

This fact sheet was made to mark International Women's Day 2021 and highlight how education responses to the COVID-19 crisis must prioritize the needs of girls' and women at the risk of reversing 25 years of gains made for girls' education.



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Global
Education
Monitoring
Report

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Keeping girls in the picture during and after the COVID-19 crisis

The latest facts on gender equality in education

COVID-19 has pushed inequalities in education to breaking point, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls.



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- The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history. Throughout 2020 most governments around the world temporarily closed schools and other learning spaces in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. At the peak of the pandemic in April 2020, schooling was disrupted for over 1.5 billion learners in more than 190 countries.
- This unprecedented disruption to education has the potential to roll back substantial gains made on girls' education in recent decades, with broader immediate and longer-term effects on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, including those related to poverty reduction, health and well-being, inclusive quality education and gender equality.
- Projections suggest that 11 million girls might not return to school.¹ Girls aged 12-17 are at particular risk of dropping out of school in low and lower-income countries, whereas boys are more at risk in upper-middle and high-income countries.²
- The most marginalised, including girls with disabilities, those in conflict-affected contexts, remote and rural communities and those in the poorest quintile, are expected to be most affected by COVID-related school closures, facing additional constraints on their ability to fulfil their right to education, health and protection, among other rights.
- About 40 percentage of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not taken any measures to support learners most at risk of exclusion during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.³
- Of 29 countries surveyed across all regions, two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries, have cut their education budgets since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only a third of upper-middle and high-income countries have reduced their budgets.⁴ These budget cuts are likely to adversely affect girls' enrolment.

Evidence from past crises shows that girls are particularly vulnerable in the face of prolonged school closures. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different.

Charting the impacts.

Digital divide

- During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, online learning platforms were used for primary and secondary education in about 55 percentage of low-income, 73 percentage of lower-middle-income and 93 percentage of upper-middle-income countries.⁵ This shift to online distance learning could disadvantage girls.
- In all regions of the world, more men than women are using the internet, with the exception of the Americas. In least developed countries, only 19 percentage of individuals were online in 2020. Significant digital gender gaps persist in these contexts: nearly 15 percentage of women compared to 28 percentage of men use the Internet.⁶ Women are 8 percentage less likely than men to own a mobile phone, and 20 percentage less likely to use the Internet on a mobile.⁷ This seriously limits the capacity of girls and women to keep up with online distance learning during school closures.

Domestic chores

- School closures have led to increased childcare and chore responsibilities at home, which are likely to disadvantage girls more in some contexts. A study of secondary school students in Ecuador during lockdown showed boys and girls were equally likely to continue their education in the morning but more girls did chores in the afternoon, while boys were engaged in leisure activities.⁸

Violence

- Globally 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months.⁹
- The extended periods families spend at home during lockdown increased gender-based violence.^{10,11} Whether such violence affects women or girls, the consequences for girls' well-being and ability to continue learning are clear.

Adolescent pregnancy

- Sexual and gender-based violence coupled with restricted access to reproductive health, police, justice and social support services may increase adolescent pregnancy.¹² The number of adolescent pregnancies reported between March and June 2020 in Turkana county, Kenya, tripled from the previous year.¹³ During the 2014-15 Ebola epidemic, some studies in Sierra Leone indicated localized rises in adolescent pregnancy by up to 65 percentage.^{14,15}
- Adolescent pregnancy is one of the causes of early school leaving, pregnant girls and young mothers are not always able to return to school to continue or complete their education, especially in poorer countries.¹⁶

Child marriage

- The potential increase in adolescent pregnancy is likely to be a result of increased child marriages, a consequence of households being plunged deeper into poverty due to the pandemic.¹⁷
- Child marriages are almost universally banned, yet they happen 33,000 times a day, every day, all around the world. The total effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is projected to result in 13 million additional child marriages by 2030.¹⁸

Before COVID-19, we were already a long way from gender equality in and through education.¹⁹

- The primary enrolment rate of girls over the past 25 years has only increased ten percentage points from 78 percentage to 88 percentage, less than half a point per year.
- At this rate, getting every girl into primary school will not happen until 2050.

