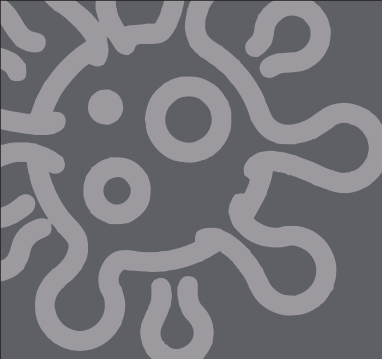


# COVID-19 IMPACT ON GIRLS' EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN





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## **About the author**

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## **About the Organization**

### **Pakistan Alliance for Girls' Education**

Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education (PAGE) is an umbrella organization working towards building an enabling environment for gender equity in education, employment, rights and leadership. PAGE acts as a platform for stakeholders, donors, policymakers and practitioners to come together and address the gender gap in education in Pakistan and devise solutions to overcome the broader socio-economic challenges faced by girls.

## Fajer Rabia Pasha

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As of March 23, more than 124 countries have suspended school activities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The partial and full lockdowns have been imposed across the world to contain the spread of deadly virus. This unprecedented situation has caused enormous human distress, huge economic loss, and tragically so interrupted the learning of almost 1 billion young boys and girls globally. Families across the globe are experiencing a life without school. For many students it will be a momentary break from which they will transpire again, perhaps with better admiration for the teaching profession and a strengthened love of learning at non formal schools. But for some, especially girls, this pandemic may jeopardies their bright futures forever if governments do not timely plan and implement gender-sensitive responses to the current and future education challenges their countries face.

The COVID-19 "chaos" for education is a distinctive one. Since we have an incomplete evidence about the prospective path of the pandemic, we cannot quite quantify the full impact on the education. Governments, educators, communities, and parents will all have to make choices in a context of "profound uncertainty." To support decision-making during the pandemic, Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education has put together a position paper that policy makers may benefit from.

Being the first position paper released on still evolving COVID-19 pandemic, this document will fall short of offering a comprehensive overview of the loss of learning and its associated burdens on the economy and society. However, this document will serve as catalyst for more debates to happen both in public and development sectors.

PAGE is thankful to all the individuals and the institutions that have been supporting its work all along. We would like to offer our special gratitude to the Hon. Shafqat Mehmood, Minister for Federal Education, Ms. Wajiha Akram, the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, and Dr. Tariq H. Cheema, the Founding Chair of PAGE.

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# PREAMBLE

Pandemics, climate change induced disasters, armed conflicts, forced displacement, and prolonged catastrophes have always disrupted the education of million of children and youth around the world and this number is mounting in an unprecedented way with the spread of COVID-19. Almost 90% of schools around the globe are closed in efforts to slow the transmission of COVID-19. Alongside school closures, governments has also imposed social distancing procedures and restricted the movement of people, goods and services that is leading to impeded economies through a lockdown.

Education has been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic with 1.53 billion students out of school and 184 countrywide school closures, impacting 87.6% of the world's total enrolled learners according to UNESCO. Drop-out rates across the globe are expected to increase as a result of this immense interruption to education access. Without access to education, as other shocks are experienced including loss of life, health impacts and loss of livelihoods; girls are more exposed and unprotected. As household finances are being stressed and needs increase, out-of-school girls are more likely to be exposed to risks like family violence, child labor, forced marriage, trafficking and exploitation. For the most of the girls globally, education is lifesaving as not only does it provide safety and protection, it also instills hope for a brighter future.

COVID-19 is a pandemic that proves how countries are interrelated; there is no longer such a thing as isolated matters, subjects and events. Effective countries in the coming decades need to understand this interrelatedness and navigate across borders to leverage their differences and work in a globally collaborative manner. The educational magnitudes of COVID-19 will last beyond the period of school closures, excessively affecting marginalized girls. This position paper uses insights from earlier health and financial shocks to comprehend how the current global pandemic could affect girls' education outcomes for years to come. It details how governments and international institutions can lessen the instant and longer-term effects of the pandemic on girls. The position paper

also reflects the 2014-15 Ebola epidemic and the 2008 global financial crisis, which both have some parallels to the impact of COVID-19. It is observed that girls are more at risk than boys of dropping out of school generally following school closures and that women and girls are more exposed to the effects of the recent pandemic. Longer-term, developing countries may try to provide adequate financing for education, especially to support schools, teachers and students to fight recurrence of the virus and stay safe from indirect effects of further outbreaks.

