Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Risk Indicator: 1 in 2 girls surveyed at risk of never returning to school

About the Girls’ Education Risk Indicator

In one of the largest surveys of girls in low-income communities across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, Room to Read has produced findings of their Girls’ Education Risk Indicator results.

The aim of the indicator is to assess the impact of COVID-19 school closures on girls’ education in low-income communities that face gender inequality around the world.

The headline result is that 1 in 2 girls (49%) enlisted in Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Program are at higher risk of not returning to school once they are safe to reopen.

Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Risk Indicator results have been compiled from interviewing nearly 24,000 girls during school closures in their country.

The girls interviewed are between 15 and 19 years old and living in low-income communities across eight countries in Asia and Africa: India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Tanzania. These countries typically see high rates of girls dropping out of education early.

The interviews took place over the phone or via video app calls in April and May 2020. Room to Read mentors asked three simple “yes” or “no” questions, allowing the girls to answer truthfully, without fear of retribution from their families. They asked:

- Are you currently self-studying/keeping up with academic learning at home?
- Has anyone in your household lost a job or a source of income as a result of COVID-19?
- Are you concerned about being able to return to school once schools reopen?

We have outlined the results to each question in this report.

The Girls’ Education Risk Indicator was devised by Room to Read’s leading experts on international girls’ education and education research.

Why are girls at risk of not returning to school?

Learning has been disrupted for most of the world’s children. But for millions of children in low-income communities, COVID-19 school closures will not be an interruption, but an end: an end to reading, an end to learning, and an end to the dream of making positive change in their own lives and communities.

Girls are particularly at risk of losing their very childhoods under these circumstances. That’s because families suffering extreme economic hardship often in low-income communities choose to marry their daughters early, ending their education due to child labor, domestic care or manual work. For the
families in low-income communities earning less than a dollar a day, this pandemic could be an end for their daughters’ educations. In Nepal, Room to Read staff have already reported girls who will not return to school because of child marriage – this is despite considerable work taking place by Room to Read program teams to keep girls enrolled.

In some countries where Room to Read operates, girls in precarious financial situations can also fall victim to sex trafficking and other means of exploitation. As families deal with unprecedented levels of stress, the risk of intra-family conflict and gender-based violence increases, negatively impacting girls’ self-confidence, well-being and ability to negotiate key life decisions.

Results

Around 1 in 2 girls’ (49%) responses to at least one of our risk indicator questions puts them at risk of non-return.

When a girl responds “no” to question one or “yes” to questions two and three, they are in the high-risk category of potentially not returning to their education when schools re-open.

42% of girls said their household had lost income during the pandemic, making the financial impact of COVID-19 the most significant risk to a girl’s education. However, our risk indicator also found worrying signs of girls’ education already stopping, with almost one in ten (8%) no longer keeping up with their studies at home. The main reasons for this include lack of access to digital resources, inability to ask teachers for help, and families not being supportive of their education.

A major cause for concern is the third risk indicator question: “Are you concerned you will not return to school?”, in which 7% answered “yes.” This figure is high, coming at the beginning of the pandemic, and must be closely monitored in the coming weeks and months.
Room to Read’s Urgent Response

Room to Read’s girls’ education experts instantly knew the impact COVID-19 school closures would have on gender equality in education. As part of our Girls’ Education Program, each girl is assigned a mentor, or “social mobilizer,” who helps coach girls through barriers preventing them from learning. Our social mobilizers began long-distance mentoring with the girls through phone calls, video calls or text messaging as soon as schools closed. In total, Room to Read’s social mobilizers have sent 223,690 direct messages to girls in our program in May alone, part of 34,241 hours of remote mentoring sessions in this time.

About Room to Read

Room to Read transforms the lives of millions of children through education, creating a world free from illiteracy and gender inequality. Since our founding in 2000, Room to Read has helped more than 18 million children in 16 countries around the world unlock their full potential through education. Our pioneering Girls’ Education Program has supported 114,000 girls and we know educating girls has positive ripple effects on the world’s greatest challenges including health, poverty, climate change and the economy. Our Girls’ Education Program participants have a 96 percent advancement rate, with 81 percent enrolled in further education or employed within one year of graduation.

Varuni’s story

Varuni is a 15-year-old girl and a participant in Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Program in Sri Lanka. With schools closed, she was living at home, and unfortunately, faced an unsafe home situation due to her alcoholic father who becomes violent at night. Varuni informed her Room to Read social mobiliser about the situation and that her father also does not respect her right to an education. Room to Read stepped in with the relevant local authorities to persuade the father to let Varuni live with her aunt during school closures, where she now is now learning again and likely to return to education. Thanks to Room to Read’s interventions during COVID-19, Varuni is not only safe, but also on a path to succeed academically.

Urmila’s story

In Nepal, Urmila is an active participant of Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Program. When her social mobiliser spoke to Urmila by phone as part of their remote mentoring, Urmila informed her that her family had been telling her to drop out of school ever since the lockdown began. Urmila was learning through online classes on the family’s only smart phone; however, her mother and brother did not believe her and said it was time to give up school. Her father, a driver stuck at the Nepal border due to the COVID-19 lockdown, was usually more understanding of the need for his daughter to receive an education—yet now, he sided with his wife and son and told her to drop out. Room to Read urgently spoke to the family, explaining how online classes work, as well as emphasizing the vital need for Urmila to continue her education. Fortunately, this was successful, and her social mobiliser plans to keep in close contact to ensure there are no further interruptions to Urmila’s education.