Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal 4 – “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” – was already in jeopardy before the COVID-19 pandemic. The world was facing a learning crisis, with 48 per cent of children unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10. For the most marginalized children, the learning crisis was even more severe. In low-income countries, 94 per cent of girls (and 93 per cent of boys) were not able to read by the age of 10, compared with 7 per cent of girls (and 8 per cent of boys) in high-income countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing disparities to the detriment of the girls and boys who were already being left behind.

This digest summarizes evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on marginalized girls’ learning, drawing from UNICEF Innocenti’s Children and COVID-19 Research Library launched in 2020. Thirteen research papers are spotlighted in this digest. What we have learned from these studies is summarized here.
Marginalized girls have been disproportionately affected during previous health emergencies, and COVID-19 is no exception. Girls from the poorest households were often unable to access remote learning through online platforms, TV or radio, or purchase materials for learning at home. Gender-based social and cultural norms have exacerbated the digital gender divide, and these include many parents’ reluctance to let girls access the internet. During school closures, girls often assumed more household responsibilities than boys (e.g., caring for younger siblings, domestic chores), which reduced their time to study. Emerging evidence suggests that girls suffered greater learning losses than boys.

School closures also increased the risk of violence and discrimination for girls. Out-of-school girls faced a higher risk of early marriage, sexual and gender-based violence, early pregnancy and child labour. This, in turn, increased the likelihood of girls not returning to school when they reopened.

Despite the challenges that marginalized girls face, remedial measures and long-term solutions exist. With political will, they can be implemented. UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank recommend governments and their partners take RAPID actions for education recovery:

- reach and retain every child in school, in particular marginalized girls;
- assess learning levels;
- prioritize the foundational skills;
- increase catch-up learning and progress beyond what was lost; and
- develop psychosocial health and well-being, so every child is ready to learn.

During school closures, addressing challenges related to gender and intersectional inequalities is critical. This includes closing the gender digital divide, targeted financial aid, improved access to infrastructure, subsidized devices and tailored learning materials delivered to households without electricity or connectivity. And teachers should be supported to engage and monitor students’ learning, especially marginalized girls, during school closures. Community-based approaches to providing remote learning, child protection and health services (including age-appropriate sexuality education, and sexual and reproductive health and rights information) can also be leveraged.

As schools reopen, targeting financial support and removing barriers, such as bans on re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers, remain critical in supporting marginalized girls’ return to school. Restoring school meals and upgrading water, sanitation and hygiene services are also incentives that can have a positive impact. In addition, mechanisms must be put in place to monitor girls’ re-entry and enrolment.

It is also essential to more systematically assess the learning losses and to design and implement flexible remedial learning programmes. When well contextualized – including for the most challenging situations – accelerated learning and catch-up courses can be effective in addressing disruptions to learning for the most marginalized children, particularly girls.

Psychosocial support is also vital, especially for girls who experienced gender-based violence and pregnancy during the pandemic. Governments should provide adequate training and support for teachers, who play a critical role in delivering psychosocial support to children.

In addition, building back more equitable and efficient education systems is imperative. As UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell said: “It is not enough to reopen schools. We need to make sure that every child is back in the classroom and learning.” Promising ways forward include identifying and scaling up the best school practices and encouraging more inclusive gender equality at all levels of the education system, including in school leadership.

We hope that you enjoy the digest and look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can make it even better in future.

About the authors
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Part 2. Research highlights

Introduction
Each quarter, this digest highlights newly curated research papers selected based on criteria such as relevance to children's rights; diverse research methodologies; and insights from low- and middle-income countries. This selection is not exhaustive, and we welcome suggestions from our readers on other papers for inclusion.

Publication 01
Leveraging Data and Partnerships: Strengthening girls’ education in emergencies with WROs
Equal Measures 2030, January 2022

As frontline responders, women's rights organizations (WROs) have unique access to the lived realities of girls seeking an education in crisis and conflict-affected areas.

