Building back equal
Girls back to school guide

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history. Most governments around the world have temporarily closed schools and other learning spaces in recent months in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. At the peak of the pandemic in April 2020, these nationwide closures impacted more than 1.5 billion students, or over 90% of the world's student population, from pre-primary to higher education in 200 countries.[1]

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. 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.

As some schools and education institutions around the world have reopened and others are preparing to do so, governments, education sector officials, community leaders, teachers and school staff should see this as an opportunity to build back equal, through gender-responsive measures that transform education systems, prioritise resilience and address the key bottlenecks and barriers to girls' education.

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billion learners have seen their education interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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1.   UNESCO. 2020. **Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by COVID-19**. Paris, UNESCO.

Why is a guide focused on girls' return to school needed?

> **" These types of crises are the product of a patriarchal structure that place girls at the bottom of the pyramid. Our experience from the Ebola crisis says that if we do not think about girls now, we will suffer serious consequences. We could lose a whole generation. For girls, every day counts.** – Chernor Bah, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Purposeful, Sierra Leone

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

While global figures showing gender parity in education are often cited as a great success story for gender equality, these figures mask large regional, national and local disparities. On average, just two in three countries have achieved gender parity in primary, one in two in lower secondary, and one in four in upper secondary education enrolment.[2]

Over 115 countries still allow child marriage to take place, although it is a violation of girls' right to education, freedom from violence, among other rights.[3]

Over 620 million children worldwide lack basic sanitation services, and 900 million lack basic hygiene services at their school, often putting a sharp end to girls' education during menstruation.[4]

Evidence from past crises shows that girls are particularly vulnerable in the face of prolonged school closures. School closures have been found to exacerbate girls' and women's unpaid care work, limiting the time available to learn at home.[5] The gender digital divide and girls' reduced access to information and communication technology (ICT), even in contexts with high mobile and internet coverage, also translates into reduced learning opportunities during school closures.[6] COVID-related quarantines have placed many girls at heightened exposure to gender-based violence[7] including sexual exploitation[8] and early and unintended pregnancies,[9] while also removing access to vital services for protection, nutrition, health and well-being.

Back to school resources

This guide builds on the UN Framework for Reopening Schools **and the** Safe Back to School Practitioners Guide**, and other guidance developed to help governments and school communities to 'build back better' after COVID-19.**

It goes further, calling for action to 'build back equal' – promoting the development of gender-responsive education systems and targeted actions to ensure girls' continuity of learning and return to school when these reopen.

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2. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). 2020. **UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database.** Montreal, UIS.
3. Pew Research Center. 2016. **Marriage Laws around the World.** Washington, D.C, Pew Research Center.
4. UNICEF and WHO. 2018. **Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools: Global Baseline Report 2018**. New York, UNICEF and Geneva, WHO.
5. UNFPA. 2020. **State of the World Population Report 2020**. New York, UNFPA.
6. UNESCO. 2020. **Gender Dimensions of School Closures.** Paris, UNESCO.
7. World Vision. 2020. **COVID-19 Aftershocks: A Perfect Storm**. World Vision.
8. UNFPA. 2020. **State of the World Population Report 2020**. New York, UNFPA.
9. Plan International. 2014. **Young Lives on Lockdown.** London, Plan International.

It is difficult to predict the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on learning loss and drop-out rates, but increases in both are predicted at all levels of education. Estimates of learning loss suggest that 25 per cent more students may fall below a baseline level of proficiency needed to participate effectively and productively in society, and in future learning opportunities.[10] In addition to learning losses, UNESCO has estimated that globally, 23.8 million children, adolescents and youth from pre-primary to tertiary may drop out or not have access to school next year due to the pandemic's economic impact alone, including 11.2 million girls and young women.[11] Other estimates have put this figure higher, up to 20 million girls and young women in low- and low-middle income countries.[12] While the numbers are not yet certain, it is clear that school closures due to COVID-19 will have devastating impacts on girls' futures, as well as intergenerational impacts on health and nutrition, on economic growth, and many other outcomes.[13]

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 79 million.[14] The return to school provides a unique opportunity to ensure that the 130 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.[15]

Who is the guide for?

