

UNICEF Education COVID-19 Response

Issue Brief: COVID-19 and Girls' Education in East Asia and Pacific

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for every child



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the unprecedented disruption of education globally threatening to reverse gains made in access to education and learning across countries. In the East Asia and Pacific region, the pandemic brought education provision in all of the 27 countries supported by UNICEF programmes to a standstill disrupting the lives and affecting the learning of over 325 million children at its peak in April 2020.

This unprecedented disruption to education systems has had particularly devastating impact on the situation of girls' education, with many having limited access to distance learning during school closures, and with many at risk of not returning to classrooms once schools reopen. The pandemic also caused increases in gender-based violence, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, which in turn negatively affected girls' ability to access education and learn.

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 policy makers in their school reopening efforts and beyond. The Brief also highlights and provides specific examples of UNICEF's programmatic interventions to ensure that girls are not left behind in the efforts to reimagine more inclusive and equitable quality education systems after COVID-19.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GIRLS' EDUCATION

COVID-19 may result in an unprecedented increase in girls out-of-school ...

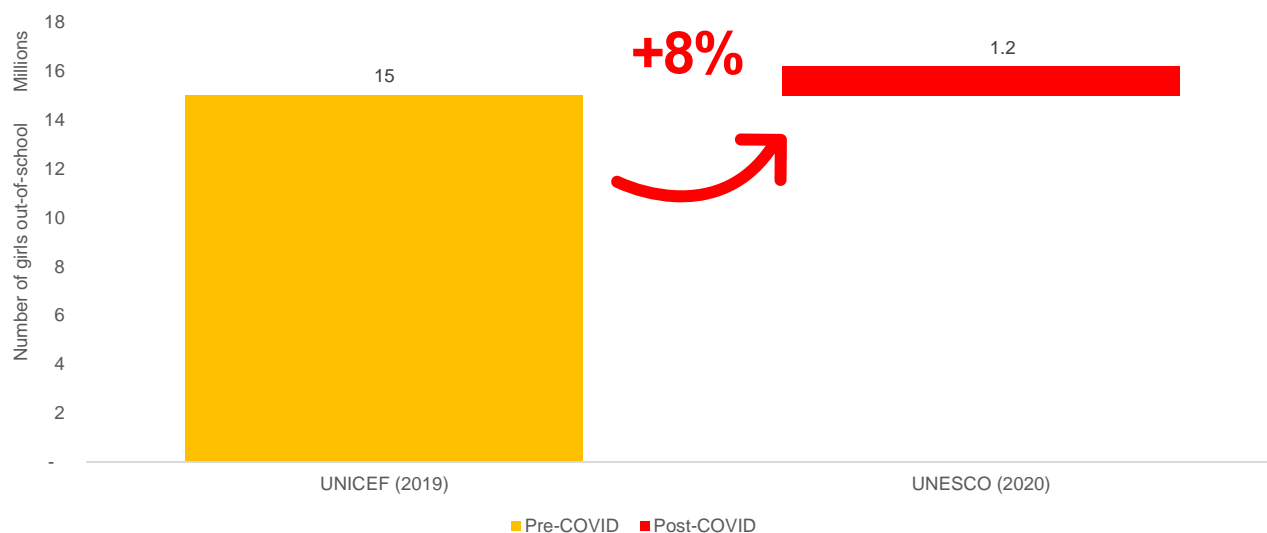
More than 15 million girls in the East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region were not enrolled and able to gain an education before COVID-19:¹ Concerted efforts by governments across the region halved the overall number of girls out-of-school from 30 million to 15 million over the past two decades. These notable achievements towards girls' access to education on a regional level hide significant variability at the country level. In Mongolia and the Philippines, for example, 73% and 63% respectively of primary school aged children out-of-school were girls before COVID-19.²

These trends are expected to be exacerbated by COVID-19. While recent research does not always agree on the exact extent of the negative impact of COVID-19 on school enrolment, all authors agree that the negative impact will be sizeable and lasting if not addressed.