This report highlights the critical contributions of grassroots WROs to the education in emergencies (EiE) landscapes in Burkina Faso and Kenya, where girls are at risk of disruptions to their education as a result of the pandemic and pre-existing conflict-related threats. Findings indicate that greater engagement of WROs in decision-making, advocacy and research around girls’ education can enable the delivery of more responsive, grounded and effective solutions.

Publication 02
When Schools Shut: Gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures
UNESCO, 2021

Research in local communities in Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali and Pakistan demonstrates that gender norms can affect the ability to participate in and benefit from remote learning. Despite governments’ and partners’ swift responses to school closures, remote learning strategies in most countries failed to account for gender-based considerations and barriers that children face at home. As a consequence, widespread limitations of access to tech-based remote learning, and increased household responsibilities and demands for labour have reduced girls’ ability to study. School closures have also severely impacted children's mental health, resulting in anxiety, isolation and fears of increased violence – particularly among the most marginalized and those in contexts of crisis.

The study calls for the education community to tackle disengagement in education and low return-to-school rates in vulnerable communities – for example, through targeted financial support to families, the deployment of no-tech and low-tech remote learning solutions, and equipping schools to provide psychosocial support.

Publication 03
An Evaluation of Adolescent Girls and Young Women’s Continued Access to Education During COVID-19 in the Middle East, East and Southern Africa – March 2020-March 2021
Plan International, November 2021

This participative study provides insight into the perspectives of girls, education actors and experts around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in Egypt, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Barriers outlined in the evaluation include harmful gender norms, an increase in unwanted pregnancies and gender-based violence, limited access to technology and high illiteracy levels among most parents and caregivers of learners.

Results indicate that community-based learning interventions outside the traditional school environment are key enablers for reaching out to learners at the household level. Earmarking financing for the most vulnerable groups, integrating key supporting interventions within the education sector (such as water, hygiene and sanitation, sexual and reproductive health services, and safety and protection support) and creating safe spaces for young girls as part of their access to learning are also critical.

Publication 04
Advancing Girls’ Education in Light of COVID-19 in East Africa: A synthesis report
Population Council, November 2021

Based on qualitative research in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, this report examines how girls’ education is confronting novel problems as a consequence of the pandemic. These challenges include: mental health issues faced by girls and teachers; cyber-harassment
of girls in the context of increased internet exposure; girls and teachers not returning to school as a result of school shutdowns; migration during prolonged school closures; and distraction by income-generating activities that were initiated to cope with economic constraints during COVID-19. Pandemic conditions have also exacerbated pre-existing issues related to girls’ education, such as economic distress, reproductive health issues (gender-based violence, transactional sex, early pregnancy, early marriage) and the digital divide.

Short-term and longer-term solutions are proposed for supporting girls’ education, including: attend to girls’ health and psychosocial support needs, while keeping them engaged in learning during school closures; bolster parental engagement in girls’ learning; accelerate the digitalization of education, while simultaneously narrowing the acknowledged digital divide; and foster collaborations between government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to enable a positive transformation of girls’ education modalities in the post-pandemic era.

Publication 05

Gender-Responsive Education in Emergency in Nigeria: Safeguarding girls’ presents and futures
Edem Dorothy Ossai, Brookings Institution, November 2021

This study assesses the Schoolonair programme, an intervention deployed in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic, and identifies gender-related barriers to its implementation.

Many girls who participated in the study were found to lack significant control over their time, had limited access to technology, encountered inhibitive instructional modes, and received educational content that reinforced gender biases. The absence of direct parental or community engagement beyond radio and television further deterred the meaningful participation of girls in the programme, especially in remote and rural areas.

The policy brief highlights the need to incorporate a gender-responsive perspective in the planning and implementation of models for EiE, in order to ensure programme uptake. Engaging communities and grassroots networks is also critical to promoting parental support and ensuring that the most vulnerable girls have access to EiE interventions, particularly in remote and marginalized areas.

