

# GIRLS' EDUCATION AND COVID-19

WHAT PAST  
SHOCKS CAN  
TEACH US  
ABOUT  
MITIGATING  
THE IMPACT  
OF PANDEMICS



**MALALA**∴  
FUND

**Almost 90% of the world's countries have shut their schools in efforts to slow the transmission of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Alongside school closures, governments are also imposing social distancing measures and restricting the movement of people, goods and services, leading to stalled economies. While this disruption to education and the expected reduction in global growth have far-reaching effects for all, their impact will be particularly detrimental to the most disadvantaged students and their families, especially in poorer countries. The educational consequences of COVID-19 will last beyond the period of school closures, disproportionately affecting marginalised girls.**

**This paper uses insights from previous health and financial shocks to understand how the current global pandemic could affect girls' education outcomes for years to come. It details how governments and international institutions can mitigate the immediate and longer-term effects of the pandemic on the most marginalised girls. The paper considers the 2014-15 Ebola epidemic and the 2008 global financial crisis, which both have some parallels to the impact of COVID-19.**

**We find that marginalised girls are more at risk than boys of dropping out of school altogether following school closures and that women and girls are more vulnerable to the worst effects of the current pandemic. Drawing on data from the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, we estimate that approximately 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school after the crisis has passed, if dropouts increase by the same rate. Longer-term, poorer countries may struggle to provide sufficient financing for education, especially to support schools, teachers and students to fight reemergence of the virus and stay safe from indirect effects of further outbreaks.**





# ANTICIPATING THE IMPACTS

For millions of girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries, missing out on school is no novelty. In poorer communities, shortages of schools and teachers, the high costs of education and harmful gender norms keep 129 million girls from education.<sup>2</sup> Now, with the outbreak of COVID-19, these girls are joined by millions more as governments in 188 countries have implemented nationwide school closures to limit the spread of the disease, impacting over 1.5 billion children and youth, half of whom are girls.<sup>3</sup>

Though near-global school closures are unprecedented, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, schools in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia shut for six to eight months.<sup>4</sup> This experience provides us with important insights into the short- and long-term consequences of school closures, particularly on girls.



## 1.1 INTERRUPTION TO LEARNING

At the height of the Ebola epidemic, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone closed more than 10,000 schools, impacting almost five million school children.<sup>5</sup> By the time the schools reopened in 2015, students had lost an approximate 1,848 hours of education, ranging from 33 weeks in Guinea to 39 weeks in Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to the outbreak in Sierra Leone, girls' education already lagged behind that of boys, with girls acquiring just 1.8 years of schooling on average in comparison to the four-year average for boys.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, girls in Guinea completed only 0.9 years of schooling as compared to the 2.7-year average for boys.<sup>8</sup> This gendered difference in educational attainment is a recurring theme in countries where girls face the greatest challenges. Consequently, the simple loss of even six months of education as a result of COVID-19 will have a proportionally greater impact on girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries; in some countries, they could lose 50% of their total years of education.

Even when schools reopen following a health crisis, shifting demands on girls can deprioritise their education. One study found that during Liberia's Ebola outbreak, many girls became the main breadwinner for families, compromising their school attendance even if they reenrolled when the crisis had passed.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 EARLY DROPOUT FROM EDUCATION

Post-Ebola, fear and poverty kept many children out of school. Families suffered large dents in their income due to the economic shock associated with the outbreak and could not afford to send their children back to the classroom. During the crisis, poorer families needed children to contribute economically in order to compensate for additional expenses. Sierra Leone registered a 19% increase in the number of girls aged 12 to 17 engaged in income-generating activities.<sup>10</sup> Once schools reopened, children who found work were rarely encouraged to return to school.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, many parents did not know about the reopening of schools and the implementation of strict protocols to ensure their safety. In Liberia, an assessment found that parents prevented their children from returning to school because of continued concerns about Ebola.<sup>12</sup> Children who had witnessed sickness and death suffered from considerable mental health issues, impeding their ability to return to their previous lives. According to UNICEF, about 16,000 children lost one or both parents as a result of Ebola.<sup>13</sup>

Girls' enrolment – already lower than boys – did not return to pre-crisis levels. In Liberia, about eight of every 100 girls of primary school age were out of school before the outbreak. By 2017, this number had almost tripled to 21.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in Guinea, as of 2018, girls were 25% less likely than boys to enrol in secondary school compared with pre-crisis levels.<sup>15</sup> One study from Sierra Leone found that girls in highly affected communities were 16% less likely to be in school after they reopened.<sup>16</sup> In the face of greater poverty and parental mortality, girls took on more domestic responsibility and were at increased risk of sexual exploitation, with many forced into transactional sex.<sup>17</sup> In areas where Ebola caused high disruption, girls aged 12 to 17 were 7.2% more likely to become pregnant. Figures show that the outbreak caused the overall teenage pregnancy rate to double.<sup>18</sup>



## **ESTIMATING THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS ON GIRLS' ENROLMENT IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

Drawing on data from the Ebola outbreak, Malala Fund calculated the potential impact of the current school closures on girls' dropout numbers in low- and lower-middle-income countries. We estimate that about 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school following the crisis.