Globally, 20 million additional secondary-aged girls could drop out of school due to COVID-19: Research by the Malala Fund based on dropout rates after the Ebola and financial crisis in 2014/15 and 2008 respectively estimates that 20 million additional girls globally could drop out of secondary schools alone.³ Following the Ebola crisis, girls in Sierra Leone were 16% less likely to be in school and girls in Guinea 25% less likely following school closures in these countries of between six to eight months – similar to the length of school closures in some countries in the East Asia and Pacific region. As the research focuses on secondary-aged girls only, the actual number of girls – primary to secondary aged – potentially not continuing their education on school reopening could be significantly higher.

In the East Asia and Pacific region, more than 1.2 million girls could drop out of school due to COVID-19: Research conducted by UNESCO estimates that more than 1.2 million additional girls (from pre-primary to upper secondary)⁴ may drop out or not have access to school next year in countries of the East Asia and Pacific region due to the pandemic's socio-economic impact including the need to generate income, increased household and child caring responsibilities, early and forced marriage and/or unintended pregnancy. Those who did not have access to distance education during government-imposed lockdowns are at particular risk of dropping out.

Figure 1: Estimated increase of girls out-of-school due to COVID-19 in the East Asia and Pacific region



Source: UNICEF (2019): Learning against the odds: Evidence and Policies to Support All Out-of-School Children and Adolescents in East Asia and Pacific, UNESCO (2020): How many students are at risk of not returning to school?

Notes: UNESCO (2020) estimate excludes tertiary. Including tertiary students UNESCO (2020) estimates 1.9 million girls and youth discontinuing their education.

¹ UNICEF (2019): Learning against the odds: Evidence and Policies to Support All Out-of-School Children and Adolescents in East Asia and Pacific

² UNICEF (2019): Learning against the odds: Evidence and Policies to Support All Out-of-School Children and Adolescents in East Asia and Pacific and Philippine Statistics Authority (2017): Annual Poverty Indicators Survey

³ Malala Fund (2020): Girls Education and COVID-19

⁴ 1.984 million from pre-primary to tertiary

The economic impact of COVID-19 will result in many poor families not being able to afford sending their girls to school as girls may need to work or help with household chores. In the East Asia and Pacific region, between 8.7 and 11.5 million additional girls are estimated to live in monetary poor households as a result of the economic contraction following COVID-19.⁵ A survey conducted by UNICEF in Thailand with almost 7,000 participants found 82% of female respondents reporting to be worried about financial difficulties of the family.⁶

During the Ebola crisis, an increase in domestic and caring responsibilities led to limited learning at home for girls compared to boys during the epidemic, and an increase in school dropout among girls when schools reopened.⁷ Initial evidence for the COVID-19 pandemic points into a similar direction: Save the Children found that almost two thirds of girls (63%) reported an increase in household chores and more than half (52%) reported an increase in time spent caring for siblings and others since the pandemic began globally. Every fifth girl reported having too many chores to do to be able to learn.⁸ A study conducted in Viet Nam found that 75% of girls are completing household chores like cleaning the house to support their families compared to only 60% of boys.⁹

Even before COVID-19, girls from poor households were more disadvantaged than boys in terms of their access to education. While girls and boys from the richest households in Lao PDR and the Philippines were almost equally likely to complete from primary to upper secondary education before COVID-19, girls from the poorest households were much less likely to complete their education than boys.¹⁰ In the case of limited resources, poor households may decide to send only boys to schools rather than girls due to higher perceived returns of education for boys exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and inequalities facing girls.

Girls are also at a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and early pregnancy due to lockdown measures, which in turn negatively affect girls' ability to access education and learn. During Ebola, school closures led to increases in early and forced marriages, transactional sex to cover basic needs and sexual abuse, while adolescent pregnancy increased by up to 65% in some communities.¹¹ Save the Children estimates that an additional 61,000 girls are at risk of child marriage and an additional 118,000 girls at risk of adolescent pregnancy across the EAP region within the next year alone as a direct effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²