This guide has been developed for policymakers and practitioners in Ministries of Education, including those directly involved in the planning and delivery of formal and non-formal education, from pre-primary through higher education. Local Education Groups (LEGs), education and refugee education clusters and education in emergency working groups involved in COVID response planning may also find this of value, as would professional associations, youth-led and youth-serving organizations, girls and women's rights groups, parents' organizations, civil society organizations, development and private sector partners supporting all learners' right to education. Finally, the guide may also be valuable for national stakeholders in health, adolescents and youth, child protection, safe schools, and the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sectors who cooperate with the education sector for broader development outcomes.

10. World Bank. 2020. *Simulating the Potential Impacts of the COVID-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes: A set of Global Estimates*. Washington, D.C., World Bank.
11. United Nations. 2020. **Education During COVID-19 and Beyond**. New York, UN.
12. It is difficult to predict the impact of COVID-19 on girls' return to school. The **Malala Fund** has estimated that 20 million more secondary-school age girls in low- and low-middle income countries could be out of school. The **World Bank** has estimated that 7 million primary and secondary students are at risk of dropping out, with an increase in the out-of-school population by 2%. **Save the Children** has estimated that between 7 and 9.7 million children are at risk of dropping out of school due to rising levels of child poverty.
13. Wodon, Q., C. Montenegro, H. Nguyen, and A. Onagoruwa. 2018. **Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls**. Washington, D.C., World Bank.
14. UNICEF 2020. **A New Era for Girls**. New York, UNICEF.
15. UNESCO. 2016. **Leaving No One Behind**. Paris, UNESCO.

What is included in this guide?

The guide provides targeted inputs to ensure continuity of learning during school closures, and comprehensive, timely 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.

It considers four dimensions of school closures, highlighted in the diagram below, covering learning; health, nutrition and WASH, protection and teachers. The guide presents recommendations for these four dimensions along a continuum which considers the distinct actions needed prior to school reopening, as part of the school reopening process, and when schools have reopened, recognising that schools may close again to respond to subsequent waves of the pandemic. It is for this reason that the guide emphasises an approach to 'build back equal' through gender-responsive measures that transform education systems, prioritise resilience and address the key bottlenecks and barriers to girls' education, including:

- Gender-responsive data and evidence to inform action, including data disaggregated by sex and gender-responsive monitoring to identify promising practices to promote gender equality.
- Policies, laws and plans to advance girls' rights, including the removal of discriminatory practices that impede girls' educational participation and completion, and ability to apply their learning.
- Sustained financing to achieve results, protecting education financing for girls' education, alongside health, social protection and economy recovery initiatives with an equity lens.

The meaningful participation of girls and women, and community mobilisation and engagement, cut across the four dimensions as essential elements of success. Governments should ensure that girls and women are consulted and can contribute to decisions about school reopening through regular feedback mechanisms, and their engagement in decision-making and planning processes. Similarly, community engagement and mobilisation is vital for getting girls back to school. In particular, parents and caregivers should be engaged in discussions and decisions concerning the reopening of schools, recognising the key role they play in girls' lives, including their access to educational opportunities and learning.

Guiding principles to build back equal

The guide includes four overarching 'guiding principles' to inform all policies and plans for school reopening as well as longer-term education sector planning. These guiding principles are essential for a gender-responsive approach which aims to build back equal.

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 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.

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.

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.

How to build back equal

The following section provides recommendations across four dimensions of school closures, calling for distinct actions prior to school reopening, as part of the school reopening process, and when schools have reopened, recognising that schools may close again to respond to subsequent waves of the pandemic. These actions aim to support girls' continuity of learning during school closures and return to school when these reopen, while developing more gender-responsive, resilient education systems that address the barriers and bottlenecks to girls' education.

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📖 Learning

" **It is better to study from school as I can listen to the teacher and ask the teacher if I do not understand something. Now it is difficult for me to understand some of my school topics. If only I had access to technology, I could ask my teacher directly. In my house, only my Dad has a mobile phone that I can borrow from time-to-time.**

