



Education during COVID-19

Primary and secondary students around the world have lost months of classroom time since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. These closures not only interrupt learning and threaten to roll back recent gains in education access and quality, but also have broader adverse effects on the well-being of students, particularly girls and other vulnerable groups. Given the experience of previous disease outbreaks, it is expected that girls will be disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This note provides evidence and lessons from evaluations relevant to addressing gender equality in education during disease outbreaks and other emergencies that can inform responses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It also draws on a [synthesised body of evidence from evaluations](#) on what works, for whom and in what contexts to advance SDG 4 Target 5: Equality and inclusion in education. This enables us to identify relevant evidence to consider and build on before designing innovative approaches to an unprecedented context.

*Evaluation evidence is key to learning from the past and
a way to leverage known successes*

The COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition is a network of the independent evaluation units of countries, United Nations organisations, international NGOs, and multilateral institutions. The purpose of the Coalition is to provide credible evidence to inform international co-operation responding to the COVID-19 pandemic - helping to ensure lessons are learnt and that the global development community delivers on its promises. **The Coalition is about learning with the world.**

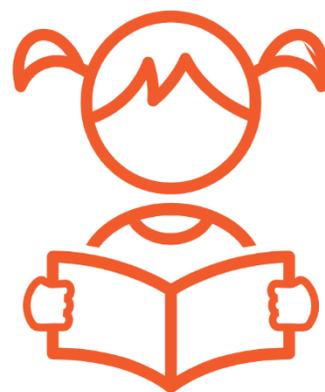
How COVID-19 affects education

The most immediate and direct challenges in the face of school closures relate to the continuity of learning. Research indicates that in low-income countries and the poorest communities, girls have less time to devote to studies because of increased caregiving responsibilities ([Akmal, Hares and O'Donnell, 2020](#)); that they are less likely to have access to the Internet and other remote learning devices and strategies; and that families might direct home-schooling resources to boys rather than girls ([World Bank, 2020](#)).

Girls and marginalised groups also face challenges related to other negative effects of school closures, and eventual return to school upon reopening. For example, since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls, and particularly domestic violence, has intensified ([UN Women, 2020](#)): a recent survey of education service providers from developing regions found that 78% of respondents consider the risk of violence against girls in the context of the current pandemic to be “important” or “very important” ([Akmal, Hares and O'Donnell, 2020](#)).

In terms of return to school, some have estimated that up to 10 million more girls could be out of secondary school when the pandemic is over – economic stress may mean families need them to find work and take on caregiving responsibilities, or they may be forced into transactional sex or early marriage ([Malala Fund, 2020](#)). This issue may be even more pressing for refugee girls: some estimate that half of all refugee girls in some countries will not return when classrooms reopen ([Nyamweya, 2020](#)).

While girls are expected to experience more negative impacts of school closures than boys, boys will face adverse consequences of closures as well. Some note that boys, especially those from the lowest income families and those currently in secondary school, are at risk of dropping out of school to become child labourers ([Akmal, Hares and O'Donnell, 2020](#); [Perakis et al., 2020](#)).



- ❖ Up to 10 million more girls could be out of secondary school by the end of the pandemic.
- ❖ Half of all refugee girls in some countries may not return when classrooms reopen.



Lesson 1: Initiatives need to target interventions to the specific context of those most in need.

Girls education



The complexity and context-specific nature of the challenges in girls' education make it extremely difficult to design a single solution of what works. Evaluations report that more focus is needed on improving the quality of teaching and on promoting gender equality in enrolment and learning outcomes in the higher grades of basic education. Expanding access to an improving formal secondary education was found to be the most effective way to prevent child labour exploitation.



Evaluations reported that longer project cycles are required in order to address the multi-dimensional barriers to girls' education (such as poverty, violence, food insecurity and climate-related emergencies). Evaluations noted that these barriers increase pressure to marry early or support their families by earning a wage. Lessons include the need to tailor interventions to the specific age, context and subgroup of adolescent girls benefiting from programmes.



Evaluations of recovery programmes in Sierra Leone noted that the provision of special needs education for pregnant girls, supported by a comprehensive teacher training programme, helped to meet or surpass enrolment targets for pregnant girls and out of school and vulnerable children.



