

# In Solidarity With Girls:

Gender and  
education in crisis



Policy  
brief series  
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INITIATIVE



# Intergenerational dialogue series: In Solidarity With Girls

This policy brief series draws from a series of intergenerational dialogues on gender and education in crisis. This brief was developed by Gloria Diamond and Natasha Harris-Harb with the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). The contents of this paper and its recommendations belong to the young women activists featured in each brief.

The intergenerational dialogues were hosted by UNGEI, in partnership with the UK Government, Plan International, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Each dialogue was held between high-level leaders and young women activists, with the aim of facilitating the meaningful inclusion of youth voices in the global policy response to COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

We are grateful to Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, the CEO of Plan International, Baroness Liz Sugg, UK Special Envoy for Girls' Education and members of the Platform for Girls' Education Julia Gillard, Chair of the Board of Directors of GPE, and Henrietta Fore, the Executive Director of UNICEF, for volunteering their time. We also thank Plan International, ActionAid, VSO International and Commonwealth Youth for Gender Equality Network (CYGEN) for their support and for connecting us with the young activists they work with.

Finally, we acknowledge the courageous activism of the young women who lent their time and energy to the intergenerational dialogues and policy briefs, and for their commitment to advancing gender equality in education against all odds.

1. [In Solidarity with Girls: Intergenerational dialogues](#) - UNGEI

## Contents

### Brief 1:

Opening up better and getting girls back to school 4

### Brief 2:

Rebuilding a 'new normal' in education post COVID-19 12

### Brief 3:

COVID-19 and girls' education: A tale of two futures 20

### Section 4:

Recommendations 26

### Section 5:

Resource list 30



# Brief 1:

## Opening up better and getting girls back to school



## Introduction

COVID-19 and the impacts of school closures are making visible many of the gendered power structures and systemic barriers to education across the globe. Drawing on the 'build back better' principle, this brief contributes to policy dialogues and discussions on how we can plan for and work towards more equal, gender-responsive school systems once restrictions are lifted. This policy brief builds on the content of an intergenerational dialogue that is representative of the wider youth network that each advocate represents (see below). The dialogue focused on the gendered impacts of school closures and youth-led, innovative responses that are being undertaken in different contexts. It also explored some policy measures and actions aimed at governments, policymakers, and other key stakeholders to promote girls' return to school.



### Sodfa

Current co-Chairperson, Afrika Youth Movement

Member of UNGEI's Youth Advisory Council

### Zaynab

Girls' education and immigrant and refugee rights advocate

Immigrant and Refugee Youth Ambassador, Green Card Voices project

### Fatu

Education and gender equality advocate, Sierra Leone

Current Chair of the West and Central African Regional Youth Forum

### Muzoon

Girls' education activist and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador



# Insights into the gendered impacts of school closures

In addition to emerging research and evidence, the testimonies of young people on the ground provide powerful insights that can help shape our understanding of the gendered impacts of school closures due to COVID-19. Fatu, Muzoon, and Zaynab, who have experienced health emergencies, conflict, and displacement in different contexts, understand what it is like to be out of school. In the COVID-19 education response and recovery, the diverse experiences and voices of young people across the world are critical.

Through her work with Plan International's West and Central Africa Youth Advisory Panel, Fatu reports that girls are being disproportionately affected by school closures due to COVID-19, noting the impact of heightened expectations around household labour. Fatu also noted increasing reports of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly rape, and teenage pregnancy through her youth-led network. The young women anticipate that in contexts already affected by crisis and economic hardship, job losses associated with lockdown measures and school closures are likely to lead to increases in child marriage.<sup>2</sup>

In many countries, pregnant girls and young mothers may not be able to return to their schools when they reopen, due to prohibitive policies, stigma and discrimination or pressures at home.<sup>3</sup> In addition, girls that have experienced harassment or violence may be dealing with trauma or other psychosocial needs that may prevent their return to school.



*"We can never achieve equality without solidarity."*

- Fatu, Chair of the West and Central Africa Youth Forum, Plan International



2. [What impact is COVID-19 having on child marriage?](#) - World Economic Forum

3. [COVID-19 School Closures Around the World Will Hit Girls Hardest](#) - Plan International

# Youth-led activism in response to COVID-19

Youth across the world have responded with strong resilience to the challenges presented by COVID-19. Youth-led and youth-serving networks are using diverse means, both online and offline, to ensure that their engagement is still impactful. According to Sodfa, the current co-Chairperson of the Afrika Youth Movement, young people are partnering with radio stations to deliver classes and essential health information. Youth activists are also working to deliver online courses, including informal and non-formal education such as ICT literacy, with the view of empowering girls to step into the increasingly digital space.