– Angel, age 13, Indonesia

Around the world, countries are making efforts to ensure continuity of learning through alternative delivery modalities, including online and other distance learning approaches. For the most marginalised, online learning is compounding existing inequalities: an estimated 826 million students do not have a computer at home and an estimated 706 million lack internet access.[16] Many of these students without internet access are girls living in the least developed countries, where digital gender gaps are growing fast to girls' and women's disadvantage.[17] Even in contexts with adequate infrastructure and connectivity, girls are less likely to have access to digital devices than boys[18] and many educators lack the ICT skills needed to facilitate quality distance learning.[19] In addition, distance learning strategies often don't consider children with disabilities[20] and the specific language needs of minority groups.[21] A combination of television and radio programming, and the distribution of print materials, has been used in low-income contexts as a more accessible and inclusive strategy to reach learners. However, few countries are monitoring the effective reach and use of these distance learning modalities, and the short- and long-term learning loss is expected to be great.[22] As schools reopen, governments should motivate learners and their families for a full return to school, assess potential learning loss during school closures and adapt curricula appropriately, and ensure quality teaching and learning opportunities that are gender-responsive and respond to girls' needs.

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16. UNESCO. 2020. **COVID-19: A Global Crisis for Teaching and Learning**. Paris, UNESCO.
17. EQUALS Research Group. **Taking Stock: Data and Evidence on Gender Equality in Digital Access, Skills and Leadership**. Geneva, International Telecommunications Union (ITU).
18. Girl Effect and Vodafone Foundation. 2018. **Real Girls, Real Lives, Connected**.
19. UNESCO. 2020. **Supporting Teachers and Education Personnel in Times of Crisis**. Paris, UNESCO.
20. United Nations. 2020. **Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children**. New York, United Nations.
21. UNESCO. 2020. **Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All**. Paris, UNESCO.
22. UN. 2020. **Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond**. New York, UN.

Table 1. Recommended actions to support learning

	Prior to reopening	**Part of the reopening process**	**With schools reopened**
Participation and retention	Collect and use sex-disaggregated data on participation in distance learning programmes, and support received for learning during school closures.	Prioritise meeting the educational needs of girls, particularly the most marginalised, who have had reduced access to distance learning in the context of phased return to school.	Establish more robust gender-responsive risk analysis, standard operating procedures and contingency plans for future shocks, drawing on feedback and lessons learned.
	Establish gender-responsive school-level 'early warning systems' to record regular/extended absenteeism or non-returns to school when these reopen, and the associated reasons, including options such as marriage, pregnancy, inadequate WASH, and other barriers to girls' education.	Ensure that robust guidance, protocol and referral systems are in place to respond to each case of regular/extended absenteeism or non-return to schools, with associated measures established according to the reason for these absences.	Ensure robust gender-responsive data collection capacity and mechanisms through Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) and other measures to identify and monitor the enrolment and participation status of all learners, with associated protocols to ensure learning for all.
Curriculum and learning materials	Ensure that digital and other distance learning materials produced to support continuity of learning are of high quality, and are accessible and inclusive, including the representation of girls with disabilities, from ethnic minority groups and from other backgrounds and contexts.	Review curriculum and learning materials for gender bias and stereotypes and establish a process for materials and curriculum reform that also considers content missed during school closures. Consider girls' well-being and re-engagement with learning, as part of catch-up plans.	Build long-term institutional capacity within Ministries of Education to support curriculum reform that promotes gender equality across all subjects and levels of education.
	Expand girls' access to online learning, through temporary free internet data packages, zero-rate traffic to educational content or other measures, while introducing specific safeguarding measures against online violence and abuse, including equipping girls with the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe online.	Support girls' early, safe and sustained exposure to digital technologies, with the aim to build girls' digital skills, self-efficacy, as well as their interest in technology-linked careers.	Establish broader and sustained approaches to narrow the gender digital skills divide through role models and mentors, gender-responsive ICT-infused curricula, and efforts to increase girls' understanding of, and exposure to, technology-linked careers.
Learning assessments	Promote the establishment of feedback loops to monitor learning during school closures, promoting timely, constructive assessments of learning, guided by the principles of equity and inclusion.	Use formative assessments to track learning loss and inform targeted remedial measures for girls, considering accessibility measures for girls with disabilities and those in challenging contexts. Pay particular attention to assessments informing the transitions between levels of education, and from school to training/employment.	Ensure that remedial programmes and adapted curricula to address learning loss are delivered in safe and accessible environments. Engage with parents and communities to ensure girls' participation in these programmes, and their transition to different levels of education, and to training/employment.
Reaching the most marginalised	Ensure distance learning programmes offer flexible scheduling, are delivered in appropriate languages and modalities and allow self-paced learning, considering that girls often have a heightened care burden during school closures.	Remove discriminatory school policies that prevent pregnant and married girls from attending school and consider the possibility of flexible attendance options for pregnant and married girls/new mothers.	Provide special accommodations, including flexible learning, particularly for pregnant girls and young mothers and other measures to build knowledge and skills, and ensure all girls' right to education.
	Deliver diverse, inclusive and accessible distance learning solutions, including radio and TV programmes and paper-based materials in connectivity-poor settings, addressing accessibility, language, quality and resource barriers to learning.	Lift financial costs that act as barriers to learning– preventing the poorest and most marginalised girls from returning to school. These include school fees, examination fees, and other indirect costs. Provide financial support to girls at risk of dropping out.	Maintain and continue to scale up gender-responsive and inclusive distance learning measures to reach the most marginalised girls and support continuity of learning.
Meaningful participation of girls and women	Allocate funding for, and partner with, girls- and women-led initiatives that are actively supporting girls' continuity of learning during school closures and ensure their engagement in consultative processes.	Work with girl- and women-led movements, and other key influencers, including community and religious leaders, to develop back to school campaigns to ensure relevance and outreach.	Increase the representation of women in school management, and leadership positions, recognising their key role in girls' continuity of learning and return to school.
Community mobilisation and engagement	Undertake contextualised, inclusive, and culturally-relevant campaigns, in collaboration with community, traditional and religious leaders, men and boys, caregivers and other champions for gender equality, to increase girls' access to and participation in distance learning programmes during school closures.	Undertake contextualised, inclusive, and culturally-relevant back to school campaigns, in collaboration with community, traditional and religious leaders, men and boys, caregivers and other champions for gender equality, that challenge pervasive gender norms that reduce the likelihood of girls' return to school.	Establish/strengthen linkages between schools and communities, through parent teacher organizations, school-community partnerships, cooperation with community and youth centres, and other means to ensure sustained support to equal rights and opportunities for girls and boys through education.