For millions of girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries, missing out on school is not new. In poorer communities, absences of schools and teachers, the abnormal costs of education and detrimental gender norms keep 129 million girls from education. Though near-global school closures are unique, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, schools in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia were shut for six to eight months. This experience provides us with important understandings into the short- and long-term consequences of school closures, especially on girls.

What can be done to attenuate these negative impacts and how can schools retain the girls' back is the question. How schools need reserves and supplies to rebuild the loss in learning, once they open again? How these resources are used, and how to target the girls who were especially hard hit? Has the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in educational institutions across the world being compelled to suddenly harness and utilize the suite of available technological tools to create content for remote learning for students in all sectors or did it halt in the lockdown for the non-formal school settings? How are the educators across the world are experiencing new possibilities to do things differently and with greater flexibility resulting in potential benefits in accessibility to education for students across the world? This position paper provides insight to these key issues and also puts forward few recommendations and analysis for non-formal school settings, policy makers, educationists and Government as well.

## Introduction:

As COVID-19 compelled school closure in almost 185 countries, that's roughly 9 out of 10 school going children worldwide, there is a colossal prospective for increased drop-out rates which will disproportionately affect adolescent girls, additionally entrench gender gaps in education and lead to augmented menace of sexual exploitation, early pregnancy and early and forced marriage. For many girls who have survived or are surviving through a crisis, education is a lifeline, offering a protective shield from violence and exploitation and providing them with skills and hope for a brighter future.

## Current Statistics of Girls' Education in Pakistan:

Out of the aggregate population of students enrolled in education worldwide, it is estimated that above 89% are currently out of school because of COVID-19 closures. This signifies 1.54 billion children and youth enrolled in school or university, including approximately 743 million girls. Over 111 million of these girls are living in the world's least industrialized or urbanized countries where attaining an education is already a struggle. These are situations of severe poverty, economic vulnerability and crisis where gender discrepancies in education are at peak. For girls living in rural areas or who are internally displaced, school closures is most devastating, as they have already met an impediment.

We are only setting a foundation to understand the economic impacts of COVID-19 globally and in context of developing countries as of Pakistan, but the collisions are expected to be prevalent, rampant and devastating, particularly for girls studying in non-formal schools. Here, in Pakistan, where very inadequate social protection measures are established, economic adversities caused by such crisis will have spillover effects as families consider the financial and opportunity costs of educating their daughters extremely extortionate. While many girls will resume their education once the school gates reopen, others will never return to school.

## Technology and Rural Areas:

For all of Pakistan's economic advancements in recent decades, the essentials of connected life; capable smartphones, reliable Internet connections, remain out of reach for large segments of the population. As the virus has revolved online expediencies into daily necessities, these people, most of whom live in rural vicinities, have been cut-off from their regular lives, specifically when it comes to education. Here many parents cannot afford to buy one or multiple devices for themselves and their

children, even though there is a variety of cheapest smartphones available in the market, the need at the time of crisis for such families is bread and not technology. The nation is blanketed in 4G services, yet the signals are distorted in parts of the rural areas whereas home broadband is also expensive and inaccessible outside the metro cities.

## Past analysis of such Pandemics:

While the enormity of the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented, we can look to the lessons learnt from the Ebola epidemic in Africa. At the peak of the epidemic, 5 million children were affected by school closures across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, countries hardest hit by the outbreak and poverty levels rose drastically as education was interrupted. Such quarantines and school closures often have longer-term consequences, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. They magnify already-existing disparities even more within the education system especially for girls from the rural and adjoining areas of such countries or cities. In addition to the squandered opportunities for learning, many children lose access to wholesome meals, and are exposed to economic and social stress.