We calculated this estimate by applying the percentage decrease in girls' enrolment rates in Sierra Leone following a year of school closures (16%) to girls' enrolment rates at lower and upper secondary levels for all low- and lower-middle-income countries. We adjusted the figure downwards slightly for the lower-middle-income countries to take into account data showing their relatively stronger record on enrolling and retaining girls in school (see methodological note for more detail).

Policy decisions made it harder for girls to reenrol in school after the Ebola outbreak. As schools in Sierra Leone prepared to reopen in April 2015, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology announced the continuation of a pre-Ebola policy that barred "visibly pregnant girls" from reenrolling. Girls were only allowed back into school at the discretion of school principals. Consequently, a large number of adolescent girls were unable to reenrol irrespective of their actual pregnancy status, exacerbating prior gender disparities in education.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.3 PRESSURE ON TEACHERS**

Before the Ebola outbreak, Sierra Leone faced a significant teacher shortage. In 2001, at the end of an 11-year civil war, the government implemented policy measures to increase school enrolments, including abolishing primary school tuition fees and providing free school meals. The total number of pupils tripled in less than four years, but the increase in teachers during the same period was less than half, bringing the pupil to teacher ratio (PTR) to 72:1.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, around 20% of primary school teachers were volunteer or low-paid community teachers with little or no professional training. These poorly paid teachers received insufficient support from their schools when Ebola struck. During the outbreak, the government recruited 7,000 teachers as social mobilisers tasked with sharing information and educating communities about Ebola. After the crisis, some head teachers refused to let them return to their original positions for fear that they had been exposed to the disease, worsening existing teacher shortages.<sup>21</sup> Between 2001 and 2012, PTRs decreased from 72:1 to 35:1; after Ebola, PTRs grew again to 40:1 in 2017.<sup>22</sup>

While governments may continue to pay civil servants and teachers, private and community schools may not. In the past, this has led to shortages of teaching staff once schools reopen if teachers found alternative employment in order to preserve an income.<sup>23</sup>

The Ebola crisis brought the world's attention to the lack of female teachers in affected countries: at that time in Liberia, only 14% of primary school teachers were women, the lowest proportion of female teachers in the world.<sup>24</sup> During disease outbreaks, female teachers have to cope with the double burden of managing the personal impact of disease alongside caring for children and sick relatives, which increases their chances of leaving the profession altogether.<sup>25</sup>



## 1.4 SQUEEZE ON EDUCATION FINANCING

During the Ebola outbreak, governments needed to pump resources into the health sector, diverting funds from other social sectors and programmes in the short term.<sup>26 27</sup> Longer-term impacts included falling public revenue and an increase in fiscal deficits, all of which constrained the countries' ability to invest in education and increased their reliance on aid.<sup>28</sup>

The specific nature of COVID-19 requires countries to shut down almost all economic activity to decrease virus transmission. Experts predict this will lead to a substantial contraction of global growth, severe impacts on poorer countries and an economic crisis more severe than 2008.<sup>29</sup> The worst estimates propose a total of \$2.7 trillion in lost output and zero global growth in 2020.<sup>30</sup>

The 2008 global financial crash is instructive as we consider how the current pandemic could affect education spending. After that crisis, education's share of national expenditure remained, on average, the same as it was prior to the crash, suggesting that governments retained education as a priority. However, lower gross domestic product (GDP) led to falling public revenues, reducing the overall size of countries' budgets and leaving countries with proportionally lower funds for education. Some countries froze teacher salaries and even reinstated school fees.<sup>31</sup> Aid to education has also stagnated since 2008, having grown in the previous decade.

Given that the economic consequences of COVID-19 will be more severe, we can anticipate similar or worse impacts on education and other social sector spending. Research shows that austerity has worse implications for girls and women than men, compounding the direct effects of interrupted learning and early dropout from education, should governments pursue these policies after the current crisis.<sup>32</sup>







# MITIGATING THE IMPACTS: GENDER-SENSITIVE EDUCATION STRATEGIES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

While the outlook for education may appear bleak, past experience also provides insights for governments to guard against rollbacks in progress. International institutions are providing guidance to mitigate the immediate impact of school closures and prepare for safe and effective reopening.<sup>33</sup> In order to protect education gains for girls during these times, Malala Fund's focus is on ensuring that gender equality is central to the COVID-19 response. We have identified the following strategic priorities:



## 2.1 MAKE SURE GIRLS CAN KEEP LEARNING DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES

During the period of school closures, governments should work with stakeholders to keep students engaged in learning. Suspension of “normal business” provides an opportunity to test the potential of different technologies and remote teaching.<sup>34</sup> These measures must take into account the different circumstances of groups of students, especially girls.