Inclusion

Some evaluations noted a failure to move beyond gender. Disability, language and ethnicity were often neglected. Intended priority groups should be clearly defined. Expectations on mainstreaming gender and inclusive education should be required to go "beyond numbers" included in interventions to address more structural/transformational changes.



There is a need for more precise and differentiated goals and measures of equality. Several evaluations noted that definitions and measures of equity tend to equate universal access with equity. This leads to missed opportunities to target interventions effectively to those the most in need, or to measure outcomes for different disadvantaged groups.



Early marriage and pregnancy remain barriers to girls staying in school due to family and community expectations and laws in some countries. Evaluations show a need for programmes to be inclusive and engage with stakeholders to address these barriers.



Lesson 2: Girls face increased risks to their employment and sexual and reproductive health during a pandemic. Adapting education programmes, through cross-sectoral approaches, can help to address emerging needs.



A gender-focused programme in Sierra Leone was adapted during the Ebola crisis to become a daily life skills, sexual and reproductive health education, and vocational learning class. A randomised control trial demonstrated that this programme successfully mitigated some of the secondary risks from the disease outbreak, especially around pregnancy and transactional sex.



Evaluation findings in Peru found inter-sectoral approaches involving health, education and protection to be effective in providing integral care and differential services for adolescents. Good practices included building the capacity of adolescent peer educators through training in leadership, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.



Lesson 3: Appropriate incentive structures, such as cash transfers and school feeding programmes, can encourage school participation for children from poor and vulnerable households.



As long as parents cannot pay for school-related costs, nor afford sufficient food for the household, they will remain inclined to make their children contribute to the household's income. Poverty is a barrier to girls attending school. Evaluations provide evidence that initiatives that reduced financial barriers or provided an incentive can be effective ways of encouraging school participation and attendance among girls. The involvement of community leaders and parents were important for changing attitudes towards girls' education.



Cash transfers

Evaluations found that cash transfers, including stipends, bursaries and scholarships, have positive impacts on school participation among children from poor and vulnerable households. They can serve to boost the enrolment of girls in schools and can reduce children's work and household chores. However, there is limited evidence regarding the impact of cash transfers during emergencies on protecting girls and learning.



Evaluations also noted limitations of cash transfers. Qualitative data suggest that some cash transfers initiatives can bring bullying and jealousy towards the beneficiaries. Success in some settings required addressing the needs of marginalised girls, while at the same time responding to cultural backlash against girls for receiving priority treatment. Questions about their long-term sustainability, once donor funding ends, were raised in several evaluations.



Lesson 3 (continued) : Appropriate incentive structures, such as cash transfers and school feeding programmes, can encourage school participation for children from poor and vulnerable households.

School feeding programmes

✓ Evaluations found that school feeding programmes have strong positive effects on primary school enrolments, particularly in areas of high food insecurity. They were found to be particularly impactful for girls and internally displaced populations. Evaluations also found some positive evidence on the effects of school feeding on improvements in school completion and drop-out rates. The sustainability of school feeding programmes was identified as a significant challenge.

✓ Several evaluations noted the need to ensure that socially defined gender roles are not reinforced. Some school feeding programmes relied on women providing voluntary labour or working for low pay, which may reinforce social norms and negatively affect women unless they are linked to wider support. Good practices included strategies to address male dominance of food preparation where financial incentives are strong, promote women's and men's joint participation in the provision of home-grown school meals, and improve the school environment by constructing and rehabilitating separate latrines for girls and boys.

Take home rations

✓ "Take home rations" worked well in several countries, making a significant contribution to advancing girls' education and other indirect benefits. In South Sudan, the food served as an incentive to the parents who generally preferred to send boys to school while girls stayed home to work, help their families with cooking or were married off early in exchange for bride price.



Lesson 4: Digital technologies are not always the most cost-effective solution for remote learning. Low-tech solutions can yield results, particularly when local leaders are involved and supports provided.

✓ Based on the limited data available, it remains unclear whether digital technologies are the most cost-effective solution to enhance learning and teaching in refugee settings compared with other less technology-orientated approaches. Evaluations have also found information and communication technology (ICT) based interventions can become a burden to the communities if the long-term considerations of maintenance are not considered.

✓ Evaluations of online learning and ICT programmes reported mixed results. In some countries, such as Argentina, virtual classrooms facilitated secondary education for adolescents and young indigenous people in isolated and difficult-to-access areas; in other countries, such as Sri Lanka, online education did not improve enrolment among rural students, especially for female students.