There have been many deeply concerning reports of increased violence against women and girls around the world as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. A number of countries with reporting systems in place, report surges of upwards of 25%. In some countries reported cases have doubled.¹³ A recent survey conducted by UNICEF in Papua New Guinea found that 45% of respondents reported an increase in physical violence against women and children during the lockdown.¹⁴ In Viet Nam, the Peace House, a shelter for women and girl victims of domestic violence and abuse, has received double the usual number of clients since COVID-related measures were introduced.¹⁵ The Minister for Women in Fiji reported that domestic violence-related calls to the national helpline increased five-fold between February and April – from 87 calls in February to 527 in April.¹⁶ The UNICEF supported Child Helpline in Mongolia recorded in March an increase in reports on physical abuse by 39 and 47% compared to February of the same and the previous year respectively.¹⁷ Malaysia reported that calls related to violence against children to the 'Talian Kasih Helpline' increased by 12% during the last two weeks of the Movement Control Order/Conditional Movement Control Order compared to the preceding two weeks, while reports of domestic violence nearly tripled.¹⁸ The number of calls and chats to the UNICEF-supported Childline in Thailand increased from just over 500 in January at the onset of COVID-19 to over 4,500 in June.¹⁹

⁵ UNICEF (2020): Children in monetary poor households and COVID-19: Technical Note

⁶ UNICEF (2020): An analysis of survey results on impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people and their needs in Thailand

⁷ UNESCO (2020): Covid-19 Education Response Education Sector Issue Notes Issue Note N° 3.1 – May 2020

⁸ Save the Children (2020): Protect a Generation - The impact of COVID-19 on children's lives

⁹ Child Rights Working Group (2020): Report - A rapid assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic effects on children

¹⁰ UNICEF (2019): Learning against the odds: Evidence and Policies to Support All Out-of-School Children and Adolescents in East Asia and Pacific

¹¹ UNESCO (2020): Covid-19 Education Response Education Sector Issue Notes Issue Note N° 3.1 – May 2020

¹² Save the Children (2020): Global Girlhood Report 2020

¹³ UN (2020): Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women

¹⁴ UNICEF EAPRO Sitrep 9

¹⁵ UNICEF (2020): Rapid Assessment on the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on children and families in Viet Nam

¹⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/feature-pacific-crisis-centres-respond-to-covid-19-amid-natural-disasters>

¹⁷ UNICEF EAPRO Sitrep 05

¹⁸ UNICEF Malaysia Country Office

¹⁹ UNICEF Thailand Country Office

Spending more time online during school closures can leave children vulnerable to online sexual exploitation as predators look to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic. A lack of face-to-face contact with friends and romantic partners may lead to heightened risk-taking such as sending sexualized images, while increased and unstructured time online may expose children to potentially harmful and violent content as well as greater risk of cyberbullying. Even before the pandemic girls were facing risks online: A study conducted by UNICEF found that 63% of girls in the region had an upsetting experience online within the last year.²⁰ Data from the Philippines Department of Justice revealed a four-fold increase in reports of online sexual exploitation and abuse during the country’s enhanced community quarantine period compared to the previous year.²¹ A UNICEF assessment in Viet Nam uncovered an online beauty contest for girls aged 12-15, who had to submit naked pictures to participate.²²

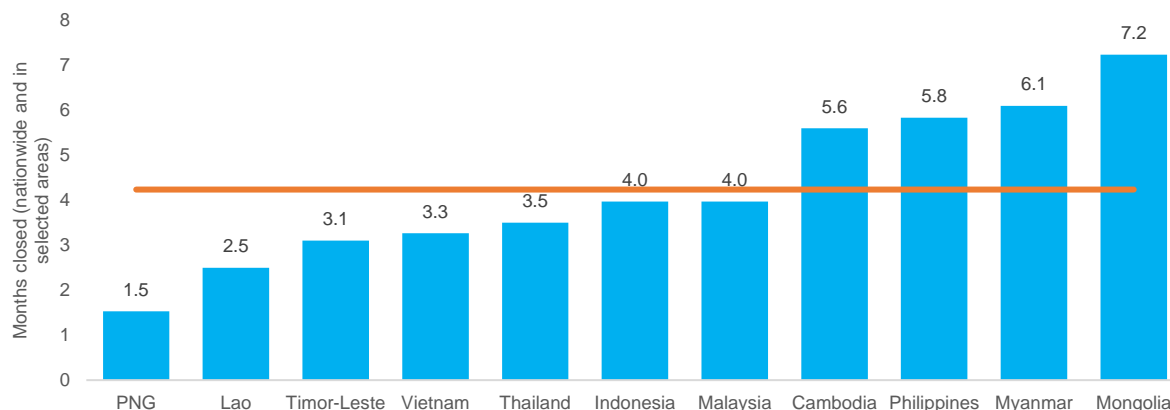
The longer the pandemic lasts, the more girls are exposed to protection risks and at risk of never returning to school.