Provision of online learning has emerged as a favoured strategy for many countries during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>35</sup> However, lack of a broadband or mobile network connection, or inability to access a device, puts poorer households at a disadvantage.<sup>36</sup> Harmful gender norms and perceptions of risk to girls’ safety or reputation make some parents reluctant to allow girls access to devices.<sup>37</sup> In the poorest countries, women are 33% less likely to use the internet than men.<sup>38</sup>

During the Ebola outbreak, radio lessons proved to be a particularly popular approach for distance learning and reached more marginalised populations.<sup>39</sup> While users did not rate it as an equally good medium for learning as formal schooling, educational radio programming served the important purpose of retaining a link to education during the crisis.<sup>40</sup>

While schools are closed, governments should also maintain essential services that provide for the most vulnerable girls and boys. For example, meal collection services or cash transfers could replace school meal provision. These may be particularly important for girls from poorer households to prevent them from resorting to paid work to supplement family incomes.<sup>41</sup>

## 2.2 FACTOR IN GENDER WHEN PLANNING FOR RESUMPTION OF SCHOOL

The experience of the Ebola outbreak highlights that though schools may reopen, some students will not reenrol, particularly girls. In order to mitigate against long-term dropout, governments should collect gender-disaggregated data on reenrolment in order to assess whether girls’ enrolment is on a par with or above pre-crisis levels and work with schools to develop action plans to return girls to education.

To support reenrolment, Ministries of Health and Education should work together to communicate well-defined timelines with clear benchmarks and standards to reopen schools. This will help quell uncertainty about when children will resume learning. This should include messaging about measures to protect children’s health and targeted messaging to ensure that children from the most disadvantaged groups reenrol.

A supportive policy environment is critical to reenrolling girls in school following a crisis. In planning for the resumption of school, government and school-level stakeholders should identify and remove any regressive policies that may discriminate against girls, such as not allowing pregnant girls to enrol. Preparing for a return to school provides education leaders with an opportunity to reset, enacting progressive national, subnational and school-level policies that address gender-related marginalisation and exclusion.

Studies show that cash transfers, community education programmes and waiving examination fees are effective strategies for encouraging girls’ enrolment.<sup>42</sup> At the school level further provisions could include: ensuring that every school has decent water and sanitation facilities (separate for girls and boys) and increasing gender-equitable personal, social and health education in schools, with specific guidance on guarding against reemergence of coronavirus. Going further, countries could step up their provision of comprehensive sexuality education to mitigate against increased rates of teenage pregnancy during subsequent school closures.<sup>43</sup> Implementing these response measures could also have a longer-term positive impact on gender equality in education.



## 2.3 KEEP FINANCING FLOWING INTO EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND ENSURE IT BENEFITS GIRLS AND BOYS EQUALLY

The 2008 financial crash showed that governments do continue to prioritise education.<sup>44</sup> But their efforts may not be enough. As we face a new – and likely deeper – squeeze on education funds as a result of the current pandemic, donor governments and the international community should immediately begin to identify and implement emergency financing measures to soften the impact of the economic downturn on education, health and other vital public services.<sup>45</sup>

Suspending debt repayments could provide much-needed relief for countries struggling with the rising cost of borrowing on capital markets alongside the economic effects of coronavirus. African finance ministers have called for a moratorium, estimating that it could release \$44 billion for the continent.<sup>46</sup> Another option is for rich countries on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Board to agree to the creation of IMF Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) and make them available to low- and lower-middle-income countries. The G20 authorised use of SDRs as a form of global quantitative easing during the previous financial crisis. This would facilitate a cash injection of hundreds of billions of dollars for low- and lower-middle-income countries.<sup>47</sup> Longer-term, donor countries should restate and meet their commitments to allocate 0.7% of gross national income to aid and spend at least 10% of that on education.

With education funding shortages in the immediate future, building gender responsiveness into education planning and budgeting becomes more vital, enhancing governments' ability to target funds for maximum impact and account for the disproportionate impact of the crisis on girls.<sup>48</sup>







# CONCLUSION

Families across the world are coming to terms with a life without school. For most, it will be a temporary hiatus from which they will emerge, perhaps with greater respect for the teaching profession and a reinvigorated love of learning. But for millions of girls, it risks being more than just an interruption if governments do not heed the lessons of past crises and do all they can to implement gender-sensitive responses to the current and future education challenges their countries face.

