

PUTTING GENDER AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE COVID-19 EDUCATION RESPONSE

COMMON MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

MAY 2020



Nationwide school closures as part of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have disrupted the education of an entire generation of children and youth. Previous health emergencies demonstrate that girls are disproportionately affected, with the effects of gender inequality and unequal power structures exacerbated in times of crisis.

As a global partnership dedicated to advancing gender equality in, to and through education, we must leverage the power of collective action to position gender at the forefront of the COVID-19 response and enhance coherence in advocacy and communication across partner and ally organisations.

This common messaging initiative represents a strategic opportunity to foster dialogue and raise attention to the gendered impacts of COVID-19, advocate for strategies to respond to the gendered dimensions of this crisis, and look ahead to the safe reopening of schools through a gendered lens.

IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES ON ALL CHILDREN, AND GIRLS IN PARTICULAR

Disproportionate impacts of school closures on marginalised girls

- Disrupted learning and economic shock will worsen existing inequalities, meaning the most vulnerable children, including girls, will be among those most affected by school closures.
- Girls from the poorest households who are unable to access continued learning through online devices, or purchase materials for learning at home, will be disproportionately affected.
- Children, and girls in particular, with disabilities and specialised learning needs face greater challenges in accessing continued learning opportunities.
- School closures could disproportionately affect girls in conflict-affected settings, where the COVID-19 pandemic represents a 'crisis within a crisis'.
- Schools are a lifeline for girls especially, providing essential health information, nutrition and protection from exploitation and violence. Protecting girls' safety, health and continued learning must be a priority during school closures.

Harmful gender-based social and cultural norms, gender-based violence and discrimination

- During school closures, girls often take on the care of younger siblings and other family members. More household work means that girls have less time to study, and may miss out on educational broadcasts on radio and television.
- Girls who are out of school face a higher risk of child marriage, sexual and gender-based violence, early pregnancy and child labour. This increases the likelihood of them dropping out when schools reopen.
- During lockdown, girls may lose access to essential sexual and reproductive health services. This may increase incidents of unwanted/early pregnancy. When schools reopen, pregnant girls may not be able to resume their education due to restrictive school policies, home pressures or stigma and discrimination.
- Schools play an important role in preventing and responding to violence and exploitation. School closures mean that children, particularly girls, experiencing violence have fewer opportunities to seek support and access services.



Digital gender divide

- On average, access to mobile internet is 26% lower for women and girls compared to men and boys globally.¹ The digital gender gap exists in all regions of the world² meaning that girls everywhere have disproportionately less access to internet or technology. This may exclude girls from online-based

learning, staying connected to social networks, or accessing SGBV hotlines and support.

- Where internet and technology access is an option, girls who are spending more time online, whether learning or socialising, may be at increased risk of cyber-bullying and sexual exploitation.

GENDER-RESPONSIVE CONTINUED LEARNING

Access to continued learning

- Include low-tech, free and gender-sensitive continued learning approaches in the education response to COVID-19.
- No country can afford to ignore the gender dimensions of this crisis. COVID-19 education response strategies must consider harmful gender-based social and cultural norms which influence girls' and boys' ability to access continuous learning and vulnerability to drop-out.
- Continuous learning materials must be adapted to be accessible and inclusive for all children, particularly girls. This includes girls with disabilities, girls from ethnic minority language groups and Indigenous communities, and girls without access to internet or technology.

- Self-paced learning and flexible scheduling can be critical to support girls' continued learning given the particular challenges they face during school closures.
- Teachers are essential to the delivery and monitoring of children's learning at home. Teachers should be supported to keep learners, and girls in particular, engaged during school closures. Support for teacher's well-being, payment and retention should also be addressed by the education response.
- Strategies for continued learning must explore alternative ways to access education materials and take into account the digital gender divide.
- We must ensure relevant training, support and continuous education programmes for all teachers as we shift to remote and online learning.