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♥ Health, nutrition and WASH

" **Previously, I would spend my time at school where I received education and training on girls' rights including sexual and reproductive health and child marriage. Due to the coronavirus, this has stopped. I no longer have access to this support which kept me informed.** – Angela, age 17, Mozambique

For many girls, schools provide a lifeline, offering vital information and support (onsite or through referral services) for their nutrition, menstrual hygiene management (MHM), and broader psychosocial and sexual and reproductive health needs. Due to COVID-related school closures, roughly 370 million school children are missing out on school meals and other types of health support.[23] Safeguarding vital services for girls, particularly the most marginalised, through alternative delivery mechanisms for health and nutrition education, commodities and support is needed during school closures to avert educational, psychosocial, health and other negative outcomes. As schools reopen, governments' first priority is to protect the health and safety of all learners, teachers and all school staff to control the pandemic. An integrated, gender-responsive and multi-sectoral approach to planning for school health, nutrition and WASH is also needed to ensure the (re-)establishment of health-promoting learning environments and essential services that address girls' specific needs.

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23. World Food Programme (WFP). 2020. **A Chance for Every School Child: Partnering to Scale Up School Health and Nutrition in the COVID Era**. Rome, WFP.

Table 2. Recommended actions to support health, nutrition and WASH

♥	Prior to reopening	Part of the reopening process	With schools reopened
Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)	Develop and disseminate gender- and age-responsive and developmentally-appropriate, accessible, evidence-based, digital CSE to reduce girls' and young women's vulnerability to early and unintended pregnancy, HIV and gender-based violence during school closures.	Promote and prioritise school-based CSE to strengthen resilience and life skills, especially among girls, to manage stress, negotiate difficult circumstances and respond to the specific challenges girls may have faced during school closures, including violence within the home and other constraints to their health and well-being.	Strengthen CSE programmes in both traditional and virtual formats, as part of efforts to ensure girls' retention and broader well-being. Strengthen links between CSE and affordable, youth-friendly and gender-responsive services, including access to modern contraception and other sexual and reproductive health (SRH) commodities and services.
Food and nutrition	Ensure the most vulnerable girls and their families have their food needs met during school closures through food vouchers, meal deliveries, take home rations, cash transfer or other means.	Gather sex-disaggregated data on access to alternative school health and nutrition programmes during school closures to better understand gender impacts and inform school meal programming that meets girls' needs.	Strengthen social protection systems, such as cash transfers and nutritional aid to keep girls in school and to motivate families to prioritise their daughter's education despite difficult economic circumstances.
	Document good practice, lessons learned and impacts of alternative school health and nutrition packages supported during COVID-19 on girls' continuity of education and return to school to inform school reopening plans.	Draft a plan with specific benchmarks for the re-establishment of school feeding and nutrition programmes, including attention for micronutrient supplementation for girls and other support, where needed.	Strengthen national policies, systems and programmes related to school feeding with the view to build stronger, gender-responsive and resilient systems that are prepared for future shocks and school closures.
Menstrual hygiene management (MHM)	Ensure that the most marginalised girls have access to menstrual hygiene information and products while they are out of school, including the provision of menstrual materials in distributions of food or non-food items to girls and women in lockdown.	Conduct MHM rapid assessments, where needed, and support the provision of MHM materials, and the safe disposal or laundering of menstrual products in school facilities when schools reopen to reduce girls' absenteeism and drop out during menstruation.	Maintain continuity of safe MHM education and services that enable girls to manage their menstruation in dignity and stay in school. Ensure education and services are accessible and inclusive, reaching girls with disabilities, those in crisis and emergency contexts, and other hard-to-reach settings.