Youth-led networks are using social media apps such as Whatsapp to ensure that information regarding mental health, virus prevention, and barriers to education reach girls who are out of school. They are also partnering with local authorities, health workers, and NGOs to use online platforms to collect information on teenage pregnancy, early and forced marriage, and monitor incidents of sexual and gender-based violence. For youth who have access to mobile phones and the internet, social media is a powerful tool through which girls can connect and raise awareness. However, in some contexts, youth voices are in danger of persecution and censorship as a result of calling for a better quality of education or raising attention to the negative impacts of lockdown measures on the safety and wellbeing of women and girls.<sup>4</sup>



*"We are afraid that the post-crisis setting will be focusing mainly on economic development and rebuilding a global order and system which wasn't working for the promotion of human rights."*

- Sodfa Daaji, Co-Chairperson Afrika Youth Movement



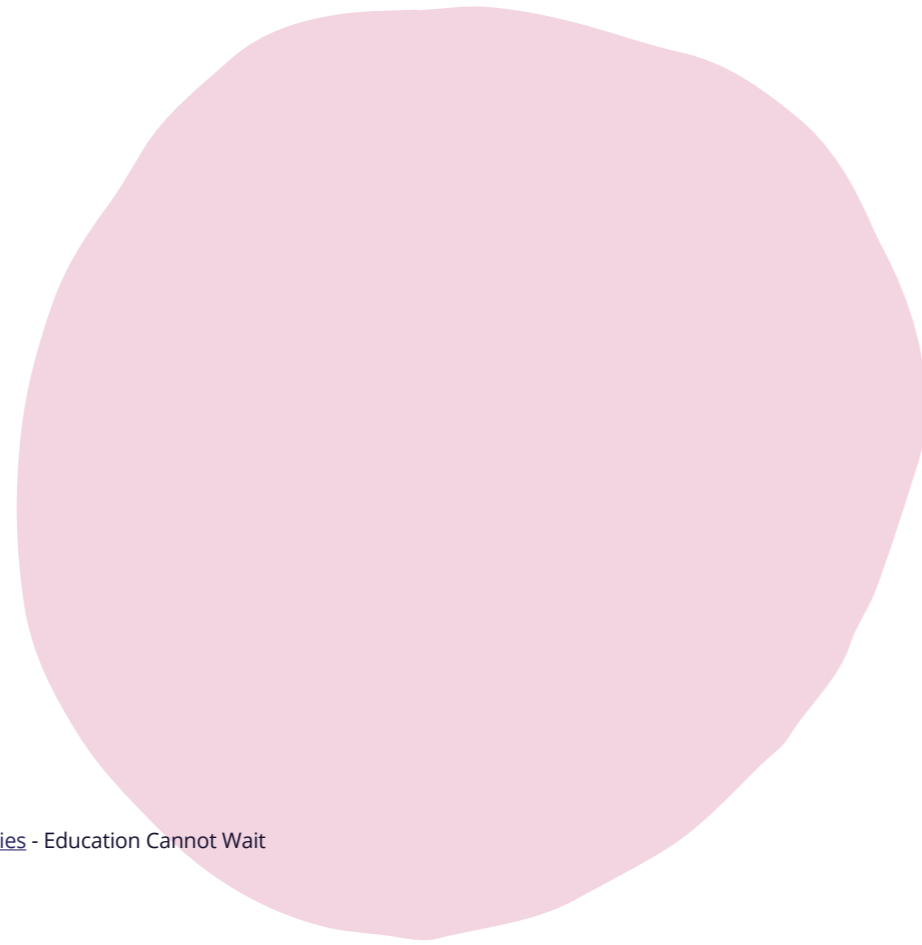
4. For example, increased risk of domestic violence and gender-based violence. [Sexual and gender-based violence during COVID-19: lessons from Ebola](#) - The Conversation