## Global Movements to Combat COVID-19 in Educational Context:

Equity in access to ICT-based education is a key concern, as learners from under-privileged backgrounds tend to have less access to computers and other devices within and outside the schools. In certain cases, they live in areas with no electricity and poor or no Internet connectivity. Several actions should be taken to address this challenge. For instance, China is providing computers to students from low-income families and offering mobile data packages and telecommunication subsidies for students. To ease the disruption, the United Arab Emirates created a hotline for teachers and students to seek technical support if they face any difficulties. In United States, the schools are not encouraged to provide online learning services unless continued access is ensured. In Portugal, to tackle the fact that not all students may have access to Internet at home, the government suggested a partnership with the post office services to deliver working sheets to be sent at home. Here in Pakistan, the education ministry launched a TV Channel Teleschool on 13th April, 2020 - as a substitute to educational content provision mechanism due to closure of educational institutions in the wake of coronavirus.

## National Commission For Human Development NCHD:

National Commission for Human Development NCHD has successfully designed its education programs and directed many projects of the non-formal education that can be materialized to achieve educational targets of the Vision 2025. Currently, the formal education system is adding only one percent per annum in literacy rate and through this pace and with 2.6% population growth rate we will be able to achieve only 68% literacy rate till 2025. There are 5,567 feeder schools of NCHD across the country where 272,289 children are acquiring education whereas there are 6,000 adult literacy centers where 150,000 women are attaining literacy as well as vocational skills. Moreover, they are also supporting their families financially and have started to enroll their children in schools. Amid this COVID-19 there is no good way to engage all these aforementioned communities in the schools due to lack of adaptability, availability of technology and relevant skills, helping aids and materials and most of all accessibility of cell phones and other tech-devices.

## COVID -19, Girls Education and Economy:

The Ministry of Planning has estimated that 12.3 million to 18.5 million people in the country will lose their jobs and the economy will sustain Rs2 trillion to Rs2.5 trillion losses in just three months due to "moderate to severe shocks from the coronavirus outbreak". The government has assessed the losses on the basis of the impact of the restrictions - imposed to stop the COVID-19 from spreading - on business, tax revenue, international trade, education and cost of unemployment which in result is going to have its consequences. The shock to non-formal education for girls and its impact on economy is based on limited, moderate and complete lockdown. The country has already passed the limited and moderate level and is at the complete lockdown phase in terms of restrictions on movement and has inched towards a massive hitch for economy. The restriction of movement and suspension of economic activities are particularly stringent for the whole quarantined population, resulting in even greater negative social and economic impacts on girls from rural areas and their education. After their quarantine will end, many will continue to experience difficulties in coming back to the school while some will be refused to rejoin the schools, organizations will be refused to approach or reach them, and some will break contact altogether which will in return effect economy exceedingly depraved. It is also observed that the termination of schools increased girls' defenselessness to physical and sexual abuse both by their peers and by older men, as girls were often are at



home alone and unsupervised. Early marriages are also feared as these exposed girls and their families struggle to cover basic needs. As family breadwinners suffer from COVID-19 and livelihoods are almost destroyed for the underprivileged, many families will choose to marry their daughters off, deceptively anticipating, that this would offer them protection.

## How Governments can act Proactively in cases as of COVID-19?

The Covid-19 pandemic is creating an education emergency that will have devastating impacts. Decent governance, controlled and predominantly gender-responsive budgeting situated within broader macroeconomic framework that favors gender equality and education equity is paramount in accomplishing gender equality in education. Strong government plans, supported by resources, must be the foundation of efforts to achieve gaps in education when faced with a crisis. The constitution after 18th amendment provides rights to Provincial Governments to act solely and therefore conduct a gender audit of national education strategies after or even before any crisis. This must be balanced by gender-responsive budgeting to guarantee that policies and plans to promote and nurture girls' right to education are completely funded. Countries with strong and reputable education systems are often well equipped when a crisis like this hits and are able to rebound more clearly. Girls and the poorest children should be the focus of a major package to help organizations and schools dealing with the effects of COVID-19 among the non-formal education arrangements particularly. An aid should be kept for children and girls who are already impacted by armed conflicts, forced displacement, natural disasters and protracted crises. An additional series of grants should also be planned and learned beforehand to support any such crisis.