Publication 06

Save the Children, October 2021

This report shows that COVID-19 containment measures, and the resulting economic instability, have increased girls’ exposure to violence, reduced access to essential services and information, and directly impacted girls’ ability to realize their rights.

COVID-19 further restricted girls’ already limited access to decision-making spaces, while responses to the pandemic failed to address multiple forms of gender inequality and discrimination. All these factors created, in turn, barriers for girls to returning to school and catching up on lost learning.

The report provides targeted recommendations to national governments, UN actors, humanitarian actors, donors and civil society. Chiefly, the rights of girls need to be put at the centre of any COVID-19 response, recognizing child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health as essential services in ongoing humanitarian and development planning.

Humanitarian response plans should also ensure that the specific needs of adolescent girls are informed by intersectional gender and power analysis, safe and ethical collection, and analysis of sex, age and diversity disaggregated data.

Publication 07

Shujaaz Inc and UNICEF, August 2021

This youth-led, data-driven research provides a snapshot of the challenges faced by adolescents in Kenya around education, sexual and reproductive health, financial security, mental well-being and resilience during the pandemic. The report is based on a national youth survey, which draws on face-to-face interviews with 2,015 young people.

Findings show that, while education remains a top priority, girls are concerned about the impact of school disruptions on their studies. A total of 75 per cent of girls reported being unable to continue their schoolwork due to the pandemic. The evidence shows a digital divide, with only 40 per cent of girls reporting using the internet compared with 60 per cent of boys. The digital divide widens in rural areas, where girls’ access to the internet lowers to 28 per cent.
Publication 08
UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD, June 2021

Based on survey data from 142 countries, this report reviews how governments are mitigating learning losses, addressing the challenge of reopening schools and deploying distance learning strategies. While most countries implemented remote learning initiatives, over a third of low- and lower-middle-income countries reported that these reached less than half of primary school students. In particular, adolescent girls were reportedly at high risk of not returning to school, with only 54 countries taking gender-specific measures to sustain the education of girls during the pandemic. Lower-income countries were also lagging in the implementation of basic health measures to ensure a return to school. Less than 10 per cent reported having sufficient soap, clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and masks, compared with 96 per cent of high-income countries.

Securing the uptake of remote learning requires parental engagement, support from and to teachers, and ensuring girls and other marginalized children are not left behind – including through financial aids, improved access to infrastructure and subsidized devices, tailored learning materials, and flexible, self-paced platforms.

Publication 09
A Lost Year of Learning for Girls in Ethiopia: Evidence from the Young Lives at Work COVID-19 phone survey
Young Lives, April 2021

Survey data from Ethiopia suggest that the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 risk reversing gains in education and entrenching existing inequalities and gender disparities. Households were found to return to traditional gender roles at times of stress, with girls and young women bearing the greatest burden of increased household work and childcare during the pandemic. Being out of school also puts the poorest girls at greater risk of early marriage and pregnancy, as out-of-school girls face increasing pressures to marry.

Policy recommendations from this study include ensuring that adequate funding is allocated to education in COVID-19 recovery plans, particularly at a time when significant amounts of aid have been redirected to health priorities. In addition, education programmes should factor in the digital gender divide, particularly in relation to girls from marginalized communities. Equally, programmes to reduce early marriage need to tackle the underlying causes, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, through social protection programmes, flexible schooling and childcare support. The risk that COVID-19 has also reinforced discriminatory gender roles may be addressed through local media campaigns and community engagement initiatives, including both girls and boys.

Publication 10
SMS Girl Data Insights: How has COVID-19 affected support for girls’ education in Punjab, Pakistan?
Hasan, Amer, et al., World Bank, April 2021

This research presents initial findings from an ongoing phone survey of families in Punjab, Pakistan, designed to assess the impact of COVID-19 on girls’ elementary school education. Following school closures, adolescent girls were shown to be at higher risk of not returning to school, with girls increasingly spending time on household chores. While parents expressed concern about interruptions in schooling, less than a third of the families interviewed in the study were aware of the available opportunities for remote learning, including e-learning tools provided by the government. Additional rounds of phone interviews will be carried out to monitor education patterns during the pandemic and to test the effectiveness of phone-based text messages to ensure that girls continue to learn and re-enrol in school once schools reopen.

