

Girls' education and the burden of Covid-19

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Girls' education in Pakistan had made slow but significant strides in the past few decades. We had started to hear about increasing enrolments and improved learning outcomes, at least amongst those girls who were fortunate enough to have made it to schools and to continue on to key transition points. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted education for billions of children. According to UNESCO estimates, at the peak of the pandemic since April 2020, schooling was disrupted for over 1.5 billion learners in more than 190 countries across the globe¹. Already disadvantaged groups – such as adolescent girls, children from poorer backgrounds and those with some form of disability – experienced the greatest risks and impacts of the disruptions to their education and their longer term economic, life and social outcomes². Those who face multiple disadvantages are likely to suffer even more significant impacts. According to research, an estimated 20 million girls in low-and lower-middle-income countries may never return to the classroom as a direct consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic³. These are staggering figures and the devastating consequences of these disruptions and resulting dropouts of girls will be felt for years to come.

The global community had made significant efforts to provide girls with quality education and learning opportunities with mixed success before the pandemic hit. The commitment of national governments, including the Government of Pakistan, alongside the push provided by international donors had created an impetus to improve educational outcomes for girls, particularly those in the most vulnerable communities. However, the Covid-19 pandemic, hit most countries hard and by its very unprecedented nature caught most governments by complete surprise. Pakistan was amongst the first countries in the world to initiate widespread school closures when Covid-19 emerged – schools in Sindh province started closing from February 2020 and in the rest of the country from mid-March 2020. Since then, there have been staggered school openings and closures as the country has faced three waves of Covid-19 (with the country facing the fourth wave at the time of writing this piece in August 2021). One of the first, robust, studies by the World Bank (Geven and Hasan, October 2020⁴) to estimate learning losses in Pakistan has found the following:

- **Income losses as a result of the pandemic had the potential to lead to substantial school dropouts in Pakistan:** it was estimated that an additional 930,000 children could drop out of primary and secondary school. Given that before the pandemic 22 million children were already out of school, this 4.2 per cent increase placed Pakistan

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/news/girls-education-and-covid-19-new-factsheet-shows-increased-inequalities-education-adolescent>

² <https://plan-international.org/emergencies/covid-19-faqs-girls-women>

³ <https://covid.malala.org/>

⁴ Geven, K. & Hasan, A. (October 2020), Learning Losses in Pakistan Due to Covid-19 School Closures: A Technical Note on Simulation Results, The World Bank.

firmly in the country the World Bank expects to suffer the highest school dropouts due to the pandemic.

- **Even the more optimistic estimates suggest that every child enrolled in school would experience learning loss in the country:** with the Bank estimating that the school closures in the country would result in between 0.3-0.8 years of learning-adjusted schooling losses for an average student in the country. With children spending around 9.1 years in school on average in the country but accumulating only 5.1 years of learning, these estimates suggest that learning could fall to between 4.8 and 4.3 years of schooling by the time schools fully reopen.
- **Learning poverty (share of children who do not learn to read and understand a simple text by age 10) is expected to go up substantially in the country.** Previous estimates had suggested that the level of ‘learning poor’ was already 75% and this was simulated to increase to 79% according to the World Bank.

Whilst these estimates do not disaggregate the findings by gender, given what we know about Pakistan, it would not be wide off the mark to assume that the burden of the pandemic in the form of higher dropouts due to income losses, the learning losses experienced as a result of school closures and increases in learning poverty are likely to be borne more by girls. Girls and women globally have borne the burden of the pandemic more heavily – either in the form of increased domestic and caring duties or through the impact of financial losses. This is also likely to be the case in Pakistan. Additionally, whilst the Pakistan government initiated an impressive response to the pandemic aimed at supporting remote learning (e.g. the *Teleschool* initiative by the Federal Government and ‘*Taleem Ghar*’ by the Government of Punjab), remote learning has not been universally accessible to millions of children, including girls, especially in more remote and disadvantaged regions. When tech-based solutions rely on access to electricity or mobile phones for example, their reach becomes even more limited.

This very timely data collection exercise and report by ITA has reiterated many of the fears that the education community has had for girls’ education in Pakistan. The report notes that ‘when the girls’ learning outcomes are seen at a general level (i.e., combining enrolled with never enrolled and drop-outs), we see the learning levels of girls much less than boys in 2021.’ The report finds that girls’ learning outcomes prior to the pandemic had been somewhat better than those of boys’ (or at least similar in some instances), however after the pandemic, the decline in learning outcomes for girls appears to be more than that for boys – **girls’ learning seems to have suffered more than boys as a result of Covid-19**. And this is the case across most competencies – mathematics, Urdu literacy and English. For Urdu reading outcomes, for example, the report suggests that girls in 2021 appear to have experienced learning losses in two-ways: firstly their learning outcomes compared to 2019 have dropped, and secondly, their performance compared to boys is lower in 2021. Almost 28% of the girls compared to 25% boys (of class 1) could read words in Urdu in 2019. However, in 2021, the picture has reversed with losses for both genders, but more severe for girls since now only 16% girls of class 1 can read words compared to 19% boys.

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Even before the Covid-19 pandemic there was a long road to travel before the global community could claim reaching gender equality through education⁵. UNESCO identified 10 countries across the globe – Pakistan was one of them – where the poorest girls spent less than 2 years in school on average⁶. Given the identification of significant impacts to girls by this report by ITA, there is a need for the global education community to refocus and intensify efforts on girls' education; to identify ways in which parents and teachers and the school system as a whole can be equipped to meet the needs of all learners as well as the most vulnerable girls. In a context of intermittent school closures, efforts need to be made to ensure all vulnerable communities, including girls, are given access to quality distance learning opportunities. Simultaneously, efforts need to be ongoing to ensure schools are supported to prevent and control the spread of disease. Government's own education and crises response plans need to be gender responsive and reflect the realities of girls and those of disadvantaged communities. Targeted instruction and structured pedagogy reforms may also be able to mitigate learning losses to above pre-Covid learning levels (according to research in Africa, see Angrist et al. 2021)⁷. The failure to prioritise girls' education during the world's response to the pandemic risks exacerbating pre-existing disadvantages and will result in a substantial economic and social loss for girls and the economies they live in for years to come.

⁵ <https://en.unesco.org/news/girls-education-and-covid-19-new-factsheet-shows-increased-inequalities-education-adolescent>

⁶ Ibid – over 80% of the poorest girls in Pakistan had spent less than 2 years in school.

⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S073805932100050X>