

EDUCATION IN CRISIS: COVID-19 AND ADOLESCENTS' EDUCATION IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Executive summary



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Cover photo: Girls wear face masks at their school to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Nepal. Credit: Plan International

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research is intended to inform and help shape efforts to turn the tide on the global education crisis that has intensified because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It shines a light on the impact of the pandemic on adolescents' education in low and middle-income countries by bringing together quantitative and qualitative data to help understand how adolescents, and particularly adolescent girls, have or have not been able to continue their education over the last year.

“ It was a devastating feeling, not being able to go to school. ”

Adolescent boy, age unknown, Guli, Sudan

Through primary research that engaged more than 1,900 adolescents, parents and teachers in Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Nepal and Sudan, supplemented by secondary data analysis, this report explores the:

- ability of adolescents to access education during the pandemic.
- quality of education received by those who were able to continue their learning.
- availability and use of home-learning materials, teaching capacity, and teacher interaction with students during periods of school closure.
- home-learning environment and the level of support adolescents received for their learning.
- impact remote learning has had on adolescents' mental health and well-being.

- extent to which adolescents have been involved in decision making, as part of the COVID-19 response.
- challenges and successes of returning to education after lockdowns.

Many adolescents in this research – especially those in poor communities in rural areas – were unable to access education from their homes. This was primarily due to a lack of devices, electricity or digital infrastructure and the limited provision of alternative no-tech approaches. For the same reason, many teachers were also unable to provide lessons.

- On average, just under half (46%) of adolescents had no contact with their school during lockdowns. In Sudan, this figure rose to 84%.

- Three-quarters (77%) of teachers were unable to teach remotely during lockdowns due to their own or their students' lack of connectivity or access to devices.
- 85% of teachers reported fewer students attending online lessons compared with pre-pandemic school-based lessons.

“Education is not only for those who have a mobile phone, but [should be] available for everyone.”

Adolescent girl, 14 years old, location unknown, Honduras

“I did not have the opportunity to teach online because there are no resources and the community where I work is poor and there is no internet access.”

Female teacher, location unknown, Honduras

The home environment was generally not conducive to learning, with adolescents feeling easily distracted and limited in study time due to competing demands such as increased chore burdens or the need to support their family through income-generating activities. Most parents and adolescents were ill-prepared and under-supported. Too few were consulted on how to improve the situation.

- More than half (53%) of parents did not feel able to support their child's learning due to believing they lacked the necessary ability or knowledge, or because of time constraints and work commitments.
- Less than half (48%) of adolescents felt able to concentrate when studying at home and four in 10 (41%) did not have enough time to study, often due to increased unpaid care burdens or needing to support their family through income-generating activities.

“I always support her emotionally, but I found using the materials [provided], the computer, the internet difficult.”

Mother, location unknown, Guatemala

“There would be frequent interruption. I would get disturbed when someone entered the room during class time. I had no separate room [to study in].”

Adolescent girl, age unknown, Makwanpur, Nepal

The social and economic impacts of the pandemic placed additional burdens on students, parents and caregivers. The psychosocial impacts of the pandemic, isolation and worry about exams, academic performance and future career prospects also affected the mental health and well-being of adolescents.

- Academic performance, falling behind and the impact this might have on their future was the most reported concern (47% of responses), followed by isolation (17%) and loss of motivation for education (10%).
- Only 46% of adolescents reported enjoying learning from home, and 53% were motivated to learn remotely. Nearly two-thirds (63%) felt they had not learned as much at home as they would have in school.

“Initially, my siblings were so excited that they were going to stay home and not go to school. But with weeks passing they started to forget the poems they were taught... to forget their friends... and became withdrawn.”

Adolescent girl, age unknown, Khartoum, Sudan

“I used to see them hold books even when doing their household chores – an indication that proves to me they really missed going to school.”

Mother, Bondo, Kenya

Despite the global commitment to guaranteeing a quality education for every child, millions now face a future outside of the classroom. Reduced numbers of adolescents have returned to school, with a third (33%) of those in our sample still absent. Of the 371 individuals who responded to an open question about why adolescents had not returned to education:

- 24% stated a fear of catching COVID-19.
- 19% stated that schools remained shut or that teachers had not returned to teaching.
- 10% cited early pregnancies.
- 10% referred to child marriage or having to leave school to work.

“Some were not able to access [sanitary] pads and they were lured by men to help them get the sanitary towels and they ended up being pregnant. Some got married. Some are engaged with some work which they earn money [from] so they don’t see the need to be back to school.”

Adolescent girl, 15 years old, Kisumu, Kenya

Millions of children have learned very little while out of school, with girls, children living with disabilities, displaced children, and those living in low-income households most likely to report learning nothing at all. The risk of adolescents never returning to school is drastically heightened as they take on additional unpaid care, are forced into marriage or work, and shoulder increased economic burdens.

Without addressing the economic, gender, social, geographic and technological inequalities – already barriers to education – that have been heightened during the pandemic, the long, uneven and uncertain recovery from this education crisis will stall. The stakes have never been higher. Swift and targeted action is needed, in partnership with adolescents, to reverse the damage done to girls’ and boys’ education over the last year, and to build back better and more equal.

We call upon donors, national governments, humanitarian actors and education providers to work together and in partnership with adolescents to:

1. Urgently increase and sustain financial support to meet the education needs of adolescent girls and boys, including those living through conflict and humanitarian crises, so every girl can lead, learn, decide and thrive.
2. Work in partnership with women and girls, men and boys, in all their diversity, to eliminate the systemic and gendered barriers preventing adolescent girls from accessing and completing a quality education.
3. Support quality inclusive learning environments, through a focus on the well-being of teachers and learners and a whole-school approach.
4. Strengthen the resilience of education systems to protect learning during the ongoing pandemic and be prepared to respond to future pandemics, climate-related shocks, insecurity, and other crises, incorporating the capacity to shift safely and effectively between face-to-face and distance learning as required.
5. Promote health and COVID-19-prevention measures, including equitable access to water, sanitation and hygiene, and safe and effective vaccines, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

BOX 1 METHODS AT A GLANCE

This mixed-methods study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to investigate the effect of COVID-19 on adolescents' education in low and middle-income countries, particularly for girls. Primary data was collected from adolescents, parents and teachers in five countries: Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Nepal and Sudan.

The literature review explored both grey and peer-reviewed literature. A total of 273 documents were reviewed. Additional evidence has also been included from other relevant Plan International research.

Quantitative data was collected in two phases. Surveys were conducted in Guatemala, Honduras, Nepal and Sudan between March and April 2021. Data collection in Kenya took place in June 2021. Analysis is based on 1,750 surveys (655 adolescents, 585 parents and 510 teachers).

Qualitative research was carried out through 134 key informant interviews and focus group discussions with adolescent girls and boys, parents, teachers and local leaders, in Nepal and Sudan. An additional 51 adolescents in Nepal and Sudan participated in a 'photovoice diary' methodology that allowed participants to express their views, perspectives and feelings on how COVID-19 has affected their education through taking photographs that were then discussed collectively.



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