Teach For All

Supporting Girls through COVID-19 and Beyond

Introduction

Despite gains in primary enrollment and improved access around the world, **girls face particularly harsh consequences for not completing a high-quality education**. Girls who do not finish schooling are more likely to:

- Experience violent personal relationships

- Have more children than desired

- Suffer increased child mortality and malnutrition

- Encounter reduced job prospects, and thus lower economic agency and ability to contribute.

Even before the current pandemic, secondary school enrollment for girls lagged behind in 40% of countries, and 130 million girls between ages of 6-17 were out of school. Societal factors like household obligations and child marriage contributed to absenteeism and a significant drop in girls' enrollment.

Severe Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic will make all of this worse for girls. Efforts to contain the virus have shut down schooling for 90% of kids globally, including 740 million girls (UNESCO). Based on past school closures due to health emergencies, we know that girls are likely to face many and often severe challenges as a result of school closures and lockdowns:

- Increased instances of physical violence

- Increased caregiving and household responsibilities

- Loss of access to food

- Loss of access to sanitary products and reproductive health materials (contraceptives, advice, counseling)

- Increased pregnancy rates

For families who suffer loss of income during and post-shutdowns, many girls will face a greater risk of having to take on responsibilities for earning money or otherwise reducing the family's financial burdens, including early marriages and pregnancies, as well as being sent out to work. Additionally, as families have less or no disposable income, less money will be spent on connectivity or technology, limiting girls' access to learning materials provided through these mediums. These challenges will persist even as schools reopen; girls who entered marriages or became pregnant during the shutdown may not return at all. As families' financial situations remain dire post-shutdown, girls who entered the workforce will face pressure to remain there.

A Societal Investment

Girls' education is considered one of the [very best investments](#) society can make to improve myriad social conditions and unleash the full power of girls and women. If every girl in the world finished 12 years of quality education, lifetime earnings for women could increase by $15 trillion to $30 trillion every year, according to the World Bank. When a girl receives a quality education, it also leads to broader benefits for families and communities: improved wages and income, reduced population growth, decreased disease transmission, delayed marriage, increases in girls' leadership in public life, and more. It is even listed as one of the most promising ways to [mitigate climate change](#). When women are educated, they are also more likely to educate their children, which benefits families for generations to come.

To preserve the gains made over the past several decades and put more girls on track to brighter futures, protecting girls' physical safety, health, and learning must be of utmost priority during the COVID-19 outbreak and beyond. We know that schools and educational opportunities provide essential support for girls, and efforts to serve all students during this pandemic must take a gendered approach to ensure that girls are not left behind or placed in increased danger.

What Works for Girls

How can members of the Teach For All network support girls now and in the future? First, **get acquainted with the broad strategies that we already know work for girls**. Many of these strategies will no longer be viable during school closures, creating real gaps for girls personally and academically.

What Works for Girls

Ensure Access

Make schools affordable by eliminating fees or off-setting indirect costs

Reduce the time and distance required for girls to travel to/from school

Promote girls' health to make attendance more likely (e.g., nutrition, hygiene, etc.)

Address negative or limiting community attitudes about girls' education

Ensure safety and wellbeing at school (e.g., sanitation, anti-violence, etc.)

Support Learning and Empowerment

Develop girls' leadership skills such as negotiation, self-advocacy, decision-making

Support girls with the socio-emotional skills to navigate school and life

Actively engage the community to improve learning and school quality

Ensure access to opportunities (e.g., internships, mentors, extracurriculars etc.)

Combat implicit and explicit gender bias in curriculum, instruction or environment

Keep in Mind

In order to plug these gaps for girls, there are several things to **keep in mind and prioritize**:

- Now more than ever, we need to **listen to girls**. Make every effort to hear what they are saying about their day-to-day realities under shutdown and, where possible, bring them into the planning of any interventions you implement. Developing an open line of communication now will pay off as schools prepare to reopen and girls with a direct connection to a caring educator find it easier to come back.

- With multiple generations sharing a roof under stay-at-home orders, **it's likely that many families will rely on traditional gender roles in which girls and women take on the burden of housework and caregiving. As such, it's critical to support all children to promote gender equity at home** to the extent that they can reasonably and safely do so. Also, keep in mind that globally, the majority of healthcare jobs are held by women. Girls (and boys) might be experiencing increased distress as their mothers continue to serve as essential workers, risking their health and potentially contracting the virus.

- In addition to identifying girls' needs, we need to be thoughtful about **enlisting boys, parents and others as allies**, informing them of the risks girls face if not given equitable access to resources and support during this time. This is important even for the youngest learners; children start internalizing gender roles as early as age three, and by age 8, girls are already impacted by gendered behavior at school.