COVID-19 will exacerbate the learning crisis for girls in school ...

Even before COVID-19, education in the East Asia and Pacific region was facing a learning crisis. On top of the 15 million girls out-of-school, a sizeable share of girls in-school were not receiving quality education and were not on course to meet minimum proficiency in basic reading and math: Every fifth girl in the region was unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10.²³ Even more girls were missing out on learning, competencies and skills including information and technology literacy required for thriving in the economy and society of the 21st century.

COVID-19 exacerbates the learning crisis and will continue to do so, through the increase of girls out-of-school and through learning loss of those in-school. A recent World Bank study predicts falling test scores and a 19% increase in the share of lower secondary-aged girls and boys in the region who are below the minimum level of proficiency due to the prolonged school closures and delay in the implementation of distance learning programmes. These estimates assume that schools are closed for five months.^{24, 25} Research from the US indicates that student achievement scores decline by one month or around a third during the three-month summer break and that students from low income background are particularly affected by summer learning loss. While schools in a few Pacific countries never closed, schools in Cambodia, Mongolia and the Philippines remain closed for significantly longer than the five months. The longer school closures last, the more negative the impact COVID-19 will have on learning.

Figure 2: Months of school closure as of end of August 2020 in selected countries in East Asia and Pacific region



Source: Own calculations.

Notes: Length of school closures does not distinguish for full/partial school reopening and does not account for school holidays. Schools are considered open once school reopening has started even if school reopening only in some geographic areas or only partially.

²⁰ UNICEF (2020): Our Lives Online: Use of social media by children and adolescents in East Asia- opportunities, risks and harms

²¹ <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/05/26/2016491/online-child-sex-exploitation-spikes-264-lockdown>

²² UNICEF (2020): Rapid Assessment on the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on children and families in Viet Nam

²³ World Bank (2020): Ending learning poverty: What will it take?

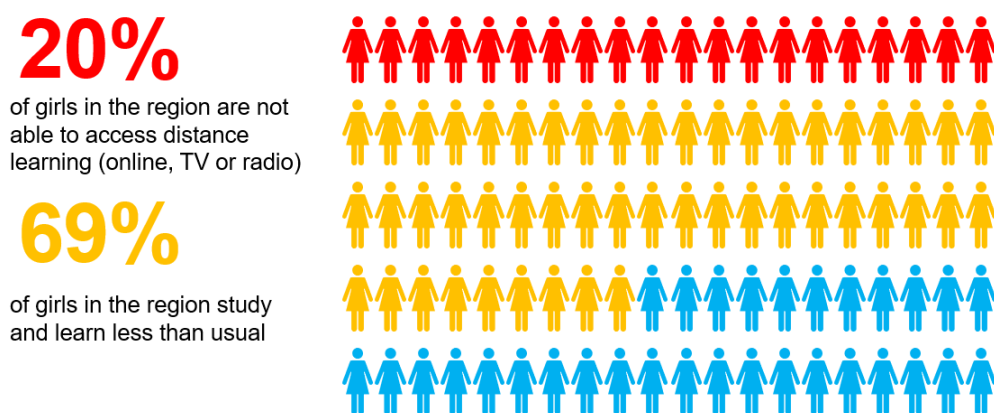
²⁴ The results are not statistically significantly different for girls and boys.