WASH	Maintain consistent messaging on handwashing as a key strategy for COVID-19 prevention, accessible to girls with disabilities, those from minority language groups, and those in remote, fragile, and conflict-affected areas.	Audit school facilities to identify gaps in WASH provision. Ensure that every school has safe, accessible, age-responsive and hygienic single-sex WASH facilities to ensure a safe return to school for female learners and staff, including in remote, fragile and conflict-affected areas.	Ensure sustainable financing for safe, accessible and age-responsive hygienic single-sex WASH facilities in schools, including in remote, fragile and conflict-affected areas.
Reaching the most marginalised	Undertake gender analysis to understand increasing health and nutrition inequalities resulting from school closures, and use the findings to plan for community-wide education, health and related interventions.	Ensure health education in the curriculum meets the needs of the most marginalised girls by recognising and addressing their realities and enabling skills-building on risk recognition and health-seeking behaviours.	Ensure the sustainable application of proven strategies to address the health and nutrition needs for marginalised girls, providing holistic support to their psychosocial, sexual and reproductive health, and nutrition needs.
Meaningful participation of girls and women	Engage girls and young women, including the most marginalised, in the development of content, the provision of remote learning on health and nutrition, and other decision-making processes, ensuring their safety and building their capacity.	Engage girls and young women, including the most marginalised, in monitoring the effectiveness of COVID response and recovery efforts, and planning and decision-making focusing on providing a safe and health-promoting environment for learning and well-being.	Systematically integrate girls and women into emergency and crisis education response decision-making processes, and intentionally ensure equity of voice and opportunities for the most marginalised.
Community mobilisation and engagement	Promote local consultations between subnational authorities and affected communities, to ensure local ownership of health and education campaigns that are relevant, accessible and contextualised.	Consult communities and engage youth groups, civil society organizations, faith/religious leaders, the media, and other key stakeholders to ensure that health concerns linked to school reopening are identified and addressed.	Ensure sustained support to address community and parental resistance to CSE, and other policies and programmes advancing gender equality and girls' sexual and reproductive health and education.

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Protection

> **Young people are on the ground creatively responding to the inequalities girls are facing at home during this time. A youth-led network in Nigeria has set up a hotline with qualified individuals for young women and girls to report cases of gender-based violence and to receive counselling services...How are you going to partner with youth networks to ensure that girls return to school?**
>
> – Maryam, age 19, Pakistan

Ensuring protection from physical, psychological and sexual violence remains an essential part of a gender-responsive, safe learning environment. Assuring this in the context of COVID-related school closures is a challenge, particularly when learning has shifted online or through other remote measures. The COVID-19 pandemic is also creating new protection risks for girls and women. Lockdown-related disruptions could lead to a projected 7 million additional unintended pregnancies, an additional 31 million cases of gender-based violence, and an additional 13 million child marriages over the next ten years.[24] Governments should establish mechanisms to prevent harm for all children during school closures, including related to their participation in online learning, and address the unique safety risks for girls. As schools reopen, governments will need to be prepared to address what children, including girls, may have endured during school closures and the potential impact on their learning and well-being. Support mechanisms and whole-school approaches are needed to ensure schools are safe and supportive, with strong policies to prevent and respond to violence in all of its forms.[25] Special attention should be given to girls with disabilities, and girls in settings of fragility, displacement, crisis and conflict, who face additional risks that affect their health and well-being and that have the potential to prevent their continuity of education and return to school.[26]