ACCESS

- Three-quarters of all primary-age children who may never set foot in school are girls (9 million). In Chad, Guinea-Bissau and Yemen, fewer than 80 girls for every 100 boys completed primary school and boys are more than twice as likely to complete secondary school as girls.
- Large gender disparities persist particularly for disadvantaged learners. In at least 20 countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa but also in Belize, Haiti, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea, hardly any poor rural young women have completed upper secondary school.
- In Honduras, 55 percentage of girls reported not attending school at some point due to physical violence perpetrated by teachers, while 22 percentage of female students in Malawi missed school due to unwanted sexual experiences.

SKILLS

- Women still account for almost two-thirds of all adults unable to read – 515 million of them lack basic reading skills. In 59 countries, women aged 15 to 49 from the poorest households are 4 times more likely to be illiterate than those from the richest households.
- Disparity in ICT skills is emerging. Among 10 low- and middle-income countries with detailed data, women are less likely to have used a basic arithmetic formula in a spreadsheet in the 7 poorest countries, while parity exists in the 3 richest countries.

LEARNING

- Girls' advantage over boys in reading widened in more than half of the 38 countries and territories that took part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in both 2000 and 2018. Girls now perform as well as boys in mathematics in over half of countries and do better than boys in one-quarter of countries.
- Gender segregation by field of study constrains girls' career choice. In Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries only 14 percentage of girls who were top performers in science or mathematics expected to work in science and engineering, compared with 26 percentage of top-performing boys. Women account for less than 1 percentage of the applicant pool for technical jobs in artificial intelligence and data science in Silicon Valley.
- Globally, only 6 percentage of mobile application and software developers are female.

QUALITY

- School-related gender-based violence, in its physical, sexual and psychological forms, affects children and youth around the world in terms of their school attendance, well-being and learning.
- Globally, over a fifth of primary schools had no single-sex basic sanitation facilities in 2018. Some 335 million girls attend primary and secondary schools lacking facilities essential for menstrual hygiene.
- Nearly 94 percentage of teachers in pre-primary education, but only about half those in upper secondary education, are female. There is a glass ceiling for women trying to attain leadership positions. In a case study of schools in Brasilia, Brazil, 75 percentage had only male candidates for school leadership positions. For the past 25 years, all federal education ministers have been men. In Bulgaria, just 5 of 96 education ministers in 140 years have been women.

The bottom ten countries for girls' education

The World Inequality Database in Education (WIDE) managed by the GEM Report and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, draws attention to unacceptable levels of education inequality across countries and between groups within countries.

WIDE data shows that, in 10 countries around the world, the poorest girls spend less than 2 years in school on average: Benin, Cameroon, Guinea, Haiti, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Senegal and Timor-Leste.

Looking at UIS data on out-of-school numbers, in primary school, more than two-thirds of girls are not enrolled in 2 countries. In lower secondary school, more than two-thirds of girls are not enrolled in 6 countries, with Benin, Nigeria and Mali featuring on both lists. In the bottom 10 countries, no more than 2 out of 10 girls can expect to attend upper secondary education among those aged 15-17 years.

Girls' early school leaving is due to many factors, including child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, discriminatory gender norms in society, child labour and the lack of easy and safe access to schools near where they live. These girls need to be given a second-chance to re-join education systems, and accelerated learning opportunities so that they can catch-up on their time lost.