Publication 11
Continuing Learning for the Most Vulnerable during COVID-19: Lessons from Let Us Learn in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal
UNICEF, February 2021

Drawing on the experience of five countries supported by the Let Us Learn (LUL) initiative, this research brief documents tangible lessons in adapting education programmes to support the most marginalized children during school closures. The study outlines recommendations for governments and education actors to build responsive education systems during times of crisis. Highlighted practices include: engaging learners using the technology that they can access and providing follow-up support to users of remote learning; leveraging community-based approaches to provide education support and continue child protection and health services while schools are closed; supporting vulnerable households.
and teachers through the continuation of cash transfers and payment of salaries; and scaling up community-based learning pathways for out-of-school children, including those who have dropped out during school closures. As COVID-19 highlighted gaps in the readiness of these systems to face prolonged school closures, systematic monitoring and assessment of existing remote learning practices are crucial, to build resilience for future emergencies and address education gaps.

Publication 12
Bringing Education to the Most Marginalized Girls in Nepal: Evidence from the Girls’ Access to Education (GATE) programme Let Us Learn: Nepal research brief
UNICEF, 2020
The Girls’ Access to Education (GATE) programme is a non-formal education programme providing out-of-school girls in Nepal with the basic literacy, numeracy and life skills they need to enter formal schooling. While the programme has been highly effective in bringing marginalized adolescent girls into schools, including from rural areas, further transition to formal education proved challenging, due to school costs and discrimination from peers and teachers.

Given that GATE proved highly cost-effective in Nepal, the authors suggest exploring the feasibility of scaling up the programme to other areas – with appropriate context-specific adaptations as required – to help out-of-school marginalized girls to eventually make the transition to formal school systems. Communication for development (C4D) and community engagement approaches should also be considered to address the stigmatization of GATE learners, particularly from marginalized ethnic groups.

Publication 13
Save our Future: Averting an education catastrophe for the world’s children
Save Our Future, 2020
Nearly 1.6 billion school children and youth had their education disrupted at the height of pandemic lockdowns, with 7.6 million girls, across all levels from pre-primary to secondary, at risk of not returning to school. This crisis could turn into a catastrophe from which millions of children and adolescents may never recover, particularly the most vulnerable, including girls, refugees and children with disabilities. This paper advocates for governments and the international community to commit to seven areas of action:

1. Prioritize reopening schools, deliver vital services to children, and treat the workforce as frontline workers.
2. Make education inclusive, engaging and adaptive.
3. Strengthen the education workforce.
4. Focus education technology (EdTech) where it is proven to be effective and most equitable.
5. Protect education budgets and target public spending at those left furthest behind.
6. Mobilize international resources to fully finance education.
7. Use resources better by improving evidence generation, coordination, alignment and effectiveness.
Part 3. Resources

Introduction
While not contained in the Research Library, a number of published guidelines, checklists, toolkits, dashboards, case briefs and other non-research-based resources on marginalized girls’ learning crisis under COVID-19 are worthy of reference here. These practical materials are intended for use by field practitioners, education staff, as well as national and local governments and the wider development and humanitarian community. This includes those service- and advocacy-based organizations that are involved in the decision-making and implementation of multisectoral COVID-19 outbreak readiness and response activities for marginalized girls in various settings.

Technical guidance

1. Where Are We on Education Recovery?
UNICEF in partnership with UNESCO and the World Bank, March 2022
Based on a survey of 122 UNICEF country and fundraising offices, this joint report presents the importance of key actions for education recovery, the RAPID framework: (i) reach every child and retain them in school; (ii) assess learning levels; (iii) prioritize teaching the fundamentals; (iv) increase catch-up learning and progress beyond what was lost; and (v) develop psychosocial health and well-being so every child is ready to learn.

