



## **FINDING HOPE:** Experiences of women, children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in their own words

### **Limits on access to education**

**“I may never finish high school; who knows.”**

Women and adolescents are bearing a disproportionate burden during COVID-19 crisis. Here we look closer at the experiences related to limits on access to education. We also highlight the range of solutions and approaches being implemented in different countries as well as the policy asks to address education and other significant challenges facing women and adolescents during and beyond the pandemic.

In mid-April 2020, UNESCO reported that 1.5 billion students (from pre-primary to higher education) were affected by educational institutions closures in 195 countries.<sup>[1]</sup> While those measures were necessary to prevent pupils from contracting the virus, it is estimated that 20 million more secondary school-aged girls risk dropping out of school due to the crisis.<sup>[2]</sup> A survey of young people in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh in India (April 2020) revealed that 46% (961/2,090) of the girls who participated believed that COVID-19 and lockdown would negatively affect their future plans to study.

In order to cope with lockdown measures, many educational institutions provided online classes in place of in-person instruction; this created a clear divide between those with access to the internet, who could continue learning at home, and those without that option. For example, in Colombia, 11% (130/1,168) of young people did not have a computer or internet access. In Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda, children from poor households, without access to technological devices and connectivity, were unable to continue their schooling during lockdown.

In IPPFWHR's survey among youth networks in 19 Latin American and Caribbean countries, 50% (544/1,088) of young people reported facing challenges in pursuing remote studies due to limited access to technology caused by financial constraints. This could directly affect their plans for future education, especially endangering the prioritization of higher education.

**“I can't go to school at all and I feel my life is just on standstill. Nothing is moving. I may never finish high school; who knows.”**

*—18-year-old woman, South Africa*

Teachers in India also reported that students without access to the internet were at increased risk of dropping out of school. Many students struggled with unreliable internet connections, hindering their ability to follow classes without interruption, catch up with their classmates and communicate with their teachers. Online

classes also increased costs for both students and teachers at a time when most households were struggling financially.

**“I'm finishing my semester. It's been a little hard for me because I only have a cell phone to communicate. It's not working well, so that's why it's a little hard, and they've disconnected our internet service twice.”**

*—18-year-old woman, Colombia*

Several other issues were caused by the shift to distance learning. Teachers reported being under-resourced and lacking the capacity to use new technologies to conduct online classes. For example, in Bihar and Chhattisgarh, India, 80% (91/113) of government teachers who participated in the survey in April 2020 reported lack of access to resources essential for conducting online classes. Students in Colombia also thought these factors could affect the quality of their education.

Teachers in India reported that distance learning was decreasing students' engagement and interest, and that students felt fatigued by the combined burden of homework and increased household chores.

Distance learning and reliance on digital technology pose additional challenges for students with disabilities or special educational needs. Specialized, time-sensitive education and support are necessary to ensure their inclusion and access to educational services. Home-schooling and e-learning may not be suitable for them and could result in their exclusion if no special measures are in place.

The requirement of distancing measures when schools reopen after lockdown is another challenge for the education sector, especially in countries with poor infrastructure. Schools in South Africa, for example, expect to face problems in accommodating returning children.

**Figure 1.**

**Summary of solutions to challenges posed experienced by women and adolescents during COVID-19**



## Strategies and solutions

A range of strategies and approaches are being implemented in different countries to address the significant challenges facing women and adolescents during and beyond the pandemic. The figure below summarizes the most common solutions identified by partner organizations to address limits on access to education as well as the other challenges experienced by women and adolescents. These solutions are not exhaustive but reflect the perceptions and experiences of those who participated in the country-specific activities.



## Illustrative examples from partner organizations of solutions and approaches used to address limits on access to education across different countries

During lockdown, alternative solutions were adopted to reach students without internet access.

- a. In India, teachers reported using mobile phones to send messages to communicate with their students and provide guidance and counselling to those without access to the internet. The government increased its efforts to ensure inclusion of all students through traditional media channels. The educational channel of the national TV service, Doordarshan, broadcast classes. The informative and explanatory content can be accessed by anyone possessing a smartphone or computer. Videos of these classes are available in several languages. Teachers confirmed that the classes have proven beneficial and are helping many of their students.
- b. In order to boost resources for teaching, in July 2020, the Indian government released the “Pragyata” guidelines to support new online teaching methods.
- c. In Colombia, using traditional communication methods (printed pamphlets, phone calls), accessing public internet hotspots and granting students free access to phone data services helped many students overcome challenges posed by school closures.

## Policy asks

Supporting the [PMNCH Call to Action on COVID-19](#), and based on the lived experiences of women and adolescents, seven policy asks are put forward. These asks seek to respond to the consequences of COVID-19 in both the medium and long term and will require a collaborative approach by governments and all stakeholders. The action required will need to address mental health and well-being as well as the other challenges experienced by women and adolescents, including related to education, livelihoods, safety and security and access to essential services.

1. Maintain essential SRMNCAN services, products and information, including for contraception, safe abortion, immunization, safe delivery, stillbirth prevention and mental health.
2. Address gender inequality, including gender-based violence, and ensure the safety and security of women and adolescent girls in integrated response and recovery plans.
3. Increase attention to the mental health needs of those, especially women and adolescents, who have been severely affected by the pandemic.
4. Adopt and scale up social and economic relief measures that are gender-responsive and reduce inequities.
5. Address adolescents' needs for education and vocational training.

6. Address the digital divide within countries and between genders.
7. Collect and report disaggregated data (by age, sex, income, disability, geography) and gender statistics.

### Illustrative actions and asks from partner organizations to address limits on access to education

- Develop and diversify educational modules for deployment in emergencies, replacing traditional teacher-centric education. Traditional media channels remain an effective tool and should continue to be used to ensure equitable access to education by overcoming digital divides and resource constraints.
- Invest in resourcing, training and enabling teachers to adapt their teaching methods in response to learning conditions during COVID-19, in order to maintain the continuity and quality of education services.
- Develop strategies, implement awareness-raising campaigns and outreach programmes and engage community organizations in promoting education, and address the issue of school drop-outs during lockdown, especially for girls. Those strategies could include providing scholarship programmes, school supplies and transportation costs.

## References

1. UNESCO. UNESCO Rallies International Organizations, Civil Society and Private Sector Partners in a Broad Coalition to Ensure #LearningNeverStops; 2020 (<https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-rallies-international-organizations-civil-society-and-private-sector-partners-broad>; accessed 23 June 2020).
2. Girls' education and COVID-19. What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics. Washington DC: Malala Fund; 2020 (<https://malala.org/newsroom/archive/malala-fund-releases-report-girls-education-covid-19>; accessed 22 September 2020).

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#### More information available at:

<https://www.who.int/pmnch/knowledge/publications/lived-experiences-covid19/>