## Education and Peace-building:

A tangible and sustainable peace building post-pandemic crisis to combat issues in Education is formulized by PAGE which can be followed by the authorities to adapt a sustainable plan:



### **Accessibility and Redistribution:**

- Fixing the inequalities
- Fixing the inequalities primarily in education inputs, resources, and outcomes
- Redeployment in macro-education reforms or policies

### **Availability and Recognition:**

- Valuing the differences
- Policies on language of instruction such as Sindhi, Pushto and Seraiki for girls of far fledged areas
- Identification of cultural assortments and multiplicity
- Social responsibility and civic education as means of state building

### **Acceptability and Representation:**

- Reassuring participation
- Participation in (local, national, global) education policy, reforms and development
- School-based management and decision-making (teachers, parents, students)
- Support for fundamental freedoms in the education system (formal and non-formal framework)

### **Adaptability and Reconciliation:**

- Dealing with prejudices and the legacies of conflict
- Addressing historical and contemporary injustices linked to conflict
- Amalgamation and separation in education systems
- Teaching about the past and its relevance to the present and future
- Upright faith in schools and education system, and parallel faith between groups

### **All government plans should address the following:**

- Governments should be accessible and transparent in their budgeting and planning processes and especially engage women's groups as part of their commitment to broad-based civil society participation in education sector planning and budget misunderstanding.
- Governments must also chart and endorse laws to ban discriminatory practices in school administration, such as prohibiting on grounds of pregnancy or child marriage.
- The State Bank and Ministries should ensure that

macroeconomic modeling, advice and policy making are gender sensitive and reason for the uneven burden on women of public sector spending constraints.

- All education donors should make robust 3-year pledges to the education replacement, while scaling up their bilateral support in alignment with approved gender targets in primary school, including the progressive elimination of all cost-barriers to education. Bilateral support needs to be foreseeable and should be targeted towards regions where girls are disadvantaged relative to boys.
- Reformation of the goal of gender uniformity in enrollments has concealed the need for balanced attention to, and speculation in, policies that will ensure that girls can stay in school and procure the learning they need to empower them throughout life.
- Evaluate austerity measures for gendered consequences: Given the very diverse impact of the economic crisis on men and women, all stimulus packages and austerity measures need to study how they may be conserving or enabling gender inequalities, for example by representation on gender analysis and gender budgeting tools.
- A Social protection mechanism should be in place:
  - ✦ **Health and nutrition:** The health and nutritional needs of women and girls need to be protected at all times and accelerated during times of crisis, for example through policy measures such as food grants, health insurance and cash transfers.
  - ✦ **Care:** The proliferation in unpaid care for women and girls that often transpires in times of economic crisis needs to be mitigated against, through the provision of social care funds such as child-care services and support for elderly people and people with disabilities.
  - ✦ **Education:** Build a mechanism to guarantee girls' enrolment in school despite any economic strain on families and a potential increase in the burden of care for women when needed. Conditional cash transfers have been effective in many countries but need to be combined with measures to reduce the higher burden of care put on women and girls during crises. Imdaad program by Government of Pakistan is in place for this during this COVID-19 crisis.
- Evaluate the impact of the economic crisis on women and girls: Pakistan should assess and map the immediate and long-term impact of the economic crisis on women and girls, in particular



whether and how it deteriorates existing gender inequalities, and related consequences, such as increased risk of gender-based violence, HIV and declining maternal and child health.