The ten countries with the highest percentages of poor girls who have only spent only two years or less in school

Country	Year	Percentage
Guinea	2018	86
Pakistan	2018	85
Mali	2018	82
Nigeria	2018	76
Benin	2017	75
Senegal	2017	72
Cameroon	2018	50
Papua New Guinea	2017	47
Timor-Leste	2016	34
Haiti	2017	22

Source: WIDE

The ten countries with the highest percentages of poor girls who are out of school

Primary

Country	Year	Percent
Mali	2018	67
Nigeria	2018	66
Benin	2018	64
Guinea	2018	61
Pakistan	2018	59
Mauritania	2015	59
Senegal	2017	55
Afghanistan	2015	52
Papua New Guinea	2018	46
Ethiopia	2016	43

Source: UIS

Lower secondary

Country	Year	Percent
United Republic of Tanzania	2015	81
Guinea	2018	79
Mali	2018	76
Benin	2018	73
Nigeria	2018	72
Pakistan	2018	70
Mauritania	2015	63
Afghanistan	2015	62
Madagascar	2018	61
Senegal	2017	58

Upper secondary

Country	Year	Percent
United Republic of Tanzania	2015	98
Côte d'Ivoire	2016	95
Guinea	2016	94
Mali	2015	92
Madagascar	2018	90
Pakistan	2018	89
Benin	2018	88
Uganda	2016	86
Zambia	2018	84
Senegal	2017	83

Girls' education has a huge impact on all of society:

- Some countries lose more than US\$1 billion a year by failing to educate girls to the same level as boys.²⁰

Female leaders influence the extent of emphasis placed on gender equality in policy and practice:

- Women in leadership positions tend to favour the equitable redistribution of resources, and legislatures with a higher share of women on average tend to support health, education and social welfare spending at the expense of defence spending.
- Across 103 countries, countries that mandated a percentage of women in their legislatures spent 3.4 percentage points more on social welfare than those that did not.²¹

Education increases women's agency and decision making:

- Achieving universal secondary education could increase women's reported ability to make decisions within the household by one tenth.²²

Educating women increases economic growth:

- Africa could add US\$316 billion or 10 percent to GDP from now to 2025 if each country makes advances in women's equality to match the country in the region that has achieved the most progress towards parity.²³

Educated women are less likely to die in childbirth:

- If all mothers completed primary education, maternal deaths would be reduced by two-thirds, saving 98,000 lives.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, if all women completed primary education, maternal deaths would be reduced by 70 percentage, saving almost 50,000 lives..

Educating girls can save millions of lives:

- If all women had a primary education, there would be 15 percentage fewer child deaths.
- If all women had a secondary education, child deaths would be cut in half, saving 3 million lives.

Mother's education improves child nutrition:

- If all women had a primary education, 1.7 million children would be saved from stunting from malnutrition.
- If all women had a secondary education, 12 million children would be saved from stunting from malnutrition.²⁴

Girls with higher levels of education are less likely to have children at an early age:

- 10 percentage fewer girls would become pregnant under 17 years in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia if they all had a primary education.²⁵

Educating girls is a key factor in hastening the demographic transition to lower birth rates:

- In sub-Saharan Africa, women with no education have 6.7 births, on average. The figure falls to 5.8 for those with primary education and to 3.9 for those with secondary education.²⁶

Girls with higher levels of education are less likely to get married at an early age:

- If all girls had a primary education, there would be 14 percentage fewer child marriages.
- If all girls had a secondary education, there would be two-thirds fewer child marriages.²⁷

Educated women are more likely to find decent work:

- One additional year of school can increase a woman's earnings by up to 20 percentage.²⁸
- When women have a secondary education, they are 9.6 percentage points more likely to work than if they only have a primary education or less. With tertiary education, they are 25.4 percentage points more likely to work than if they only have a primary education or less.²⁹
- Women with secondary education can expect to make almost twice as much as those with no education, and women with tertiary education almost four times as much.³⁰

At this critical moment, we must renew our commitment to educating girls and women

The [2020 GEM Gender Report](#) shows that 180 million more girls have enrolled in primary and secondary education since the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), a landmark commitment to advance the rights of girls and women made in 1995 by 189 countries. These significant gains are now threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is more important than ever for governments to tackle persisting discrimination to achieve equality for the next generation of girls, the report calls for action in the following areas:

- 1. Eliminate gender disparity in education access, participation and completion.** There are fewer than 9 females enrolled for every 10 males in 4 percentage of countries in primary school, 9 percentage in lower secondary, 15 percentage in upper secondary and 21 percentage in tertiary education.
- 2. Support all pregnant girls and young parents to go to school.** Despite the global decline, adolescent pregnancy rates remain high in sub-Saharan Africa. In Chad, Mali and Niger rates are higher now than they were in 1995. Active bans still prevent pregnant girls from going to school in Equatorial Guinea and the United Republic of Tanzania.
- 3. Provide training for all teachers, school and career counsellors** to prevent negative gender stereotypes spilling over into teaching and students' subject choices. Globally, the percentage of females studying engineering or ICT is below 25 percentage in over two-thirds of countries. The share of women in technical and vocational education (TVET) declined from 45 percentage in 1995 to 42 percentage in 2018. Few women pursue careers in ICT.
- 4. Ensure representation of females in curriculum and textbooks in a way that does not perpetuate gender stereotypes.** Textbook reviews in many countries found that text and images do not portray women in active social and economic positions but in traditional home-bound roles.
- 5. Provide access to comprehensive sexuality education for all students** which has been shown to prevent school-related gender-based violence by promoting understanding and respect of students' gender identities. It also leads to a reduction of the prevalence of adolescent pregnancies.
- 6. Encourage more women in leadership positions** to help change social and gender norms and act as role models for female students. The report finds that negative stereotyping of women as unsuited to be leaders are reinforced by a scarcity of female teachers in higher education. Globally, women make up 94 percentage of teachers in pre-primary but only 43 percentage in tertiary education. Even fewer women hold leadership positions in universities and in education administration.

A failure to prioritise the needs of women and girls in COVID-19 responses risks further entrenching disadvantages. Building back equal.

The COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, with school interruptions and closures continuing in a number of countries worldwide, including in high-income countries. Ensuring girls' continuity of learning and return to school is needed to protect gains in education made over the last two decades, where the number of out of school girls has decreased by 81 million.

The rethinking of education systems post COVID-19 provides a unique opportunity to ensure that the 128 million girls who were already out of school before the pandemic are included within all school reopening plans, and that plans to ensure continuity of learning and support for all students, including the most marginalised, are put in place for future crises and disruptions to education. The current outbreak of Ebola in Africa is yet another reminder that education systems need to become more resilient to pandemics.

UNESCO's Global Coalition Gender Flagship developed the [Girls back to school guide](#)³¹ which provides comprehensive and evidence-based plans for reopening schools in a way that is safe, gender-responsive and child-friendly, and meets the needs of the most marginalised girls.

Adopt a system-wide approach to school reopening which brings a gender and inclusion lens to education analysis, and takes steps to remove gender bias and discrimination within and across education systems, from teacher recruitment and training to curriculum and materials development, and ensure school environments are resilient, safe, and free from violence.

Prioritise action to bring all girls back to school – both returning students and those previously out of school – through targeted measures for the poorest and most marginalised girls. Ensure school reopening plans are equity-focused and designed to leave no one behind, with contextualised consideration to intersecting and exacerbating inequalities.

Prioritise the leadership of girls and women and recognise their role as agents of change. Systematically and meaningfully integrate them in consultations and decision-making on COVID-19 education response and recovery planning, from needs assessments to the design of remote learning opportunities, and other interventions to plan and monitor school reopening and promote life-long learning.

Promote an integrated and coordinated approach that addresses girls' holistic education, health and protection needs. Catalyse cooperation between teachers, school administration, families and communities, and support cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure an inclusive and gender-responsive school reopening that safeguards rights.

The guide contains more detailed recommendations to support learning, health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), protection of girls and teachers.

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