2. Mapping Social Protection Intervention Pathways to Address Barriers to Girls’ Education: A visual guide
UNICEF and Overseas Development Institute (ODI), October 2021
This visual guide represents, in an accessible way, different types of barriers to girls’ education and how social protection programmes could contribute to tackling these.

UNICEF, December 2020
This conceptual model highlights gender-responsive actions that can be carried out at school and in alternative education settings for building equitable and inclusive education opportunities.

4. Guidance on Distance Learning Modalities to Reach All Children and Youth During School Closures: Focusing on low- and no-tech modalities to reach the most marginalized
UNICEF, May 2020
Aimed at policymakers and practitioners involved in the education response, this guidance reviews different distance learning modalities, with a focus on low- and no-tech approaches (such as the use of basic mobile phones) to reach the most disadvantaged children.

5. Monitoring Distance Learning During School Closures: Guidance and survey question bank
UNICEF, December 2020
Developed by UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, this guidance is intended to be used by anyone who is considering monitoring the effectiveness of distance learning and blended modalities, through surveys of parents/caregivers, children/students and/or teachers.

6. Building Back Equal: Girls back to school guide
The Malala Fund, Plan International, UNESCO, UN Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) and UNICEF, August 2020
This brief provides targeted recommendations to help policymakers and practitioners in Ministries of Education address the gender dimensions of the pandemic-related school closures.

UNGEI, May 2020
Developed by UNGEI and ally organizations, this Common Messaging Framework can be used as an advocacy tool to position gender at the forefront of the COVID-19 response and enhance coherence in advocacy and communications efforts.
Dashboards and factsheets

1. **EduView 2.0 Dashboard**
   UNICEF, February 2022
   Drawing on UNICEF country-level data, this interactive dashboard provides up-to-date information on the status of education during the pandemic.

2. **#HerEducationOurFuture: Keeping girls in the picture during and after the COVID-19 crisis**
   UNESCO and Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2021
   This factsheet highlights how education responses to the COVID-19 crisis must prioritize the needs of girls and women to avert the risk of reversing 25 years of gains made for girls’ education.

Toolkits and checklists

1. **Remote learning packs**
   UNICEF and the World Bank, February 2022
   These seven resource packs aim to support government officials and staff in national and international agencies tasked with designing remote learning opportunities for children in development and humanitarian contexts.

2. **Checklist of key considerations to promote effective and equitable learning recovery**
   UNICEF, February 2022
   In line with the Framework for Reopening Schools from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, the World Food Programme and UNHCR, a checklist of key considerations and enablers for Ministries of Education has been developed to reach those who have been left behind.

3. **EiE-GenKit: A core resource package on gender in education in emergencies**
   Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and the UNGEI, 2021
   The EiE-GenKit includes practical tools and guidance to help practitioners ensure EiE interventions and programmes are gender-responsive and inclusive.

4. **MHPSS and EIE Toolkit: COVID-19 Response**
   UNICEF and UNGEI, 2021
   This toolkit includes useful guidance and resources for practitioners working in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and EIE, helping them to access relevant knowledge across both fields.

5. **COVID-19 response – re-enrolment: identifying students at risk of drop-out and encouraging a return to school, with a focus on equity and, in particular, girls**
   UNESCO, July 2020
   This toolkit provides information on how education systems can support students’ safe return to school and a checklist of actions to take.

Programming recommendations

1. **Framework for Reopening Schools Supplement: From reopening to recovery – key resources**
   UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, World Food Programme (WFP) and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), March 2021
   The supplement offers a collection of key resources to support recovery as schools reopen after months of closure due to COVID-19 – including policy research, practical guides and emerging best practices to help countries in the preparation and implementation of their national education recovery process.