²⁵ World Bank (2020): Simulating the potential impacts of covid-19 school closures on schooling and learning outcomes: a set of global estimates

Distance learning programmes are not always accessible to girls. The extent of the negative impact of COVID-19 on enrolment and learning also depends on the availability, accessibility and quality of alternative, distance learning programmes. UNICEF estimates that at least every seventh girl globally – 222 million in total – was unable to access these remote learning programmes when schools were closed due to COVID-19. In the EAP region, 20% of girls – 40 million in total – were not reached by distance learning delivered online or through TV or radio, due to the lack of devices and/or policies geared towards the needs.²⁶ Girls from rural and poor households in particular are facing barriers to accessing distance learning during school closures. As the data quoted earlier is based on potential access to distance learning, actual access is expected to be significantly lower.²⁷ These estimations are supported by assessments conducted in countries: A survey conducted by UNICEF in Indonesia found that 36% of girls learning online faced challenges with internet access at home.²⁸ To a similar survey conducted by UNICEF in Malaysia, 30% of participating girls reported that they are not or only sometimes able to attend online classes.²⁹

COVID-19 is exacerbating the existing digital divide. One of the reasons girls often have less access to distance learning opportunities than boys lies in the already existing digital divide. Recent research shows that women across the world access and utilize the internet less than men, and that the digital gender gap is growing, particularly in developing countries.³⁰ In the East Asia and Pacific region, 55% of men had access to the internet compared to 41% of women before COVID-19.³¹ In the case of the availability of devices and internet, girls are still often disadvantaged with regards to access in multi-children households, in which the number of children exceeds the number of devices.

Figure 3: Girls' access to distance learning programmes in EAP region based on estimations³²



Source: UNICEF (2020): COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures?, ILO (2020): Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being

Distance learning programmes are not always of good quality. Girls able to access distance learning, often have to contend with poor quality of education. In a recent ILO study 69% of female respondents in the East Asia and Pacific region indicated to learn less than usual.³³ In a global study, Save the Children found that more than 8 in 10 children surveyed felt that they were learning little or nothing at all. This figure was even higher for children living in poor households, displaced children, and girls.³⁴ The evidence from the East Asia and Pacific Region is supporting these findings: A recent UNICEF survey in Indonesia found that 68% of school age girls are studying only two hours or less a day when they are learning from home, and 30% of them didn't receive any support from the school such as learning

²⁶ UNICEF (2020): COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures?
²⁷ UNICEF (2020): COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures?
²⁸ UNICEF (2020): UNICEF Indonesia U-Report Poll Result on Young People's Perspective about School Reopening 5-8 June 2020
²⁹ UNICEF (2020): UNICEF Malaysia Country Office UReport Survey
³⁰ UNESCO (2020): Covid-19 Education Response Education Sector Issue Notes Issue Note N° 3.1 – May 2020
³¹ ITU (2019): Measuring digital development Facts and figures 2019
³² The 20% figure is based on unpublished data of "UNICEF (2020): Covid-19 - Are children able to continue learning during school closures?".
³³ ILO (2020): Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being
³⁴ Save the Children (2020): Protect a Generation - The impact of COVID-19 on children's lives

material or access to the online learning application.³⁵ 28% of girls participating in a UNICEF survey in Malaysia found it difficult to study at home compared to only 11% who found it easy.³⁶

As countries continue to rely on blended or distance learning under the ‘new normal’, the challenges to delivering quality education will remain and the learning loss may deepen particularly for those children with limited access to distance options, many of them girls.

COVID-19 also increases psychosocial stress and mental health issues of girls, affecting their ability to learn.

The prolonged lockdown, economic stress on the family and the loss of the school support system and routines can all result in psychosocial stress and mental health issues. Findings on the negative impact of the prolonged school closures and quarantine measures on girls’ mental health are consistent across countries in the East Asia and Pacific region: A recent survey of 800 girls and adolescents conducted by UNICEF Philippines found that 30% of girls felt worried and 28% felt sad. Only 14% of girls responded to have remained calm.³⁷ A large-scale study involving more than 8,000 Chinese high school students found that more than every third female student showed symptoms of depression (46%) or anxiety (38%).³⁸ A recent survey of more than 600 girls conducted in Viet Nam found that 60% of participants felt worried and pressured during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁹ A survey conducted by UNICEF Thailand with almost 7,000 participants found three out of four female respondents reporting mental health issues such as stress, boredom, lack of motivation and frustration caused by the lockdown.⁴⁰ All three studies found that girls are generally more susceptible to mental health concerns than boys.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO PROTECT GIRLS’ RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Keep girls’ needs at the center of the analysis of the solutions and decisions: Girls are at increased risk of dropping out of school due to the disruption of the education system caused by COVID-19 and the pandemic’s negative economic impact on households. To ensure that the specific needs of girls are considered, UNICEF advocates for a gender-lens in all analysis and assessments of solutions and decisions concerning education provision.