Lesson 4 (continued): Digital technologies are not always the most cost-effective solution for remote learning. Low-tech solutions can yield results, particularly when local leaders are involved and supports provided.

✓ Evaluations have noted the importance of providing social, financial and operational support to increase access to information technology courses for female students. The time of training courses is also an important factor.

✓ Low-tech solutions, especially radio broadcasts, can be effective. For example, during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, one education programme was rapidly adapted to incorporate radio-based learning opportunities. Working with national agencies and local leaders ensured gender-responsive content and strong buy-in at all levels. Some evaluations have found that integrated approaches, incorporating both media and non-media elements, achieved better results.



Lesson 5: Non-formal life skills interventions can help support disease control and health education.

✓ There is a strong evidence base around the positive impact of informal learning programmes, particularly those that include psychosocial support. In Liberia, the training of young volunteers to support both disease control and health education in the fight against Ebola were effective. In Sierra Leone, study groups for affected children used integrated approaches that spanned child protection, psychosocial support and educational input.

✓ Multiple evaluations have demonstrated that life skills interventions and sexual and reproductive health distance education programmes have positive outcomes related to knowledge and attitudinal changes – but evidence of impact on rates of pregnancy and child marriage is very limited.

✓ Evaluations of education programming in Colombia pointed to the success of capacity-building programmes to introduce teachers to new psychosocial approaches. The incorporation of breathing and emotional awareness techniques in learning activities resulted in teachers reacting less aggressively, students reporting less sad and anxious feelings, improved communication, and reduced conflict in the classroom.

✓ Evaluations show the value of girls' clubs and other safe spaces which provide opportunities for developing social skills and self-confidence and engaging with mentors and positive role models. These activities support girls to remain in education and make informed choices about their future.



Lesson 6: Expanding the use of longer term development funds to address education in conflict and crisis can provide needed predictability, particularly where crises are protracted.



As crises continue, evaluations report a need to switch from rapid responses to resilience and longer term planning, collaborating with the host government and systems. There is a need for a more upstream focus on building crisis preparation and risk management into sector planning and the capacity of national governments. This will require further co-ordination, including across different international organisations.



Expanding the use of development funds for education in conflict and crisis is often a pre-requisite to improving access and quality, particularly where crises have become protracted. The use of multiannual agreements should be prioritised. Evaluations have further noted the need for deeper reflection about the sustainability of emergency education programmes.



Lesson 7: The choice of delivery modalities and partners should be informed by knowledge of context and capacity-building needs.



Evaluations have identified the comparative advantage of civil society partners for improving access to and the quality of education in conflict and crisis, particularly in terms of their ability to reach vulnerable groups and bridge the humanitarian-development divide. Their “closeness to the ground” and strong emphasis on extensive consultation with affected populations has enabled the provision of education services which are sensitive and nuanced to needs. Evaluations have also identified the importance of working closely with national education systems to strengthen these systems, ensure coherence and the sustainability of activities.



In Colombia, evaluations found that project consortiums can leverage comparative expertise by bringing together humanitarian partners, focusing on access to education, with development partners, focusing on quality of education. This can help to better identify and meet the needs of targeted groups and scale-up assistance. Evaluations also noted that flexible delivery approaches enabled vulnerable youth and adults, particularly girls and women, to receive accelerated schooling while staying in their communities.



Pooled sector financing and budget support modalities have received mixed evaluation assessments. Evaluations show two positive effects of budget support on education: first, budget support increases government expenditure on education and second, it increases access to education. However, there is no evidence to show that it is effective in improving the quality of the services provided or improving the administration responsible for delivering it.



Lesson 7 (continued): The choice of delivery modalities and partners should be informed by knowledge of context and capacity-building needs.



Institutional capacity-building programmes were often found to be supply driven and not designed systematically or with an eye to sustainability. In addition to partners' human resource capacity, the coping capacities of beneficiary groups and communities should be considered, as they move from relief services to pay-for services. These factors have an influence on the duration and the sustainability of such programmes.



New types of financing are reported as having mixed success. Evaluations found limited impact of results-based financing on school completion, learning, or gender equality and inclusion. There was no evidence that payment by results leads to fundamentally more innovation or autonomy.

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