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24. UNFPA, with contributions from Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University (USA) and Victoria University. 2020. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage. New York, UNFPA.
25. Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV). 2020. COVID-19: Policy Brief and Recommendations Strengthening Efforts to Prevent and Respond to School-Related Gender-Based Violence as Schools Reopen.
26. UNGEI and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). 2017. Evidence Review Mitigating Threats to Girls' Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts: Current Practice. New York, UNGEI.

Table 3. Recommended actions to support protection

	Prior to reopening	Part of the reopening process	With schools reopened
Gender-based violence	Prioritise measures to protect girls from cyber-bullying, exploitation and other online violence during distance learning programmes, and establish reporting measures and referrals to support for those affected.	Communicate to parents and learners the measures undertaken as part of school reopening to (re-)establish safe, gender-sensitive and inclusive environments including school policies, and strong prevention, reporting and accountability mechanisms.	Apply whole-school approaches to ensure schools are safe and supportive, and prevention and response mechanisms are in place to address school-related gender-based violence.
	Support the delivery of culturally and age-responsive messages in educational programmes and through the media calling for protection of children from violence, abuse and neglect during COVID-19, recognising the particular risks for girls in some contexts.	Provide teachers and school officials with appropriate training to manage confidential discussions with girls who have been affected by violence during school closures as well as referral to appropriate services.	Establish mechanisms between school health and protection services to connect girls who have witnessed or experienced violence during school closures with psychosocial and legal services.
Psychosocial support	Deliver gender- and age-responsive, inclusive, developmentally-appropriate messages and activities to promote psychosocial well-being, and stress prevention as part of distance learning programmes.	Update school-based reporting and referral mechanisms to ensure gender- and age-responsive, and developmentally-appropriate and inclusive support for psychosocial and protection needs when schools reopen.	Support the establishment of regular professional development for teachers, school management and other education sector staff to identify and support girls who are struggling psychologically, as part of crisis-sensitive education planning.
Stigma and discrimination	Address stereotypes or superstitions about persons affected by COVID-19, including girls with heightened caring responsibilities during school closures.	Provide support to teachers to initiate socio-emotional learning activities as part of the reopening period, ensuring safe spaces for girls to share their experiences of school closure and inclusive learning environments.	Promote the integration of social and emotional learning in curriculum and learning materials, as part of efforts to build resiliency, cognitive and socio-emotional development, and inclusion.
Child, Early and forced marriage and unions (CEFM)	Ensure community-based programmes continue during school closures, addressing CEFM as a human rights violation that robs girls of their education, health and long-term prospects.	Train education and other support workers to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills needed to recognise and prevent the risk of CEFM and other harmful practices, through safe referral practices and protection services.	Support education-related interventions to end CEFM, including cash-transfers, community awareness to address cultural and social norms, life skills, CSE and other interventions, paired with laws on the minimum age of marriage.
Reaching the most marginalised	Ensure continuity and availability of child protection services for all children, particularly those in fragile and humanitarian contexts, and attention to harmful gender norms that increase girls' vulnerabilities.	Assess the impact of COVID-19 on girls' protection risks (such as violence, CEFM, early and unintended pregnancy, child labour) and mitigating measures to meet girls' needs and transition them back to school.	Maintain and expand budgets and investments aimed at child protection and ending gender-based violence, and referrals between education, health and child protection systems, with a focus on the most marginalised girls.
Meaningful participation of girls and women	Engage girls' and women's organizations working at the community-level to identify, respond to and address children and families in distress, and facilitate referrals to services.	Engage girls in the development of peer-to-peer support mechanisms, and awareness-raising activities about available support mechanisms and how/when they should be activated.	Establish learner-focused, spaces that enable them to speak out and share their experiences, ensuring that these are safe for girls, and awareness-raising of available support mechanisms, should schools need to close again.
Community mobilisation and engagement	Ensure communication with communities through media and other means on potential protection concerns during emergencies, such as girls' heightened exposure to violence, neglect, exploitation or other dangers, as well as sources of support for those affected.	Work with local actors (caregivers, teachers, school leadership, community leaders and local government) to assess and improve their disaster/emergency preparedness and response, with particular attention to risks and local resources to address girls' protection needs.	Establish protection continuity plans with parents/caregivers and other key community stakeholders, drawing on lessons learned from COVID-19, for future school closures, paying particular attention to risks facing girls.