During this challenging time, youth-led networks are innovating to support girls' learning and provide essential social support during nationwide lockdowns and school closures. However, the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on jobs and livelihoods mean that many girls, especially the most marginalized, will require funding and structural support in order to return to schools, and stay in schools once they reopen. This includes targeted support for girls in conflict settings, displaced girls, and girls in refugee camps, for whom the pandemic represents a crisis in a crisis.<sup>5</sup>



**“It is important to remember the girls who are already out of school due to conflict and displacement”**

- Muzoon Almellehan, Goodwill Ambassador, UNICEF



5. [COVID-19 and Education in Emergencies - Education Cannot Wait](#)

## Measures to ensure girls' return to school - prior to reopening



**Governments need to lift financial barriers that will prevent girls from returning to and staying in school. The provision of free services such as school meals, books, and uniforms must be maintained during school closures.**



**To intensify community mobilisation and support for girls' education, governments need to engage with local actors and community leaders to encourage families to support girls' return to school.**



**Governments should put in place and maintain distance learning innovations for girls in conflict and emergency settings. This must include free, low-tech (or offline) and gender-sensitive approaches that are context-specific and designed to reach every girl.**



**Governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders must recognise young people - particularly adolescent girls - as partners to design relevant policies and programs that work for them.**

## Conclusion

This pandemic has shown that we are all fragile in the face of unexpected and unprecedented events. As we work towards reopening schools and rebuilding our education systems post COVID-19, we must uplift the voices and experiences of young people and respond in unity and solidarity to ensure that no one is left behind. As Zaynab, an Immigrant and Refugee Youth Ambassador for Green Card Voices notes, “usually girls are behind the scenes during such dialogues and discussions”. Only with a cohesive and intergenerational response can we truly define sustainable, cross-sectoral, and gender-responsive policies to ensure that no girl is left behind.



## Brief 2:

# Rebuilding a 'new normal' in education post COVID-19



## Introduction

How can we identify and leverage opportunities through the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate change and advance gender equality in education? This brief contributes to policy dialogues and discussions on how we can transform our education systems to work better for girls. The intergenerational dialogue on which this policy brief is based discussed the existing inequalities that have been exacerbated through the pandemic, with a focus on the gender digital divide. The brief also outlines concrete actions to rebuild a 'new normal' in education post COVID-19, alongside visions for more gender-equal, inclusive education systems. The recommendations are aimed at governments, policymakers, funders and other key stakeholders in the gender and education space.



### Maryam & Nivaal

Twin students, filmmakers and girls' education activists

Co-founders of The World with MNR

### Pooja

Anti-GBV and child marriage advocate

President of Nepalgunj Adolescent Girls' Network, Nepal

### Tolani

Student and girls' education activist

Youth volunteer, VSO Nigeria

### Faith

Member of the Girls' Advocacy Alliance Liberia

Founder and Executive Director of the Girls' Alliance for Future Leadership

### Maryjacob

Coordinator, Activista Network Nigeria

Founder of Whispers feminist network, Nigeria

### Beatrice

Teenage mother and youth education activist.

Member of the Girls' Advocacy Alliance, Kenya



## Navigating a new digital landscape in the COVID-19 pandemic

Nationwide lockdowns and school closures have forced a shift to the digital space for learning, socialising, work and activism. Access to internet connectivity and technology should be a fundamental right for all. However, girls and women often have less access to technology and the internet compared to boys and men.<sup>6</sup>This gender digital divide can be deepened by a lack of infrastructure outside of urban areas, barriers related to the cost of mobile phones and data, or accessibility challenges due to disability.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, youth-led networks report that during school closures, girls and young women experience heightened expectations around household chores and caregiving, making it difficult to find the time to access distance learning opportunities on tv, radio or the internet. This can also restrict girls from accessing the help and support needed in instances of witnessing or experiencing gender-based violence. Being disconnected from technology can also mean being disconnected from friends and teachers, which may negatively impact on girls' mental health and motivation to continue learning.<sup>7</sup>

6. [Bridging the Gender Digital Divide](#) - Plan International

7. [Mental health needs of children and young people in conflict need to be prioritized](#) - UNICEF

## Youth-led activism to bridge the gender digital divide

Tolani, through her work with VSO Nigeria, has been supporting awareness-raising campaigns to encourage parents to allow their children (including girls) to use their mobile devices for learning. Youth-led networks working with VSO in Nigeria have also been engaging with Kano and Engu state governments to provide radio transmitters to rural communities to improve access to education broadcasts.

