

Policy brief:

Gender-responsive remote digital learning

This brief outlines policy considerations and recommendations to promote gender-responsive remote learning using digital technologies.

Background

Quality education (SDG4) remains a pressing issue worldwide. In the current global learning crisis, children are not learning at expected levels, despite higher school enrolments. Pre-COVID-19, half of the world's children could not read and understand a simple text by the age of 10.¹ The pandemic has only deepened the global learning crisis, affecting national education systems worldwide.² To mitigate this, countries have increasingly been adopting digital technologies to improve remote education and promote better learning outcomes for children. In the process, however, most nations have struggled to meet the needs of all.³

While technology-enhanced learning can help ensure content reaches more learners in multiple and flexible formats, access to quality digital learning varies greatly and can exacerbate gender inequalities. In many contexts, the gender digital divide disadvantages girls who already face several vulnerabilities to their education: risk of child marriage, early pregnancy and gender-based violence. A gender-responsive approach to remote learning using digital technologies enables the needs of all learners to be considered, while addressing the gender-related barriers to education and digital technology.

Key factors

The key factors impacting the implementation of gender-responsive digital learning for all children and adolescents include:

- **Inequitable access to remote education and digital technology**

One of the main challenges of remote learning using digital technology is inequitable access, which largely augments existing inequalities.⁴ Girls and children from socially marginalized groups are comparatively less likely to advance in their learning in non-traditional classroom settings.⁵ This is often due to a lack of accessible technology and availability of electricity, connectivity, and devices.⁶

Gender norms also restrict girls' access to and use of technology, including smartphones, tablets, computers, and the Internet in many places.⁷ In some contexts, girls are socialized from an early age to believe boys are naturally more suited to use technology, leading girls to doubt their abilities and seek fewer opportunities to develop digital skills.⁸ Gender norms and expectations determine when and if learners learn - in the physical classroom or by using digital technologies. In challenging contexts with limited resources, girls' access to education (and particularly remote education) is constrained by time required for their household chores and care work, while boys' time is limited by the demands of their income-generating activities. Furthermore, girls' access to digital devices and their digital literacy lags behind their male peers.

A set of compounding factors compromises girls' rights to an education. Discriminatory gender norms restrict their access to public spaces, elevate their risk of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy, and make them vulnerable to gender-based violence. In many settings, one or a combination of these outcomes prevents girls from completing their education.

- **Teachers' role in gender-responsive digital pedagogy**

Teachers play an essential role in promoting gender equality and ensuring all learners can engage in remote learning. When technology is combined with relevant, engaging content and effective teacher support to guide learners, quality learning is possible.⁹ This finding is consistent across mediums, including educational programmes disseminated via radio, television, or online platforms.¹⁰ However, in many contexts, teachers lack fundamental ICT skills and adequate remote education training to enable quality learning.¹¹

Furthermore, while digital skills are essential, digital skills alone are insufficient to ensure that remote learning using digital technology is gender-responsive and inclusive. Teachers need to be aware of the gendered expectations that impact girls' and boys' daily lives in their homes and communities and adapt

their pedagogy accordingly.¹² Without adequate training, teachers may rely on methodologies that are not learner-centred or gender-responsive, reinforcing existing social and gender norms. Similarly, teachers who are aware of and responsive to girls' and boys' unique needs and barriers can more effectively adapt their methods and practices.

- **Gender-responsive and inclusive educational material**
National curriculum guidelines provide the primary basis for creating educational materials and evaluating learning outcomes in most countries. Despite its importance, evidence shows that many national curricula are unable to meet the diverse needs of learners¹³ and tend to reinforce gender bias and stereotypes.¹⁴ As a result, digital content and tools developed on these source materials are unlikely to be gender-responsive and inclusive. This compromises girls' learning and the learning of other vulnerable children. Curricula and educational materials that are gender-responsive and adaptable to the needs of all learners can significantly influence the quality of digital learning.

- **Family and community support for remote learning**
Learning continuity depends heavily on families' and caregivers' active engagement and support to learners, especially younger ones.¹⁵ Learners' immediate environment, their caregivers, families and communities, are all essential elements in remote learning. For instance, lack of preparedness and guidance from a caregiver can be a barrier to a learner's education.¹⁶

Communities and caregivers, as the primary gatekeepers of children's education, may prevent vulnerable groups, especially girls, from learning because of social and cultural norms and beliefs – for example, caregivers may hold different expectations for their children based on gender, such as seeing more value in educating boys over girls, or expecting boys to outperform girls especially in technology, math, and science. Furthermore, adolescent girls are more likely than their male peers to engage in caretaking and household chores.¹⁷ This was noted in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, where at-home support during remote learning varied; adolescent boys were more likely than adolescent girls to receive help from their families with their schoolwork.¹⁸ Without adequate guidance and complementary gender-responsive support for caregivers, including building female caregivers' own digital literacy, girls and other vulnerable groups may not benefit from national remote learning initiatives.