- Monetary incentive packages for women's employment: Financial incentive packages have been a key tactic of governments seeking to address the impacts of the global economic crisis. Given the significance of investing in women and gender equality as a long-term strategy for protection from financial shocks and overall economic steadiness, women's employment needs to be a more substantial focus of these stimulus packages.
- Advance and expand school-based Early Cautionary Systems and tie them to evidence-based involvements for at-risk students. Research has facilitated us to categorize clear indicators and benchmarks that articulate when a student is at risk of dropping out. These students can be directly linked to the assistance they need to get back on track by assigning them a school-connected mentor who would produce/design a concentrated educational plan.
- Emergency Radio Education Program: An emergency radio education program should be set up for far fledged areas and the education program should continue for 5 days a week and 30 minutes each, it would help maintain link to education during crisis. Same education radio channel whilst providing core education should address civic education matters that highlight the shortcomings of early marriages and highlight benefits of educating the girls.
- The government should plan shortened academic years after the crisis and provide an accelerated syllabus specifically focusing on core subjects.
- Psychosocial trainings for teachers should be conducted every year, a task force of volunteers or an agency can be formed to address and help people in time of such crisis.

These recommendations highlight the challenge that exists for policy-makers in mitigating the impacts of the global economic crisis on women and girls, and the need for urgent attention and investment. Furthermore this shows a substantial opportunity to address global gender inequalities, which has exposed itself with the present economic environment. The real challenge is embracing this opportunity rather than using austerity as an apology for procrastination.

**"I have 41 students in my STAR School (A NFP; ALP) class and only 11 have a cellphone," said Shafiqa, a STAR School Sarae Kharbooza teacher. "We have numerous students who are very underprivileged and don't have access to a computer, smartphone and especially the internet, so ICT based learning is merely a dream for these students"**

### **Recommendations by Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education (PAGE):**

Pakistan Alliance For Girls Education has successful enrolment of 4,960 students in 124 STAR Schools all over Pakistan with an enrolment of 59% girls. PAGE believes that school closures are problematic for several reasons especially for girls as they will negatively impact learning achievement; decrease economic productivity, as parents struggle to balance their livelihoods; and compound inequality, the disadvantaged underprivileged families tend to have lower levels of education, and fewer resources to fill learning gaps therefore the girls who were brought to school after a struggle will go back to work again, forced into early marriages and later consequences.

The coronavirus pandemic is revealing new stratum of inequality that may end up setting us back even more. Education leaders are confronting and tackling the unanticipated challenge of offering distance learning as the primary mode of instruction for weeks, months, and possibly the remainder of the school year. How can school systems that struggle to provide equitable results in a standard brick and mortar setting overcome the added challenges inherent in distance learning? Equity is a lot harder than access. Accomplishing equity in distance learning needs leaders to emphasis on student populations who often already have reduced opportunities for academic success in our traditional in-person education model. It is appreciated that Pakistan wants to pivot really fast to technology, but it needs to be recognized that there are lots and lots of girls in this country who are not connected at home, and that is 'a challenge'. There are already 22.6 million out-of-school children in Pakistan - a number larger than the entire population of Karachi.

The education system remains under-prioritized and perforated with inequalities across the economic, political and cultural domains. Issues of redistribution remain paramount and while recognition have not been adequately addressed. Girls, youth, urban-rural divides, and ethnic demotion negotiate the system

and require concerted effort to overcome. Similarly, these issues extend into the domains of recognition and representation, with the most marginalized communities feeling subject to misrecognition and discrimination and having little faith and say in the decisions that affect them, from school management to national government.

This failure to priorities addressing the multiple dimensions of inequality in the education system in Pakistan is a result of the over-emphasis on the part of the national and international peace building community on security, democratic elections, and economic reforms at the expense of prioritizing the basic needs of the citizens of Pakistan to access quality basic health and education services formal and non-formal both. When the COVID -19 outbreak emerged, the health system was woefully inadequate to address the challenges that the disease brought. Similarly, the education system, which could have acted as a national preventative factor in combatting the outbreak, became instead a risk factor, with poor hygiene and sanitation and lack of preparedness evident in the delayed response by the sector to the challenges. Linked to the earlier points, the COVID-19 crisis revealed a lack of governance mechanisms in place in both the health and education systems to deal adequately with the crisis, which reflects broader systemic governance issues.