Ensure equal access to distance and blended learning programmes: For various reasons, girls face additional barriers in accessing distance learning options compared to boys. To ensure that all children and especially girls have equal access to learning continuity, UNICEF advocates with government counterparts for the implementation of different modes of distance learning including through online, TV, radio and take-home learning-kits. Girls with disabilities are at particular risks and specific, targeted action needs to be taken to ensure they can access distance learning programmes tailored to their specific learning needs, and that they return to school.

Assess and address needs of girls to return to school: Girls are facing multiple barriers to returning to school upon school reopening. UNICEF advocates with government partners to implement targeted programmes to ensure that all girls are able to return to school with a particular focus on the most marginalized girls, including girls from poor households, girls with disabilities and girls from minority households.

Prioritize girls’ safety and protection: Girls face a number of protection risks especially during the prolonged school closures and home confinements. UNICEF supports government counterparts to provide girls with comprehensive integrated programmes on school reopening integrating health, protection and MHPSS considerations.

HOW IS UNICEF SUPPORTING GIRLS IN CONTINUING THEIR EDUCATION?

As the Co-Chair of UNGEI partnership in East Asia and Pacific, the UNICEF Regional Office is working to ensure that relevant data and information on the situation of girls’ education is made available. The UNICEF Regional Office is also supporting Country Offices in considering and prioritizing girls needs in distance learning programming and in reopening schools equal.

³⁵ UNICEF (2020): Learning from Home Survey 2020

³⁶ UNICEF (2020): UNICEF Malaysia Country Office UReport Survey

³⁷ UNICEF (2020): UNICEF Philippines Country Office UReport Survey (COVID-19 Poll 3: Feeling, coping with emphasis on mental health)

³⁸ Zhou and Zhang (2020): Prevalence and socio-demographic correlates of psychological health problems in Chinese adolescents during the outbreak of COVID-19

³⁹ Child Rights Working Group (2020): Report - A rapid assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic effects on children

⁴⁰ UNICEF (2020): An analysis of survey results on impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people and their needs in Thailand

UNICEF is also participating in UNESCO's **#LearningNeverStops** campaign to ensure that every girl is able to learn while schools are closed and return to the classroom when schools safely reopen through amplifying the campaigns messages through UNICEF regional and country level communication channels.⁴¹

UNICEF Country Offices across the region are implementing education interventions to ensure that girls have equal access to distance learning programmes during school closures and that the specific support needs of girls are considered and addressed on school reopening. Below provides examples of activities implemented by a select number of UNICEF Country Offices to build girls' education back equal.

Targeted campaigns to encourage communities to support girls' return to school (Indonesia, Philippines)

- In Indonesia, UNICEF conducts nation-wide monitoring of out-of-school children covering 415 districts in order to identify girls and boys who have dropped out of school or who are at risk of dropping out due to the pandemic. The mapping is conducted in close collaboration with school communities and findings are utilized to encourage support from local governments and communities to provide support for the identified girls and boys to remain in or return to school. Special attention is given to out-of-school girls to ensure appropriate responses and solutions to their barriers in accessing or continuing their education.
- In the Philippines, UNICEF supports the Department of Education in developing a C4D initiative to encourage the large number of girls out-of-school to continue learning activities through the Alternative Learning System (ALS). The campaign will also address local communities for their support in encouraging girls to continue their learning activities.