2. **Reimagining Girls’ Education: Solutions to keep girls learning in emergencies**
   UNICEF, February 2021
   This solutions book seeks to highlight promising evidence-based actions in education for decision-makers who are designing and implementing interventions to support girls’ education in low- and middle-income country humanitarian settings and where education has been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. **Safe to Learn during COVID-19: Recommendations to prevent and respond to violence against children in all learning environments**
   Safe to Learn, May 2020
   Safe to Learn partners have released a set of recommendations for governments to help prevent and respond to violence against children in different learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Briefs

1. **Gender Transformative Education: Reimagining education for a more just and inclusive world**
   UNICEF, UNGEI and Plan International, December 2021
   This short brief explores how to ‘do’ gender-transformative education: what it means, why it’s important and how to make it happen.
2. Learning loss among adolescent girls during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Bangladesh
   Population Council, November 2021
   This brief summarizes findings on learning loss among adolescent girls during the pandemic in rural Bangladesh.

   UNICEF, October 2020
   This brief summarizes the impact of COVID-19 on the education of girls in countries across the East Asia and Pacific region and proposes considerations for national stakeholders and policymakers in their school reopening efforts and beyond.

4. In Solidarity with Girls: Gender and education in crisis
   UNGEI, September 2020
   Drawing from a series of intergenerational dialogues on gender and education in crisis, this document outlines actions to rebuild a ‘new normal’ in education post-COVID-19, alongside visions for more gender-equal, inclusive education systems.

Case studies

1. Mission Recovery case study (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
   UNICEF, February 2022

   MoES Uganda, UNGEI and UNICEF, 2021

3. Sparking adolescent girls’ participation and interest in STEM (Ghana)
   UNICEF, April 2021

4. Getting girls back to the classroom after COVID-19 school closures (South Sudan)
   UNICEF, March 2021

5. COVID-19 case study: Burkina Faso – Opening schools up better
   UNICEF, September 2020

Blogs and presentations

1. COUNT ME IN! World Bank Education Global Practice: Improving education outcomes for girls and young women
   World Bank, March 2022

2. Making gender the norm: why now is the time to prioritize girls’ education
   UNICEF, July 2021

3. Where are the girls and why it matters as schools reopen?
   UNICEF, June 2021

4. COVID-19 and education: The digital gender divide among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa
   UNICEF, August 2020

5. Five actions to help bring the most marginalized girls back to school after COVID-19
   UNICEF and Global Economy and Development, May 2020

6. Lessons from Ebola: How to reach the poorest children when schools reopen
   UNICEF, June 2020

Webinars

1. Reducing financial barriers to ensure girls continue learning during emergencies and can eventually return to school
   Side event, Global Disability Summit 2022, 17 February 2022

2. UNICEF’s strengthening distance education for girls during emergencies
   UNICEF’s learning event, 9 February 2022

3. The State of the Global Education Crisis: A path to recovery
   Launch event for the UNICEF, UNESCO and World Bank report, 6 December 2021
UNICEF Innocenti’s Children and COVID-19 Research Library has collected over 200 research publications exploring the impact of COVID-19 on girls and their learning situation.

Overall, the Children and COVID-19 Research Library contains over 4,200 records updated daily. Over 600 new records have been added in the last quarter (January to mid-April 2022).

Trending topics in the library include the impact of COVID-19 on health and well-being (including over 1,500 records on mental health), education, and social protection, well-being and equity, with less research on nutrition, refugee and migrant youth, and water, sanitation and hygiene.

(All numbers are updated as of 9 March 2022.)
Part 5. Other useful links

- **COVID-19 Global Education Recovery Tracker**, monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on response and recovery for students across the globe
- **UNGEI’s Gender in Education in Emergencies Resource Centre**
- **Global Partnership for Education’s Knowledge and Innovation Exchange Observatory on COVID-19 Responses** in Africa’s Educational Systems

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About this digest

Each quarterly thematic digest features the latest evidence drawn from UNICEF Innocenti’s Children and COVID-19 Research Library on a particular topic of interest. Updated daily, the library is a database collecting research from around the world on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, with the potential to inform programmatic and policy work for children and adolescents.