As Coordinator of the Activista Network Nigeria, Maryjacob is supporting girls and young women to stay safe online, introducing virtual training sessions for young girls on basic digital literacy, navigating online spaces safely, and how to fully maximise the digital world. For girls who do not have access to the internet, Maryjacob has also shifted to activities on the radio with the help of teachers they work with.



“Some apps and media spaces have given access to internet users with little or no data, but many of these spaces also have rigid and complex terms and conditions that are difficult to navigate and give them rights to users' personal information and data, making it unsafe for users...”

We understand how unsafe the digital space is and have made it paramount to help our sisters learn how to create safe spaces and maximize this new world”

- Maryjacob, Activista Nigeria





# Opportunities for action as schools start to reopen

School closures as a measure to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus have caused major disruption to the education of children and young people.<sup>8</sup> This is a period to take urgent measures that will yield lasting results even after the pandemic. With inequalities relating to gender, education, income and access to technology likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic, families, governments, NGOs and youth-led networks all have a part to play in building back better for girls.

As governments start planning for the reopening of schools, young advocates consider some actions that can be taken as schools reopen, in order to rebuild a 'new normal' in education:



**When schools reopen, put in place counsellors and special advisors so that girls can report cases of sexual and gender-based violence and abuse that may have occurred during the lockdown.**



**Establish programmes geared towards girls' leadership and empowerment, such as capacity-growing initiatives, practical skills workshops and brave spaces for information-sharing.**



**Mobilise and support youth-led networks to deliver back to school campaigns, facilitate information-sharing seminars, and raise community awareness around period poverty and menstrual taboo, early pregnancy and early marriage, and other barriers to girls' education.**



**Make flexible core funding available to grassroots, youth-led networks working to deliver emergency products and services to girls and young women on the ground.**

8. [School closures caused by Coronavirus \(Covid-19\)](#) - UNESCO

9. [COVID-19 Policy Brief and Recommendations: Strengthening efforts to prevent and respond to school-related gender-based violence as schools reopen](#) - Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV WG)

# Rebuilding a 'new normal' in education post COVID-19

The reopening of education systems is an opportunity to advocate for, and rebuild, a 'new normal' in education. As schools reopen, governments should review existing policies, plans and budgets that impact education, through a gender lens. This must include those relating to social protection, health and youth. Governments should enforce new, cross-sectoral policies that are gender-responsive, with the policy processes fully represented by advocates for different groups of learners.

For example, the reopening of schools is an opportunity to make educational content and teacher training more gender-responsive. Teachers should also receive training to create more gender-sensitive learning environments and help reverse gender stereotypes and bias in the classroom.

In order to make education future-proof, continued investment in policies and programmes that will enhance girls' access to technology and internet, in ways that will enhance their learning and employment opportunities, is needed. Girls should be encouraged and supported to participate in STEM courses, with additional support provided through extra-curricular clubs, and pursue careers in STEM fields.

## Conclusion

Governments, NGOs and other key stakeholders should continue to cultivate and maintain partnerships with youth-led networks that are working in local communities to advance gender equality in education and build lasting solutions to reverse inequalities. Youth-led and youth-serving networks should be actively and consistently involved in decision-making and programme development in education. We must work together to achieve our visions for a 'new normal' in education post COVID-19.

“A world where girls are safe to learn, free from violence”

- Pooja, Plan Nepal

“A world where girls have access to all the latest technologies and can use it as much as boys can”

- Tolani, VSO Nigeria

“A world where a girl is not just a community member, but a decision-maker in the community”

- Beatrice, Plan Kenya

“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, Plan Liberia

“A world where girls' education advocates and feminist activists no longer have work to do, because girls have access to education — just because they are humans and they are alive”

- Maryjacob, ActionAid Nigeria

# Brief 3: COVID-19 and girls' education: A Tale of Two Futures



## Introduction

As governments around the world look to get education systems back on track following prolonged school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this raises a question as to what kind of education systems we are returning to. Prior to this pandemic, millions of girls attended schools that lacked basic menstrual hygiene management provision, felt unsafe on journeys to and from school, and faced stigma or discriminatory policies as pregnant girls or young mothers.<sup>10</sup> The current context has made many of these inequalities worse.