Gender-sensitive educational content within alternative education methods (Indonesia, Viet Nam)

- In Indonesia, UNICEF is implementing a Life Skills Education (LSE) programme using creative methodology to reach more adolescents, especially adolescent girls with sessions on hygiene, nutrition, critical thinking, problem-solving and other topics.
- In Viet Nam, UNICEF facilitates children's access to STEM education through increased digital connectivity especially for girls in hard-to-reach areas with no qualified STEM teachers. UNICEF is introducing Augmented and Virtual Reality (AVR) education solutions in Viet Nam's remote mountainous provinces where teachers have difficult access to STEM training. The AVR will empower marginalized girls to learn-by-doing by directly engaging with their STEM subject matter through gamification and immersive interactive experiences.

Support for girls' access to and uptake of distance learning platforms (Philippines, Viet Nam)

- In the Philippines, UNICEF supports the Department of Education in developing a C4D initiative to encourage the large number of girls out-of-school to continue learning activities through the Alternative Learning System (ALS).
- In Viet Nam, UNICEF collaborates with the government and private sector partners to provide children with access to online learning platforms through increased digital connectivity especially for girls in hard-to-reach areas.

Information and channels for girls to access services for violence or abuse (Philippines, Viet Nam)

- In the Philippines, UNICEF is supporting the enhancement of a nationwide network of child protection units (One Stop Centers) to facilitate better access to multi-disciplinary telemedicine services for children survivors of abuse in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In the Philippines, UNICEF leads a multi-agency campaign to increase public awareness on the link of the pandemic to the increased vulnerabilities of girls and boys to online sexual exploitation.
- In the Philippines, UNICEF is collaborating with the largest helpline in the country, Bantay Bata 163, for online chat-based and phone-based helplines nationwide, and with regional chapters to ensure services are delivered in local languages. This includes MHPSS counselling for children and adolescents, and facilitation of case management services for girls and women survivors of sexual exploitation.
- In Viet Nam, UNICEF collaborates with UNFPA and UNWOMEN to support the development and delivery of training programmes for teachers, school managers and other school staff on prevention of gender-based violence in schools and on psycho-social support and mental health needs of girls.

⁴¹ UNESCO, UNICEF, Plan, Malala (2020): Building back equal: girls back to school guide

- In Viet Nam, UNICEF supports the development and roll-out of the “Opening Up Better Schools” initiative. A major component of this initiative focuses on the prevention of School Related Gender Based Violence (SR-GBV) when children return to their classrooms. A teacher’s manual and online training have been developed, addressing stigma and SR-GBV.

Addressing the health needs of girls during the pandemic (Indonesia, Philippines)

- In Indonesia, UNICEF supports the government in implementing the Weekly Iron Folic Acid Supplementation (WIFS) for adolescent girls during the pandemic. The closure of schools all over Indonesia has caused significant reduction of adolescent girls having access to WIFS. Together with the government, UNICEF encourages adolescents to take active part in distributing Iron Folic Tablets to their peers through home visits.
- In Indonesia, UNICEF conducted a two months series of events about menstruation and hygiene management. The events addressed participants from national and local governments, development partners, CSOs, communities, and mass media. As part of the event series, girl students participated in [writing, photography and videography competitions](#).
- In the Philippines, UNICEF’s WASH in Schools programme supports the Department of Education in promoting effective menstrual hygiene management for school girls. UNICEF assists the Department of Education in building evidence of the situation of adolescent girls and the broader culture on menstruation, formulating policy and standards on MHM services and education in schools, mainstreaming MHM indicators in the Department of Education’s EMIS and WASH in Schools Three Star Approach, and developing tools for integrating MHM in the curriculum implementation and co-curricular student activities.
- In the Philippines, UNICEF supports the Department of Education’s Alternative Learning System (ALS) Task Force in enhancing learning modules and activities related to comprehensive sexual education for both girls and boys.
- In the Philippines, UNICEF supported the Council for the Welfare of Children in passing a resolution for enhanced collaboration between the Department of Education, Department of Health and the National Youth Commission in developing and disseminating core messages on adolescent sexual health to tackle issues on teenage pregnancy, HIV, sexual abuse prevention and response, and mental health. UNICEF also supported the development of advocacy materials on teenage pregnancy, cyberbullying and HIV to assist teachers, health care providers, social workers, as well as trained peer educators and youth leaders with standardized information dissemination on sexual health within the broader adolescent health topics, to reduce stigma and to promote access to life-saving information and services.