- Girls do not live in isolation from their families and communities, and promoting gender-equitable beliefs requires building relationships with communities and networks over the long haul. When seeking to support girls, think broadly about who needs to be involved (and in some instances, give permission).

How can you get started today?

Many organizations, including Teach For All partner organizations, are providing local relief to families. Your job as a caring educator is to support your learners through this trying time, but **you do not need to do everything yourself**. Many of these tips involve you getting **familiar with supplemental resources you can share with families to assist them**.

Also, it's important to proactively **protect girls from unintended consequences of trying to help** them. We know from past epidemics that school closings will amplify girls' exposure to domestic violence and sexual abuse, alongside loss of access to reproductive services. However, **these are sensitive subjects at the best of times, and figuring out how to understand girls' needs (and determining strategies to help) should not place them at increased risk**. Many girls may not have private spaces at home where they can openly have these types of conversations. Girls might be sharing a phone with multiple members of the household, or may not be given access to phones or technology. If educators face obstacles connecting with girls, reaching out to their parents or older siblings may be necessary. If connecting with a girl's family member may put her at risk, it may be possible for these conversations to take place between a girl and a trusted friend or female mentor.

Getting Started

With those considerations in mind, here are a few things you can try now:

1 When reaching out to families, try to understand **what level of economic hardship they are experiencing** during this time. Families that are heavily impacted will be making tough choices about resources, so it's important to realize that efforts to support girls will be influenced by the level of hardship her family is facing. Get familiar with any local **economic relief programs** and be prepared to link families to crucial basic needs services.

2 If you are teaching virtually, keep an eye out for **gender bias creeping into lessons or discussions**. While this is much easier to do in person, we can't afford to ignore bias while schools are closed. This could include reviewing lessons in advance to ensure that they don't include gender-biased examples or rhetoric, monitoring whether girls are showing up to virtual lessons (or engaging in WhatsApp chats or whatever method you're using) at the same rates as boys, and making sure that girls are able to participate in discussions and receive equitable time to speak and contribute.

3 Make a special effort to **track down those students who are most vulnerable**. While schools are closed, figure out how you will keep in touch with girls who you suspect might be facing increased hardships now that they are confined to their homes. Understand what **child protection resources are still available** in case you become aware of violence, neglect, or other abuse. Start thinking now about how to ensure that these girls are able to return to school once they reopen.

4 Remember that **boys need to be supported to challenge gender norms, too**. They can be valuable allies to their sisters, mothers and friends during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 shutdowns. When engaging boys, talk to them about their experiences at home and how those might differ from what girls in the home are going through. Support them to behave and advocate in a way that promotes gender equity.

5 Educate yourself about resources that promote comprehensive sexuality education and be prepared to talk honestly with girls and boys about power, relationships and sexuality. **During times of confinement and economic desperation, pregnancy rates rise and girls may find themselves facing pressure to enter early marriages or unwanted relationships.** Be prepared to offer guidance to girls about how they can protect themselves, and have links to local reproductive health and abuse organizations or hotlines ready to share. In the US, UK, Canada and Ireland, you can refer girls to the Crisis Text Line for access to a counselor.

6 Many girls may lose out on **access to menstrual hygiene products** that they used to receive at school. Find out if organizations that normally provide resources at schools are doing other forms of distribution to community centers or other places girls can safely access them.

7 Without school, girls miss out on enriching and supportive after-school clubs, mentorship programs, and other activities. These pursuits provide **opportunities for self-expression, self-advocacy, and exposure to socio-emotional and life skills** that improve their ability to respond to challenges and trials. Seek ways to connect girls to each other, to older girls and young women, and to other avenues that might enable them to continue learning and growing outside of formal academics. This can also help girls understand their role in fighting the virus, both as potential transmitters and as valued community members who are empowered to share accurate information.

Where can you learn more?

- You can view resources on all of these topics and many more by visiting our dedicated Girls' Education Resource Repository. Here you will find facts and statistics, but also toolkits and guidance for leading workshops and lessons that promote gender equity.

- Teach For All is collecting resources for teachers on this site; in addition, partner staff members can access our Learning Portal page on COVID-19. All members of the network should sign up for Teach For All's Connect newsletter, which is going out weekly in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

- Keep up with the latest stories of impact and collaboration during the COVID-19 outbreak from across the Teach For All network.

- You can also find UN reports on COVID-19 and gender here, here and here. There are plenty of incredible resources circulating.

- Plan International also has a site with resources and facts on COVID-19 and gender.

- Many of you will be undertaking this work in contexts where girls may not have access to the most popular virtual methodologies being tried all over the world during the pandemic. See this resource on Teaching Without Internet for a wealth of ideas for how to reach girls without relying on the internet.

- And lastly, if you are working on the front lines to provide educational opportunities to girls, please fill out the Center for Global Development's survey on the risks for girls caused by school closures.