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Teachers

❝ **I prepare the lesson plans as well as teach my children at home. Sometimes, I talk to the teachers at school and also to the students through the phone. I ask my students about the lessons and their family's news. I want to know about their activities because if something happened in their family...I would love to help them.** –

Khankeo, teacher, Lao PDR

Teachers are the most important in-school factor when it comes to learning, and female teachers have been found to have a positive impact on girls' education, particularly in contexts with rigid gender norms.[27] More than 65 million teachers around the world have been affected by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.[28] Many of these teachers are women; nearly 94% of teachers in pre-primary education, while about half of those in upper secondary education, are women.[29] Teachers' roles have been rapidly evolving during school closures to respond to the need to facilitate quality distance learning and provide support to learners in high-stress environments. They have been doing so often with little professional support, training or additional resources and often in contexts where they must also support their own children's learning from home. Ensuring attention to teachers' and education support personnel's health, safety and well-being must be the first priority. As schools reopen, governments should also support teachers to create a safe, gender-responsive and inclusive classroom and school environment, in partnership with school leaders, communities and caregivers. The further recruitment and retention of female teachers is also needed, along with interventions to bridge the gender gap in teaching and school leadership.

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27. Unterhalter, E. et al. 2014. **Girls' Education and Gender Equality: Education Rigorous Literature Review**. London, Department for International Development (DFID).
28. International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030. 2020. **Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak. Call to Action on Teachers.** Paris, UNESCO.
29. UNESCO. 2019. **Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Gender Report: Building Bridges for Gender Equality**. Paris, UNESCO.

Table 4. Recommended actions to support teachers

	Prior to reopening	Part of the reopening process	With schools reopened
Health and well-being	Collect sex-disaggregated data on teachers to better understand and address the differential impact on teachers' health and well-being during school closure.with particularly consideration to the impacts of additional caregiving responsibilities and increased rates of domestic and gender-based violence.	Monitor teachers and ensure access to psychosocial, health and other support, and that their health, rights and entitlements are protected during school closures, after school reopening, and in planning for future closures.	Ensure teachers' health, safety and well-being figure in COVID-19 response and recovery plans, with attention to differential needs by gender, location and other aspects. Ensure this focus is ongoing and continuous, and part of broader efforts to support teacher satisfaction, motivation and well-being.
Female teachers	Support female teachers, recognising the double role that they have often had to play in ensuring continuity of learning for students, while facing childcare responsibilities and a larger burden of unpaid domestic and caring responsibilities during school closures.	Preserve female teachers' employment, salaries and benefits, as they will be essential for a rapid and effective recovery when schools reopen. Promote their professional development through flexible self-paced delivery modalities.	Prioritise, with adequate remuneration and appropriate support, the recruitment, retention and safe deployment of female teachers in remote and rural areas, in higher levels of education, and in managerial and leadership posts, as they play a key role in girls' participation and retention.
Teaching materials	Deploy and adapt existing teaching materials to ensure they are free from gender bias and stereotypes, challenge negative social norms, and promote gender equality.	Review teacher education curriculum and learning materials for gender bias and stereotypes and establish a process for materials and curriculum reform, along with prioritisation of content to be delivered when schools reopen.	Build institutional capacity to remove gender bias from teacher education materials and support curriculum review and reform that promotes gender equality.
Professional development	Provide support and training to teachers to adapt their practice to online and distance learning, with particular attention to gender gaps in digital access and skills among teachers.	Promote ongoing professional development for teachers to develop their ICT skills, while assessing the e-readiness of educators and schools in future school closures.	Reform initial and ongoing teacher education to include digital literacy, ICT-infused pedagogy, and online assessments, with the aim to close gender digital access and skills gaps among teachers, while also addressing training needs in low-/lower-tech environments.
	Equip teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes for gender-responsive and learner-centred pedagogy, ensuring equal treatment and participation of girls and boys during distance learning.	Support teachers to conduct formative assessments of girls' learning to inform gender-responsive and learner-centred teaching practices and identify additional support where required.	Mainstream gender-responsive and learner-centred pedagogy in initial and ongoing professional development programmes for teachers, to improve girls' participation, retention and achievement and promote gender-equal classrooms.
Reaching the most marginalised	Support teachers in rural, remote and other marginalised contexts to provide distance education (e.g. providing equipment, supporting connectivity, purchasing data) and professional development for online teaching, or other support relevant to the context.	Identify and document the needs and experiences of teachers in rural, remote and marginalised contexts, to find out what worked during school closures and address gaps in skills, resources, and infrastructure as schools reopen.	Support initiatives that strengthen teachers' resilience, instructional capacities, and access to technical and skills in rural, remote and other marginalised contexts to ensure their ability to assure continuity of learning in the event of future shocks.
Meaningful participation of girls and women	Ensure associations of female teachers are represented in the crisis response, particularly in the design, delivery and monitoring of distance learning programmes.	Engage associations of female teachers in preparation for school reopening, ensuring measures address their own health, well-being and needs for a safe teaching environment.	Sustain professional bodies of female teachers over the long-term through adequate financial, institution and human investment.
Community mobilisation and engagement	Facilitate communication between teachers, learners and caregivers to assess participation in distance learning, difficulties and needs for learning and other support, particularly for girls.	Collect feedback from communities of school closures and the support they received for learning and well-being. Use feedback to inform planning for school reopening.	Strengthen parent-teacher committees, school management committees, and other bodies that can inform future gender-responsive, inclusive plans for future disruptions to education.

