

# COVID-19: Policy Brief and Recommendations

## Strengthening efforts to prevent and respond to school-related gender-based violence as schools reopen

July 2020



## **An opportunity for action against school-related gender-based violence**

As education systems around the world begin to reopen, schools must be prepared to mitigate and respond to gender-based violence in and around schools, and provide support for those children who have experienced violence in the context of school closures. School reopening offers an opportunity for governments, education officials and teachers to reset the clock and take a zero-tolerance approach to violence, including corporal punishment, peer-to-peer psychological and physical violence, or sexual harassment and violence. Strong commitment from school leadership is needed, through school-based policies as well as strong reporting and accountability mechanisms.

This policy brief is targeted at policymakers and practitioners working in gender, education and child protection fields. It draws from emerging evidence on the gendered implications of COVID-19 on violence as well as research from previous health emergencies regarding the impacts of school closures on gender-based violence. Working on the principle of 'Build Back Better', this brief may be used to advocate for improved attention to school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV). The entry points for action identified by this brief complement the [Framework for Reopening Schools](#) (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and World Food Programme), the related [Safe Back to School Practitioners Guide](#) (Global Education Cluster) and [Reopening Schools Safely](#) (Safe to Learn campaign) providing more detailed guidance on how education systems can prevent and respond to gender-based violence in and around schools.

## Gender-based violence in the context of school closures: new challenges to overcome

School-related gender-based violence can be defined as acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around school, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics. Violence in and around schools is a widespread phenomenon, impacting the lives of children, teachers, families and communities around the world. Globally, one in three students has been bullied by their peers at school at least once in the last month, with physical appearance being the main cause of bullying<sup>1</sup>. Further analysis shows that between 20-37% of students aged 11-17 years old experienced bullying, physical, emotional and/or sexual violence in the past year all of which are forms of school-related gender-based violence<sup>2</sup>.

The context of school closures presents new challenges for preventing and responding to gender-based violence. Whilst our understanding of the impacts of this pandemic on violence is still evolving<sup>3</sup>, extended quarantines and other social distancing measures linked to COVID-19 have led to increasing reports of intimate partner violence, violence against children and other forms of domestic violence<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> with up to 85 million more girls and boys worldwide potentially



exposed to physical, sexual and/or emotional violence over the next three months as a result of COVID-19 quarantine<sup>8</sup>. The situation is aggravated by children's isolation from school friends, teachers, social workers, children's or youth clubs, and the safe space and services that schools provide. Where learning has shifted online, children and especially girls may have been exposed to increased risks of online violence, including cyberbullying, sexual exploitation and abuse.

Girls have experienced particular challenges to learning during school closures. Often, girls disproportionately lack access to technology and the internet and face heightened expectations of duties at home in comparison to boys<sup>9</sup>. Children, particularly girls and those with disabilities, may not have the materials or support needed to access remote learning. Their progress may, therefore, be more limited than their male peers leading to inequalities in the classroom and potential for discrimination

1. UNESCO 2019. Behind the Numbers: Ending school violence and bullying. UNESCO, Paris.

2. This estimate uses GSHS, HBSC, VACS and TERCE data (Fry, 2019, unpublished)

3. If COVID-19 related lockdowns remain in place for six months, UNFPA also estimates that 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence will likely occur (with 15 million more cases for every three months of lockdown thereafter).

4. CARE. 2020. [Gender implications of COVID-19 outbreaks in development and humanitarian settings](#). Atlanta, CARE.

5. Robyn Yaker and Dorcas Erskine. 2020. [GBV case management and the COVID-19 pandemic](#). GBV AoR Helpdesk.

6. Erika Fraser. 2020. [Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls](#). London, Department for International Development.

7. WHO. 2020. [Joint Leaders' statement - Violence against children: A hidden crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

8. World Vision. 2020. [COVID-19 Aftershocks: A Perfect Storm](#)

9. Robert Jenkins and Rebecca Winthrop, "5 actions to help bring the most marginalized girls back to school after COVID-19," May 15, 2020,

and bullying. Being out of school also increases girls' risk of early and unintended pregnancy, sexual exploitation, and child, early and forced marriage.<sup>10,11</sup> When schools reopen, pregnant girls and young mothers may be unable to return due to restrictive policies, lack of support or stigma and discrimination.

The following sections will take into consideration the new challenges to children's safety and wellbeing posed by school closures due to COVID-19, and outline some potential entry points for action to strengthen efforts to prevent and respond to SRGBV as schools reopen.

## Ensuring schools provide a safe learning environment and continue to promote gender equality in education

Gender inequalities and harmful gender norms present in schools before closures will not have disappeared at the time of reopening and may have been exacerbated. Through their physical spaces, teaching practices and policies, all schools must strive towards ensuring equality of educational outcomes for boys and girls. Ensuring protection from physical, psychological and sexual violence remains a critical part of providing a safe and gender-responsive learning environment. School-level policies on preventing and responding to all forms of violence must be established or revitalised in light of the



new challenges posed by COVID-19, using national policies as a guide. Reporting and accountability mechanisms must be in place and functioning.