Girls from Lebanon to Pakistan to Ethiopia tell us that education shields them from violence, mitigates against harmful gender norms and gives them hope for the future.<sup>49</sup> Children consistently place the restoration of education services among the highest priorities for emergency response and post-crisis reconstruction.<sup>50</sup> Learning from the past and planning now for the future will enable education systems to recover quickly and serve the most marginalised girls and boys.

Facing the current crisis, the world must not fail future generations, but hold fast to the dream that one day, every child will have 12 years of safe, free, quality education.





# MALALA FUND'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

Malala Fund speeds up progress on girls' education through our Education Champions Network. Our model is based on the belief that local leaders best understand the needs of girls in their community, the barriers that keep them out of school and how to overcome these obstacles. We believe we will see more girls in school when educators, activists and their organisations have the resources to advocate for policy and programmatic solutions and hold governments accountable at local, subnational and national levels.

As this paper shows, COVID-19 will disproportionately hurt girls and young women. Because Malala Fund's Education Champions are critical to their communities' recovery once this crisis ends, we are focused on ensuring that the activists we support are in the best position to continue their work for girls' education, during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Malala Fund is taking the following actions to support them:

- Suspending grant deliverables for the next four months;
- Allowing Champions to reallocate up to 10% of their grant funding for operating expenses (e.g., staff salaries, paid sick leave and medical expenses related to COVID-19); and
- Providing additional financial or in-kind support for projects responding to the pandemic.



HAROON YASIN



As of April 1, several Education Champions are scaling up or implementing projects aimed at distance learning for girls in their communities.

For the last four years, Haroon Yasin and Orenda have been digitising Pakistan's national curriculum for students from rural areas without nearby schools. Downloads for Taleemabad, Haroon's award-winning learning app, increased 600% last month and users spent 5,800 hours on the app from March 24-29. Haroon and his team are currently working to add more lessons to the app, increase digital advertising and repurposing the app's cartoon characters for an educational children's TV show to broadcast twice a day on Pakistani television.

NAYLA FAHED



Like Haroon, Nayla Fahed and Lebanese Alternative Learning (LAL) provide digital learning solutions to children, particularly refugees, living in Lebanon. Their curriculum, Tabshoura, includes lessons for kindergarten to baccalaureate students and received certification from Lebanon's Ministry of Education. In response to COVID-19, Nayla and LAL have made Tabshoura available to anyone online and are training educators to create more online content.

KIKI JAMES



Kiki James and ACE Charity are working with teachers to produce education radio programmes so Nigerian children can keep learning at home with widely accessible technology. Each broadcast is 30 minutes and covers literacy, numeracy or STEM. Kiki's radio lessons are currently running in seven states on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Abubakar Askira and Hallmark Leadership Initiative (HALI) are providing 200 radios to girls in Nigeria's Borno state. While their girls' clubs can't meet in person, HALI's mentors will continue tutoring sessions over the radio.

Visit [Malala Fund's Newsroom](#) for up-to-date information on our COVID-19 response.

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## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

In Sierra Leone, protracted school closures led to a 16% decline in reenrolment rates once schools were reopened after the Ebola outbreak. Given that school-age absorption and retention rates in Sierra Leone mirror those in low-income countries, we computed a dropout estimate directly using the most recent enrolment figures for secondary education. Lower-middle income countries absorb a higher share of school age girls into the education system and retain a higher share of those enrolled than Sierra Leone. Net enrolment ratios and survival rates are used as proxies for absorption and retention. We used this to generate deflation factors that are then used to calculate the share of girls in lower-middle-income countries that would be out of school should they follow the trend seen in Sierra Leone. It must be noted that schools in Sierra Leone were shut for an entire year.

	Enrolment Numbers		Net Enrolment Rates		Survival Rates		Estimated Dropout Rates		
	LICs	LMICs	LICs	LMICs	LICs	LMICs	LICs	LMICs	
Secondary	12,448,130	71,380,345	31.17	63.69	54.13	85.31	1,991,701	3,546,519	
Upper Secondary	5,892,955	53,736,401	33.58	60.01			942,873	3,052,697	
Totals							2,934,574	6,599,216	<b>9,533,790</b>

## ASSUMPTIONS

1. Low-Income Countries will behave as Sierra Leone – direct transformation of 16%.
  2. The survival rates through to secondary school are the same as primary school (this is unavailable on the database).
- Controls: To control for variations in education systems, ratios (LIC:LMIC) of enrolment rates and survival rates are used to deflate the figures.



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