers have been shown to have positive effects on girls' enrolment and improve their learning outcomes, particularly in countries with rigid gender norms. Governments and education providers must work to preserve female teachers' employment, salaries and benefits to mitigate against teacher attrition and promote well-being. The continued engagement and return to schools of female teachers will be critical to ensure also that girls return to school.

Impacts on women's economic empowerment: Crises significantly restrict women's engagement in economic activities, especially in informal sectors, and can deepen economic hardships. We are only beginning to understand the economic impacts of COVID-19, but the effects on people and the formal and informal economy are devastating. In the Global South, where limited social protection measures are in place, economic hardships caused by the crisis will have spillover effects as families consider the financial and opportunity costs of educating their sons and daughters.

Lessons from past practices and current crisis

- **Strengthen the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls** in decision-making processes to respond to COVID-19. During the Ebola crisis, women were less likely than men to have decision-making roles, and their needs were largely unmet in the outbreak response.

- **Ensure diverse distance learning solutions, such as radio-based and TV programmes in resource-poor environments.** Such programmes retain links to education, support continuity of learning, and have been found to positively influence family and community attitudes on girls' education. These programmes should challenge negative social norms and promote gender equality.

- **Address gendered access, including skills barriers and concerns around online safety, in the design of online distance learning.** Evidence from low- and middle-income countries shows that parents give girls access to digital technology at a later age than their male peers and that their access is more curtailed or surveilled.

- **Work cross-sectorally to address the intersecting health, social and protection issues that affect adolescent girls' education during crises.** In Sierra Leone, a programme offering information on sexual and reproductive health, life and vocational skills, and microfinance facilitated girls' continuity of learning. School re-enrolment rates among girls fell by 16% in non-intervention areas, compared to 8% in those with such a programme.

- **Adapt school opening policies and practices to expand access to marginalised groups following the crisis.** As part of the reopening process, waive school fees and others costs to maximise re-enrolment, and invest in the expansion of sex-segregated toilets and water and hygiene measures.

- **Support girls' and women's access to learning programmes, including technical and vocational education and training, that enable access to the labour market and livelihood opportunities.** Experience shows that health crises can trigger economic crises which affect women disproportionately, particularly in low-income countries. Mitigation measures are needed, including education programmes that build resilience, skills and the social capital needed to rebound.

- **Continue advocacy efforts in favour of girls' education**. In villages in Sierra Leone with established "girls' clubs" and existing sensitization efforts to promote girls' education, fewer girls experienced adverse effects and were more likely to continue their learning when schools reopened after Ebola.

- **Address harmful gender norms that may impact on disease vulnerability through health education.** The current crisis shows that more men are dying from COVID-19 due to comorbidities linked to smoking and drinking alcohol and poor health-seeking behaviours – all associated with masculine norms.

- **Cash transfers and waiving of examination fees are effective strategies for encouraging girls' re-enrolment and retention.** Conditional cash transfers and scholarship programmes have been

[effective](#) in keeping children, particularly girls, in education, including following the 2008-09 financial crisis.

- **Ground country responses in comprehensive gender analysis** that considers gendered roles, responsibilities, and dynamics. Containment and mitigation measures must address the burden of unpaid care work, digital gaps and heightened GBV risks, particularly for women and girls.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

As UNESCO supports Member States to establish education responses to COVID-19, the following advice is provided:

- **Continuously assess the tradeoffs between higher protection from COVID-19 through school closure and reduced risk of economic, health, protection and education loss through school reopening**, using a gender lens to provide a holistic view of the best interest of learners.

- **Strengthen the capacity of Ministries of education to collect sex-disaggregated data on participation in distance learning programmes, and on re-enrolment and survival rates when schools reopen:** [UNESCO's strategy for gender equality in and through education](#) calls for high quality timely and relevant data and evidence to inform policy-making, planning and delivery of strategic interventions. This information will help understand whether girls' and boys' participation and learning are on par with pre-crisis levels, and be used to take appropriate action.

- **Include gender as a core element of crisis planning and response:** Ensure equitable representation of women and men in crisis-related decision-making and ensure gender expertise is mobilized at all levels of the education sector response.

- **Promote partnerships to address cross-cutting health, social and education issues that impact on continuity of learning and return to school:** Coordinated responses, with clear benchmarks for school reopening are needed, that consider gender-related marginalization and exclusion.

- **Leverage teachers and communities:** Work closely with teachers, school staff, parents and communities to ensure inclusive methods of distance learning are adopted and communicated to call for continued investments in girls' learning. Community sensitization on the importance of girls' education should continue as part of any distance learning programme.

- **Narrow the gender digital divide:** In contexts where digital solutions to distance learning and internet is accessible, ensure that girls are trained with the necessary digital skills, including the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe online. Parents must also be engaged to support equal learning opportunities for their children, and to dismantle gendered stereotypes about digital skills.

- **Strengthen comprehensive sexuality education programmes in both traditional and virtual formats** to reduce girls and young women's vulnerability to early and unintended pregnancy, HIV and gender-based violence, contributing to school re-enrolment and retention. These programmes should continue when schools reopen, and include referrals to sexual and reproductive health services and access to modern contraception for young people.

- **Safeguard vital services:** The most vulnerable children and youth miss out on vital services when schools are closed, specifically school meals and social protection. Make schools access points for psychosocial support and food distribution, work across sectors to ensure alternative social services, and ensure other measures to prevent boys and girls from poorer households resorting to paid and risky work to supplement family incomes.

- **Engage young people:** Give space to youth, particularly girls, to shape the decisions made about their education. Include them in the development of strategies and policies around school closures and distance learning based on their experiences and needs.

- **Ensure return to school:** Automatic promotion and appropriate opportunities in admissions processes must be considered to ensure return to school, and recognise the particular challenges faced by girls. Outreach, catch-up courses, accelerated learning and other financial support may be necessary to ensure girls return to school and continue their education.

- **Continue to expand communities of practice and promote learning on what works, and support financing for equitable, evidence-informed action.** UNESCO must continue to play its role as a laboratory of ideas, and leverage its convening power and institutional priority of gender equality to support continued action with the aim to achieve SDG 4 and leave no one behind.

Key references

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About UNESCO Education Sector´s Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector's issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by the UNESCO Section of Education for Inclusion and Gender Equality at UNESCO Headquarters with inputs from the UNESCO Bangkok, Dakar and Santiago Regional Offices, and staff in the Section for Health and Education at UNESCO Headquarters.

Stay in touch

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