This brief contributes to discussions on how to avoid returning to a status quo which does not provide quality, inclusive education for all. It builds on an intergenerational dialogue which focused on measures that must be taken now to prevent a future where inequalities of learning and gender continue to deepen. The dialogue also highlighted innovative ways in which these inequalities can be reversed, in order to rebuild more resilient, inclusive education systems.



### Maryam & Nivaal

Twin students, filmmakers and girls' education activists

Co-founders of The World with MNR

### Marjina

Member of Commonwealth Gender Equality Network (CYGEN).

Teach for Bangladesh fellow

### Pauline

Youth Ambassador with Girls' Advocacy Alliance Liberia

Co-Chair of the Mano River Union Child Rights Defendant

### Cynthia

Teenage mother and education activist

Member of the Girls' Advocacy Alliance Kenya



10. [Inclusion in Education: All means all](#) - UNESCO GEMR

## Partnering with youth in education and development

Youth-led networks, from the global to the grassroots, have shown dynamic and innovative action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When youth are represented from different groups and communities, their diverse insights and experiences can help to build a holistic view of the issue and what is needed to address it. This must be harnessed if we are to truly build back equal. In addition, the acceleration of youth leadership may increase young people's sense of civic responsibility and ownership of education policies, increasing their sustainability.



**“If we are going to build resilient, quality, education systems, we can only do that if we listen to the voices of young people, who know what they want and need from their education”**

- Julia Gillard, member of the Platform for Girls' Education and Chair of the Board of Directors, Global Partnership for Education

**“Involving the voices of young people in discussions around their education is absolutely vital”**

- Baroness Liz Sugg, member of the Platform for Girls' Education and UK Special Envoy for Girls' Education



We are calling for increased collective and intergenerational action to build a gender-responsive education response to this pandemic. However, the meaningful participation of youth must go beyond consultations. As this policy brief highlights, youth-led networks are carrying out critical work to support continuity of learning - filling gaps in essential services and ensuring marginalised learners, and girls get the support that they need to continue learning. Their work must be recognised and funded by governments, NGOs and other stakeholders.

## Taking action against deepening inequalities in the context of COVID-19



**“Young people should be empowered with the resources, skills and platform needed to lead”**

- Pauline, Girls' Advocacy Alliance, Liberia



### Financial barriers to education: closing the gaps

A social safety net can help vulnerable learners, and girls in particular, to get back to school at the time of reopening, and stay in school.<sup>11</sup> Measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 have impacted on the livelihoods and incomes of families across the globe, with knock-on effects for girls' education and empowerment. Cynthia reports increased vulnerability of girls and young women due to the economic impacts of the pandemic. In Kenya, national lockdowns have severely restricted the small businesses run by young women - a critical source of economic empowerment and financial independence.

Online commerce and mobile money have become vital channels to keep businesses alive during lockdown, however girls and young women are often excluded from the digital economy and therefore face additional financial challenges, being unable to grow their businesses or sell their products online. Through her work with the Girls' Advocacy Alliance<sup>12</sup>, Cynthia is supporting vulnerable groups to gain access to social security schemes and government cash transfers to fill this income gap.

11. [Framework for reopening schools](#) - UNICEF

12. The Girls Advocacy Alliance consists of Plan International Netherlands, Terre des Hommes Netherlands and Defence for Children - ECPAT Netherlands: <https://www.girlsadvocacyalliance.org/>

## Tackling the shadow crisis

Reports of increasing sexual and gender-based violence across the world have been referred to as the 'shadow crisis' of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>13</sup> National lockdowns, restrictions on movement, and a shift to the digital world have forced new levels of innovation among youth-led networks operating in this space. Through her work with the Girls' Advocacy Alliance Liberia, Pauline is working with community-based youth activists, organizations and local leaders to raise awareness, monitor and report GBV and all forms of harmful practices against girls and children.

Teenage Network in Nigeria has set up a hotline with qualified professionals for girls and young women to report cases of GBV and to receive counselling services. Kenyan activist and teenage mother Cynthia reports that her Girls Advocacy Alliance chapter is coordinating a group of 20-30 members to check in on each other, share information, and stay connected. They are also working closely with chiefs and community leaders to monitor reports of gender-based violence.

## Teaching across the gender digital divide

Marjina, a young education activist from Bangladesh, works with primary school learners in a marginalised community. A large number of the learners' families have poor access to internet and digital communication technology, and the shift to digital learning has forced Marjina to find innovative and creative ways to engage her learners.