Conclusion: Building back equal to ensure a new normal for girls

Ensuring continuity of learning and preventing the permanent exit from education for millions of girls will depend upon short-term measures informed by rigorous gender-responsive data and evidence and longer-term approaches that aim to build back stronger, gender-responsive and resilient systems that are prepared for future shocks, stresses and school closures. Such planning must be approached with a long-term perspective that prioritises equitable access, community mobilisation and engagement and efforts to ensure no girl is left behind.

In the longer term, the global disruption to education presents the opportunity for Ministries of Education and their partners to build back equal and establish a 'new normal' for girls. A new normal where deep structural change occurs. Where we tackle barriers to girls' education and ensure that education does not perpetuate unequal power structures, but rather serves as a force to accelerate sustainable gender equality and full inclusion.

We asked girls what this new normal would look like. Here are some of their responses.

> "My vision for a new normal: a world where girls are safe to learn, free from violence." – *Pooja, youth advocate, Plan International Nepal*

This new normal places gender equality centrally within education systems, and ensures girls can learn in safe and inclusive environments, have the knowledge and skills they need for the jobs of today and tomorrow, and the ability to tackle challenges that face people and the planet.

> "My vision for a new normal: a world where we can harness the power of technology for educational advancement and increase learning opportunities for children, especially girls in the rural setting." – *Faith, youth advocate, Girls' Advocacy Alliance Liberia*

This new normal requires a transformation in our approach to ensure education systems are gender-responsive by design. Building back equal for girls means putting gender equality at the heart of education – from teaching and learning environments, teacher training and practice, education curricula and materials, to leadership and administration. It also calls for cross-sectoral, cross-ministerial cooperation and integrated approaches to build back more gender-equal education systems.

> "My vision for a new normal: a world where a girl is not just a community member, but a decision-maker in the community." – *Beatrice, a youth advocate and teenage mother, Girls' Advocacy Alliance Kenya*

Only through collective, intergenerational and sustained action and investments can we truly transform education systems and build back equal.

COVID-19 Global Education Coalition Gender Flagship

This guide was developed by a core group of representatives from UNESCO's COVID-19 Global Education Coalition Gender Flagship, including members of the following organizations: Malala Fund, Plan International, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The Gender Flagship provides a collaborative platform for stakeholders committed to gender equality, and girls' and women's empowerment in and through education.

Interested organizations are invited to contact us to discuss what support, tools or services they can offer to address the gender dimensions of COVID-related school closures and ensure that #LearningNeverStops.

Contact us to support the Gender Flagship at **Gender.ed@unesco.org.**

Stay in touch

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