



Summary Brief

DISTANCE EDUCATION & THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Ensuring learning continuity for girls during
school closures

This brief was developed to support the dissemination of key messages in [Mind the Gap 2: Seeking Safe and Sustainable Solutions for Girls' Education in Crises](#). It provides an overview of evidence and gaps in girls' and women's access to distance education and recommends actions for gender-responsive planning and design of distance education policies and interventions.



Girls are missing out on learning during school closures.

At the height of the pandemic, 1.6 billion learners globally were affected with school closures. In response, governments invested heavily in distance education programs including remote and hybrid approaches as a substitute for classroom instruction.¹ In a rush to provide distance education alternatives, many education providers did not take existing gender equity gaps into account in the design and planning of their responses, thus leaving behind the most vulnerable populations.² Globally, 222 million girls could not be reached with digital and broadcast distance learning.³

1 UNESCO. (2021). When schools shut. Gendered impacts of Covid-19 school closures. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379270/>

2 See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.1.

3 UNICEF. (2020). COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures. A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies. UNICEF. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/remote-learning-reachability-factsheet/>

Girls face gendered barriers to distance education

Girls face a number of barriers to participating in distance education, which vary from context to context. During the COVID-19 related school closures, some of these challenges included:

- **Domestic and care-burden disproportionately increased for women and girls:** Women and girls faced an increased burden of domestic and caregiving responsibilities during lockdowns and school closures due to the gendered social norms and roles. They also experienced more frequent interruptions to their studies and lack of a study routine.⁴
- **Lack of access to devices and connectivity for online learning:** Girls and women lag behind boys and men in their access to internet and online devices and in their digital skills and competencies. Gaps are widest gaps in the least developed countries, where only 19% of women use the internet as compared to 31% of men.⁵ During school closures, this gendered digital divide limited girls' and women's ability to benefit equally from digital or high-tech learning solutions.⁶
- **Gendered social norms and biases reinforce barriers to girls' access to distance education:** Studies show that the disparities in girls' access to technology are rooted in broader social norms and attitudinal biases on girls' access to and usage of technology.⁷ In some cases, access to mobile phones and internet study was mediated by parents who gave boys greater access. Mobility and safety concerns may have also limited girls' access to shared or community spaces where they might access digital learning.⁸

Making distance education work for girls in crisis-affected contexts

In order to equitably engage girls in distance education, initiatives must take into account existing barriers girls face accessing education and learning.⁹ Some promising approaches identified in Mind the Gap 2 include:

- Conducting an initial analysis to understand the types of technology (mobile phones, radio...etc.) girls have access to and the barriers they face in accessing distance learning.
- Using a mixture of low-tech and no tech solutions, such as combining interactive radio instruction with printed learning materials. Tailoring programming to the most widely accessible platforms can help ensure more learners are able to access learning materials.

⁴ See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.1.2.

⁵ ITU. (2021). Measuring digital development. Facts and figures 2021. ITU. <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2021/>

⁶ See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.1.

⁷ See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.1.2.

⁸ See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.1.2.

⁹ For more details and case studies on promising practices for low-tech and no-tech distance learning approaches, see INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.3.

- Removing barriers to the use of technology for education (e.g. through affordable internet access, training, safe spaces for online access) can support greater access to and engagement of girls with online distance learning.
- Maintaining in-person contact with girls and their families (e.g. through community workers, peer learning groups) can help monitor girls' wellbeing and ensure that they are continuing to learn when schools are closed.

Gaps

The Mind the Gap 2 report highlights the following gaps in data, evidence, and actions for distance education for girls.

- **Lack of gender-responsive approaches to distance education:** Many distance education approaches during COVID-19 school closures did not consider gendered challenges to education or technology and lacked gender and inclusion analyses. Adaptive measures relied on technology even in contexts where access to technology was limited. Moreover, there is little evidence of teacher training on gender-responsive pedagogy for distance learning, or of providing additional support to female teachers, for-instance, to account for their increased care burden.¹⁰
- **Digital access and skills:** There is very limited international comparable data, disaggregated by gender and other vulnerabilities, available on digital access and skills, particularly in crisis-affected countries. While UIS indicators are available to assess digital skills, they are very focused on skills in using a computer, while neglecting skills on using mobile phones, which girls in crisis-affected contexts are more likely to be able to access.¹¹
- **Limited evidence on what works:** While a range of distance education approaches were taken during COVID-19 related school closures; it is too early to holistically assess how these approaches contributed to girls' continuity of learning, retention, and re-entry into school. Evidence on the impact of education technology prior to COVID-19 is at best mixed; previous reviews of education technology in school systems experiencing protracted crises found very limited high-quality evidence of impact.¹²

10 See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Sections 3.1 and 3.2

11 See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.1.1.

12 See INEE (2022) Mind the Gap 2, Section 3.3.3.

Recommendations

The following actions are suggested in order to close the gap in access to and quality of distance education for women and girls in crisis-affected contexts:

Programming

- Governments and their education partners should ensure that a range of distance education options are available during school closures, including no-tech and low-tech options. Distance education interventions should take into account gendered and intersectional barriers to distance education, including inequalities in access to technology, digital skills, and online safety.
- Governments and education partners should work with parents and caregivers to help them understand the value of girls' education and the importance of enabling them to continue to learn remotely when schools close. They should provide parents and caregivers with practical guidance on how best to support the learning of girls in their care.
- Governments and education partners should establish school- or community-based focal points responsible for maintaining contact between the education system and girls' households to ensure girls' safety, wellbeing and continued learning during school closures.
- Governments and education partners should provide support and training to teachers and educational personnel on gender-responsive pedagogy for distance education.

Policy and planning

- Governments, collaborating with partners in local education clusters and working groups, should design and adapt education sector crisis responses based on the findings of gender analyses, including ensuring equitable access to remote learning when schools close.
- Policymakers should introduce and implement policies to safeguard and protect the rights of children and youth, particularly girls, online.

Funding

- Governments, with the support of the international donor community, should support rigorous empirical studies of the effectiveness of different approaches to distance learning on girls' learning, education access, and retention.

Data collection, monitoring, and analysis

- National data systems should collect gender-disaggregated data on educational access to and engagement with different distance education modalities, including digital learning, radio programs, television programs, mobile phone-based instruction, etc.
- Collectors and collators of global monitoring data should consider how gender-disaggregated data on access to technology and digital skills can be improved.

Further resources on distance education:

- **ECW, INEE, UNGEI (2021). EiE-GenKit, Section 5.1 Accelerated and Alternative Education**. This resource package includes guidance for ensuring that distance education initiatives are gender-responsive.
- **Girls Education Challenge (2021). Keeping In Contact With Girls COVID-19 Communication and Safeguarding Guidance**. This guidance outlines ways that projects can maintain communication with girls during COVID-19 from a safeguarding perspective.
- **INEE (2020). INEE Mapping Report: Distance Education in Emergencies**. This report provides an overview of distance education initiatives in emergency and emergency-prone contexts.
- **UNICEF (2020). Reimagining Girls' Education: Solutions to Keep Girls Learning in Emergencies**. This report offers considerations and promising practices to support the continuity of girl's education in emergency settings.

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