As the Government of Pakistan prepare for indefinite school closures, policy makers and practitioners can look to lessons from past crisis to address the specific challenges faced by girls. We therefore call on governments to protect progress made in favor of girls' education through these gender-responsive, evidence-based and context-specific actions:

**Public-private educational partnerships:** In the past few weeks, we have seen learning syndicates and alliances taking form, with diverse stakeholders including governments, publishers, education professionals, technology providers, and telecom network operators who are coming conjointly to develop digital platforms as a transitory short-term solution to the crisis. In Pakistan where education has primarily been provided by the government, this could become a predominant and consequential trend to future education.

**Leverage teachers and communities:** Work meticulously with teachers, school staff and communities to ensure comprehensive methods of distance learning are adopted and communicated to call for continued investments in girls' learning. Community sensitization on the importance of girls' education should continue as part of any distance-learning program.

**The Wider Digital-Divide:** Most schools in affected

areas are finding alternative solutions to continue teaching, but the quality of learning is heavily dependent on the level and quality of digital access. After all, only around 60% of Pakistan's population is online. While virtual classes on personal tablets may be the norm in Islamabad but not in a far flung area of Punjab. The less wealthy and digitally savvy individual families are, the more their girls' are left behind. When classes transition online, these girls' lose out because of the cost of digital devices and their inaccessibility to them. Unless access of technology devices to the underprivileged communities is given and quality of access increase in all parts of Pakistan, the gap in education quality, and thus socioeconomic equality will be further exacerbated. The digital divide can be acute if educational access is ordered by access and availability to the latest technologies hence mostly unavailable to those in the impoverished circumstances.

**Adopt appropriate distance learning practices:** In situations where digital solutions are less accessible, consider low-tech and gender-responsive methodologies. A plan on sending reading and writing materials home and use radio and television broadcasts to reach the most marginalized communities shall be viable. The Government should ensure program scheduling and learning structures are flexible and allow self-paced learning so as not to deter girls who often disproportionately shoulder the burden of care.

**Ensure Girls' return to school:** Provide flexible learning approaches so that girls are not deterred from returning to school when they re-open. Allow impulsive promotion and appropriate opportunities in admissions processes that recognize the particular challenges encountered by girls. Catch-up courses and accelerated learning may be essential for girls who return to school. In contexts where digital solutions to distance learning and internet is accessible, ensure that girls are trained with the necessary digital proficiencies, including the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe online.

**The role of the National Volunteers:** The role of national volunteers from the evidence believes to be a highly practical initiative, which had and has numerous prospective added values for the education system and for the broader peace building process. Drawing upon youth as a resource for the future, rather than a security risk - as is so often the case in many post-conflict societies, the National and Junior Volunteers seemed to have played a really significant role in raising awareness about the disease, providing community guidance and building trust between communities and the state.

Building on these finding, some steps should be put in place:



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- It wasn't merely the health system that divulged limitations and drawbacks. Profuse combines efforts still need to be done in the education sector. In particular, Pakistan needs to take a tougher ownership of the education of its population.
- The pandemic disclosed the need and advantages of a rapid information flow towards the communities. Decentralizing and giving authority to local administrations can have a positive impact, a better impact than deciding all centrally. This, however, requires a stronger, unbroken line of communication between all levels. Within the education system, the information needs to properly flow between students, parents and teachers to and through the School Principals, the District Education Officers, the County Education Officers and the Ministry of Education Headquarters, both top-down and bottom-up. The strengthening of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning mechanisms are required.
- The channels of informal education, such as the radio and youth volunteering, should be perpetual and strengthened. In particular, the volunteering program, as an informal education strategy for peace building and citizenship, needs to be established, supported and reinforced.
- Maintain the benefits and pros of the volunteering programs such as of PAGE and streamlining integration of those teaching volunteers of proven quality and institutionalizing those programs within PAGE Youth Volunteer Service and other organizations working for Girls' education in Pakistan, as an effective tool of informal civic youth education.

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