Recognising the differences in learning and progress experienced by girls and boys during school closures must be part of 'back to school' assessments to understand learners' needs and design relevant programmes to overcome different learning barriers and ensure all learners are brought back up to speed. Schools should ensure that any remedial programmes put in place to address learning loss are conducted in safe and accessible environments and engage with parents and communities to ensure girls' participation. Special efforts are needed across education structures and communities to monitor girls at risk of not returning to school and provide the necessary support for their safe return. Teachers and local school officials should be provided with tools to follow up with students who have not returned. Specific guidance on absence management systems can be found in the [Safe Back to School Practitioners Guide](#).

## Addressing gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health issues

Children, and especially girls, children who don't conform to gender norms and children with disabilities, may have experienced or witnessed sexual violence or harassment during school closures. Specific efforts should be made for school health and protection services to connect learners with services dedicated to providing psychosocial and legal support. Schools should also be supported to establish referral directories which map out service providers in their communities and are

10. Cherner Bah (With and For Girls), "COVID-19 and Girls' Rights: A Series - Part One: Public Health, The Economy and Girls' Safety," Medium, March 19, 2020, <https://medium.com/@WITHandFORgirls/covid-19-and-girls-rights-a-series-e68f21ddda60>;

11. Lisa Denney, Rachel Gordon and Aisha Ibrahim, Teenage pregnancy after Ebola in Sierra Leone: mapping responses, gaps and ongoing challenges, Working and discussion papers, Overseas Development Institute, December 2015, <https://www.odi.org/publications/10396-teenage-pregnancy-after-ebola-sierra-leone-mapping-responses-gaps-and-ongoing-challenges>.



made accessible to all children and caregivers. Some children will have faced or witnessed increased online harassment, bullying or sexual exploitation and abuse as a result of increased internet use and the use of different social media and learning platforms. Teachers and school officials should receive appropriate training to manage confidential discussions with students who have been affected. Schools should also provide child-friendly reporting mechanisms for online violence and education on online abuse and safe internet use.

Lessons learned from countries experiencing extended school closures (e.g. Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak) show that rates of unintended pregnancy are likely to rise during this period<sup>12</sup>. Girls must be allowed, and supported, to re-enter school regardless of their pregnancy status, with appropriate national policies adopted and enforced. Schools must be attentive to the heightened bullying and violence that pregnant adolescent girls face by students and teaching staff, which can also be a factor in absenteeism and drop-out. School reopenings should be accompanied by back to school campaigns that are contextualised, inclusive, culturally relevant, and effective at changing pervasive gender norms that disadvantage girls and underpin SRGBV.

Adequate water and sanitation facilities are crucial for a hygienic return to school, both for COVID-19 prevention and continued menstrual health and hygiene needs of female learners and teachers. Privacy and safety in and around toilet areas remain a critical way of reducing harassment and sexual violence in schools. Provision of menstrual hygiene materials as an essential component of WASH kits provided to girls will contribute to healthy menstrual management and may lead to reduced bullying and harassment.

## Supporting mental and psychosocial wellbeing of returning learners and school personnel

Providing mental and psychosocial support to learners and school personnel must be prioritised by education systems, in order to address issues of trauma or other psychosocial needs that emerge through the pandemic. Schools should dedicate sufficient time in the first two weeks of reopening to provide psychosocial support and promote a healthy and safe environment. These measures should respond to the particular needs of girls, who may be worse affected as a result of caregiving responsibilities or loss of key family members. Efforts to address stigma related to COVID-19 will need to be highlighted, including focussing on racially-motivated stigma and those who have been affected, or have cared for people with COVID-19, a role notably taken on by girls and women.

Teachers and counsellors will need to work with students to understand what students are feeling, how they experienced the pandemic, and what changes it has brought about. Schools are encouraged to promote child-focused spaces for children to speak out and share their experiences, ensuring that these are specifically safe for girls. Building any avenue for children to speak out is helpful for wellbeing and engagement, whether through the use of art, drama, suggestion boxes, or clubs. Understanding the emotional impact of the pandemic on students will be necessary to better prepare them to return to academic content. Support will be required for this process to be carried out safely and effectively and causing no harm. Specific guidance can be found in the [Safe Back to School Practitioners Guide](#).

12. Lisa Denney, Rachel Gordon and Aisha Ibrahim, Teenage pregnancy after Ebola in Sierra Leone: mapping responses, gaps and ongoing challenges, Working and discussion papers, Overseas Development Institute, December 2015, <https://www.odi.org/publications/10396-teenage-pregnancy-after-ebola-sierra-leone-mapping-responses-gaps-and-ongoing-challenges>.

## **Building back better: safe, inclusive learning environments for all children**

Ministries, school personnel, communities and families must work together to prevent and respond to new and existing challenges of SRGBV as schools reopen. Only through collective and coordinated action to address the root causes of gender-based violence in and around schools can education systems truly 'build back better' and provide safe, inclusive learning environments for all children.

### **Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence**

This brief was developed by a core group of representatives from the following organisations, members of the Global Working Group: Commonwealth Institute, Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, Human Rights Watch, Plan International, Raising Voices, Save the Children UK, UNESCO, UNGEI, UNICEF, VVOB and World Education.

The Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) was created in 2014 to respond to SRGBV by raising awareness and finding solutions to ensure schools are safe, gender-sensitive and inclusive environments, where boys and girls can learn to unleash their full potential. The Group has expanded to more than 100 members representing 50 organizations, including humanitarian actors, civil society organizations, and regional and national offices. [www.ungei.org/srgbv](http://www.ungei.org/srgbv).