- **Safe and inclusive digital learning spaces**

Even when girls and boys have seemingly comparable access to remote learning, safety concerns may prevent some of the most vulnerable learners from acquiring quality education. Although the Internet has broadened connections and horizons for learners, it has also exposed them to potential risks. More than a

third of young people in 30 countries reported being cyberbullied, with one in five skipping school because of cyberbullying and violence.¹⁹ Even more alarming is the risk of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Around 80 per cent of children in 25 countries report feeling in danger of sexual abuse or exploitation online.²⁰ A recent study conducted across 31 countries with over 14,000 girls and young women attested that more than half of those surveyed had been harassed and abused online.²¹

Some children may be more likely to experience peer-on-peer violence or abuse due to their specific identities such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religious beliefs, gender identities or migratory status. Children who are vulnerable offline may be more

exposed to online risks.²² To keep girls and vulnerable children away from online dangers, parents and caregivers may limit their access to technology, which can result in their exclusion from online learning and skills development. Without the proper legal framework to regulate the digital environment and provide safe opportunities to engage, learners may see their education possibilities diminished or at greater risk when engaging on digital platforms. And the lack of gender-disaggregated data on children and technology (access, usage, learning and skills, and online violence) poses a challenge when designing and implementing initiatives to reach and ensure the online safety of children, especially the most vulnerable.²³

Recommendations

The following recommendations outline an initial response to achieve inclusive, equitable and gender-responsive remote digital learning for children and adolescents:

1. Bridge the access gap in remote education: support initiatives designed to reach girls and the most vulnerable learners.

- a. Strengthen existing infrastructure (ICT- telecom, electric) to better enable technology-based education solutions that can reach disadvantaged groups at scale. Although infrastructure challenges differ by context, governments should prioritize investments that reach vulnerable learners, including options for low-tech and offline solutions. For example, creating solutions with technology that is widely accessible on affordable devices and/or trying out solutions that can blend with offline options.
- b. Lower the costs of connectivity and technological devices. Governments can provide solutions to the high costs of access by subsidizing devices for learning, making data and digital content more affordable, and providing free-of-charge educational material, particularly for girls and vulnerable learners.²⁴
- c. Prioritise the education needs of girls, particularly the most marginalised. This includes providing financial support to girls at risk of dropping out; lifting financial costs that act as barriers to learning; and removing discriminatory school policies that prevent pregnant and married girls from attending school and considering flexible attendance options for pregnant and married girls/new mothers.
- d. Ensure updated guidance, protocols and referral systems are in place to respond to absenteeism among girls and boys- for both in-person, remote, and blended learning models.

2. Equip educators and caregivers with the skills they need to incorporate digital technology in their classrooms and homes in a gender-responsive and inclusive way.

- a. Strengthen teachers' professional development to build capacities on gender-responsive and learner-centred pedagogies in live classroom settings and online. Teachers who are well-trained and supported can positively affect learners' motivation, competence, beliefs and learning achievements.²⁵
- b. Ensure effective training for teachers on digital skills and pedagogies to help them cope and respond to the new challenges of remote teaching.²⁶
- c. Integrate complementary training for caregivers, particularly female caregivers, in settings where women's access to technology and female digital literacy is low.

3. Adapt national curricula to ensure material and content for remote and digital learning is accessible and representative of all learners.

- a. Adjust curricula to promote gender-responsive and inclusive learning for all children and adolescents.
- b. Develop standards for curating and creating educational material for remote learning- radio and television programming and online content – based on a gender-responsive and inclusive approach. Materials should:
 - i. Address gender stereotypes and biases, promote gender equality, and empower girls.
 - ii. Pay special attention to the representation and access of children with diverse needs – especially those with other gender identities, disabilities, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and migrant and displaced children.²⁷

4. Ensure a comprehensive and effective legal framework to protect children from online violence, exploitation, and other forms of abuse.²⁸

- a. Introduce specific safeguarding measures against online bullying, violence and abuse, including equipping girls with the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe online.
- b. The legal framework should include appropriate regulation of the technology industry to ensure safe platforms for all children and adolescents.
- c. Train teachers on online safety, online child protection policies and laws, and ways to help learners be safe online.
- d. Ensure technology companies integrate and enhance safety features in digital learning platforms. For example, data collection and other commercial practices should be transparent, relevant security and protection measures should be in place, and other built-in protections for children should be appropriately adapted to different age groups. Furthermore, companies should offer clearly accessible and easy-to-use safety solutions for teachers, caregivers, and learners themselves.²⁹

5. Build an enabling educational ecosystem through partnerships with different stakeholders.

- a. Engage the private sector to harness gender-responsive and inclusive innovation to use and access technology for education.³⁰ The private sector is a critical player in education delivery during remote learning and a relevant actor for digital content creation and developing safe digital platforms for all learners, especially the most vulnerable.

- b. Involve civil society organizations to help reach the most vulnerable children and their communities. Their unique knowledge and expertise may facilitate engagement with the most affected communities.³¹
- c. Work with communities to support children's and adolescents' inclusive learning during remote education. Learners make more significant progress when caregivers actively support their education.³² With the necessary information and guidance (e.g., information about online safety, the benefits of technology for education and sensitization around gender themes), caregivers can better support children and adolescents in their learning process.
- d. Engage children and adolescents in decision-making processes, create environments that allow the views of children and adolescents to be heard on practices and policies that directly or indirectly concern them.

6. Tackle evidence gaps in the use of remote learning technologies and in learning outcomes.

- a. Enhance collection of data – disaggregated by gender, age, disability, ethnicity, mother tongue, socioeconomic status, migration status and other characteristics – on learners' access to available tools for remote learning,³³ and systematically measure learning outcomes³⁴ linked to the effective use of these tools.
- b. Consistently monitor and adapt policies for safe, equitable and quality remote education in consultation with children and adolescents, especially among targeted vulnerable populations.



Endnotes

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