The gender digital divide impacts teachers as well as learners. According to Marjina, female teachers need capacity building and must feel themselves empowered to use technological devices and digital learning, which will enable them to help girls continue learning during and after COVID-19. In the context of COVID-19, Marjina has been mobilising funds, disseminating vital health information, and providing psycho-social support to vulnerable learners, particularly girls.

13. [Issue brief: COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls](#) - UN Women

## Conclusion

This dialogue shows the many different ways in which the scale of this crisis has forced new levels of innovation and opened new pathways for collaboration. Meaningful participation with youth-led and youth-serving networks can ignite a culture of inclusion and participatory efforts toward improved education for girls and gender equality.

As schools start to reopen, these efforts must be sustained into the future, to ensure no one is left behind. More than ever, the support of governments, NGOs and development partners are needed to make commitments to partner with and fund youth-led networks in the COVID-19 education response and recovery. We must protect the futures of girls around the world by protecting their right to education.

# Section 4: Recommendations



This section comprises the overall learnings and recommendations from the intergenerational dialogue series. This is an unprecedented crisis, however many of the challenges to learning existed prior to the pandemic. Simply reopening schools, and returning to 'normal' after the pandemic, doesn't mean returning to a gender-equal world. We must reimagine education systems to provide equal opportunity and equal pathways into the future, so that we come out of COVID stronger and better for adolescent girls.

## Ensuring girls can return to school

1. Provide incentives to families at the time of reopening to support marginalised learners, and girls in particular, to return to school. This may include free school meals, provision of menstrual hygiene products, waiving of fees, and increased social protection measures to counteract the financial hardship placed on families during the crisis.
2. Establish community-centred awareness-raising campaigns. Engage men and boys, and mobilise community leaders to support girls' return to school.
3. Remove policies that discriminate against pregnant girls and young mothers. This, in recognition of the increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, early/forced marriage and early pregnancy, and reduced access to essential SRHR services during lockdown.
4. Maintain gender-responsive education funding, especially in times of crisis.
5. Include youth, and particularly girls and young women, in decision-making and dialogues around their education, and to support the development policies & programmes that are relevant and targeted to help girls.

# Transforming education systems to build back better for girls

1.

Establish and maintain distance learning innovations for the most marginalised girls, particularly displaced girls and girls living in refugee camps.

2.

Remove gender stereotypes from teaching and learning materials, and change expectations around women and girls in STEM fields.

3.

Develop policy and enforce existing laws to tackle GBV and harmful practices against women and girls. Ensure that this is accompanied by awareness-raising and community mobilisation to challenge harmful practices and combat child marriage.

4.

Address the lack of access to technology and internet, particularly for girls.

5.

Establish desks at both governmental and non-governmental organisations for youth representation. Empower youth activists with the required skills, funding, resources, technology, and networks to enable them to drive actions crucial for transforming their communities and advancing gender equality.



# Section 5: Resource List



This section highlights some key resources on gender, education and COVID-19.

## Research

- [Girls' education and COVID-19: What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics](#) - *Malala Fund*
- [Sisters for Sisters' Education in Nepal Project: Current Situation of Communities and Educational Institutions during the COVID-19 Crisis](#) - *VSO*
- [Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from the Sahel](#) - *Plan International*
- [Practical Tips on Engaging Adolescents and Youth in the Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Response](#) - *UNICEF*

## Funding

- [Global Resilience Fund Application](#) - *Global Resilience Fund*
- [Covid-19 Young Leaders Fund Application](#) - *One Young World*
- [COVID-19 Emergency Grants Programme](#) - *Queen's Commonwealth Trust*
- [Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund](#)

## Youth-friendly tools

- [Episode 6 Youth Against Covid: Youth, Gender and COVID-19](#) - *UNFPA*
- [Youth Take Action On COVID-19 Toolkit](#) - *UNICEF*
- [COVID-19 : Resources for Adolescents and Youth](#) - *World Health Organisation*
- [Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation: Adapted Resource Package for COVID-19](#) - *UNICEF*
- [Education and Learning for Adolescents and Youth during COVID-19](#) - *Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)*
- [Girls Get Equal Youth Toolkit](#) - *Plan International*





The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is an intergenerational, multi stakeholder partnership committed to advancing gender equality in and through education. Youth participation is at the core of UNGEI's mandate, and the partnership is committed to working with youth-led and youth-serving networks as equal partners.