Preventing and responding to violence

- Where learning and socialising is becoming increasingly internet-based, governments should raise awareness on potential risks of cyber-bullying and sexual exploitation online, and put in place measures to ensure online safety and protection for girls in particular.
- Teachers, parents, caregivers and communities must be trained on the increased threat of sexual and gender based-violence and child marriage during school closures, including training or awareness-raising to identify and support at-risk girls and boys. Governments should identify opportunities to put alternative referral pathways in place.
- School closures can increase girls' vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse. Gender-sensitive continued learning for girls and boys must embed violence prevention measures & psycho-social support to protect the most vulnerable.

Integrating CSE and social and emotional learning into the education response

- Adolescent girls and boys must continue to have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality education (CSE) and sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services as part of distance learning.
- Continued learning can be an important awareness-raising tool that also engages men and boys in promoting girls' education or raising awareness about household gender norms.
- As with any other learning environment, continued learning approaches should incorporate the social and emotional learning that is key for the development of positive social norms and gender equality.
- Teachers play a critical role in providing psycho-social support and social and emotional learning to children. As part of the COVID-19 education response, governments must provide training and support to teachers that go beyond academics.



RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER THE CRISIS

The role of communities and educators

- Girls must be involved in decisions about their education. We must strengthen girls' leadership through this crisis, and engage girls and young women as partners in the response and recovery efforts.
- All teachers have a crucial role in post-crisis recovery and reopening better for girls. They must be included in education policy-making and planning for learners' safe return to school.
- We must empower boys and men to speak up for girls' safe return to school. Their role in supporting girls to feel encouraged and secure in claiming their right to education is crucial.
- A social safety net can help vulnerable children, including girls, to get back to school and stay in school. Teachers, school leaders and communities can help to monitor and support learners and their parents and caregivers through a whole school approach.

Planning for the return to school - reopening better for girls

- We call for collective action to advance every child's right to learn in a safe and gender-sensitive environment following this crisis.
- After the crisis, we call on governments to monitor girls' enrolment and re-entry and identify policies/incentives that

encourage girls to return to school. This includes removing barriers that keep girls out of school, such as bans on re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers.

- School meals contribute to removing barriers to education for vulnerable learners, providing an incentive for families to send their children, particularly girls, back to school and help them stay in school. Governments must put strategies in place now to ensure that when schools reopen, health and nutrition services are functioning effectively.
- We call on governments to consider maintaining continued learning strategies and innovations to support more equal education systems when schools reopen. Flexible and self-paced learning approaches can help to ensure that the most marginalised and out of school girls can continue learning.
- Governments must ensure that gender-responsive education budgeting is enforced to reduce girls' absenteeism and drop out due to a lack of gender-sensitive WASH facilities.
- Social and emotional learning and sexuality education must be included within education response plans.
- Governments must ensure accelerated learning and catch-up courses to help address the interrupted learning of the most marginalised children, and girls in particular.

Responding to the wider societal and long-term impacts of school closures

- In low-income settings, previous epidemics show that girls face greater barriers than boys in returning to school. Simply lifting school closures will not be enough to ensure all girls can return to school and fulfil their full potential.
- Gender-responsive education funding needs to be maintained during and after the crisis.
- Response and recovery planning must target girls in particular, or risk reversing progress to advance gender equality in education and the workforce worldwide.

- School closures disproportionately heighten the risk of drop-out among girls, impacting their future lifetime earnings and access to decent work. To rebuild a more resilient, gender-equal world, we must ensure that this generation of learners returns to school.
- The impacts of this pandemic on economies around the world will be significant. In times of economic hardship, girls often experience a heightened risk of sexual exploitation, early/forced marriage and drop-out. Governments must put in place increased social protection measures to mitigate these long-term impacts of school closures.

The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a multi-stakeholder partnership committed to the advancement of gender equality to, in and through education.

With special thanks to our partner and ally organisations for their contribution to the development of this common messaging initiative, including: ActionAid, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Education International (EI), the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, Teach for All, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), Plan International, the 100 Million Campaign, the World Food Programme (WFP), WVOB Education for Development, CAMFED – Campaign for Female Education, the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, and Impact[Ed].

Endnotes

- 1 [Bridging the digital gender divide \(OECD,2018\)](#), [In tech-driven 21st century, achieving global development goals requires closing digital gender divide \(UN Women, 2019\)](#)
- 2 [We cannot allow COVID-19 to reinforce the digital gender divide \(Devex, 2020\)](#)





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