

# Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response

Focus on South Asia (Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan)



Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



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This *Focus on South Asia* brief summarises emerging findings around the impact of COVID-19 on learning, wellbeing and return to school from Girls Education Challenge (GEC) projects in Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan. It is one of a series of five regional *Emerging Findings* briefs which covers the time period from March 2020 to June 2021.

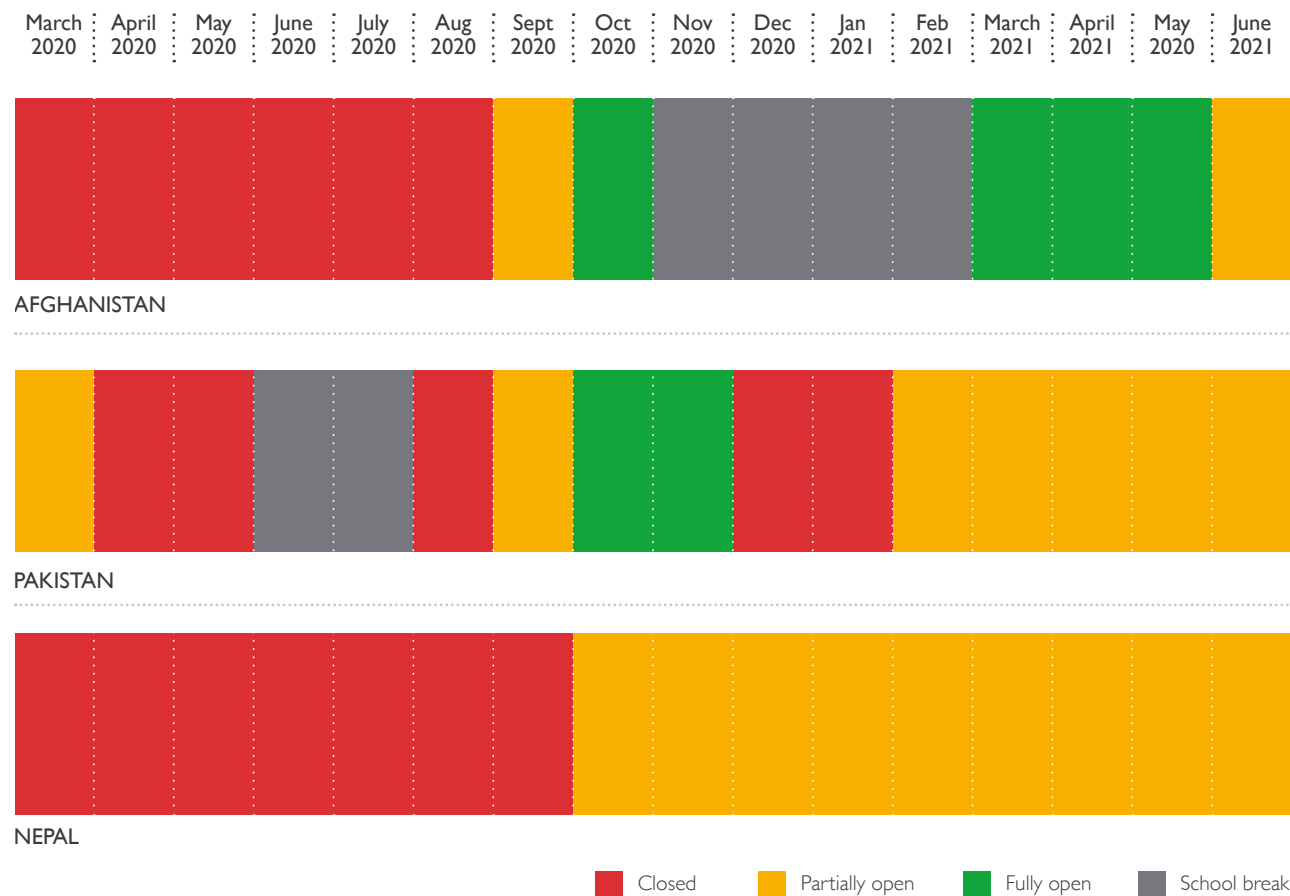
It is primarily aimed at South Asian national governments, INGOs and NGOs working in the region who are interested in understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on learning, wellbeing and return to school. This brief has continued relevance because of the ongoing uncertainty and continued impact on schools and in some cases, school closures and learning. It outlines interventions that support the reopening of schools, and the continuation of remote learning where schools remain closed.



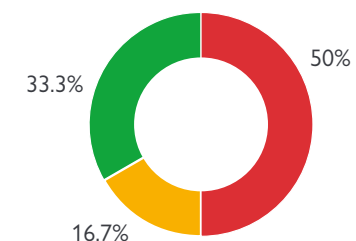
# Summary

The evidence presented in this paper around learning, wellbeing and return to school from the GEC projects in South Asia was collated from March 2020 to June 2021.

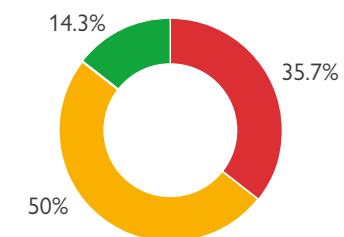
## Schools closures | March 2020 to June 2021



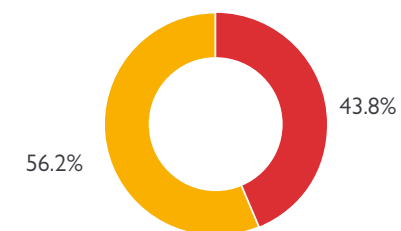
AFGHANISTAN



PAKISTAN



NEPAL



# Summary

## IMPACTS ON GIRLS' LEARNING

- Unequal access to remote learning modalities has been a common constraint across Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal. In addition, those most disadvantaged (e.g., from poor households or rural areas) before Covid-19 were the least likely to access remote learning.
- One of the reasons was a lack of access to modalities (TV, radio, phone) and the associated costs.
- Many girls live with parents or caregivers who are illiterate and were thus less likely to help girls with their studies.
- Projects also found that girls faced increased pressure to do housework and agricultural labour instead of learning.
- **Solutions:** Projects used multiple modalities to reach girls and ensure learning continuity. These included providing worksheets, printed materials that included self-guided materials, audio recordings and radios, conducting learning sessions via phone, and small group learning when restrictions eased.

## IMPACTS ON GIRLS' SAFETY AND WELLBEING

- There has been an increase in domestic violence and abuse reports in the three countries, with some projects concerned that girls may not get help due to fears of stigma.
- Projects have also reported increases in child marriage in Nepal and Pakistan. In Nepal, there were instances of families marrying girls during COVID-19 as it is cheaper (they do not need to pay for the whole family to attend).
- Projects are also reporting increases in girls' stress and anxiety levels in both Afghanistan and Nepal. Alarmingly, there were also increased reports of attempted suicide cases in the region.<sup>1</sup> Some projects, such as *Sisters for Sisters* in Nepal, reported increased suicides amongst adolescents, particularly girls.
- **Solutions:** Projects used individual tracking; staying in regular touch with girls; community awareness and working with families to prevent early marriage; community awareness-raising on gender-based violence (GBV), COVID-19 etc. via radio and group discussions; working alongside government agencies and parental engagement to address GBV; training of teachers on safeguarding; life skills sessions; psychosocial support; counselling and the strengthening of referral mechanisms.

## IMPACTS ON GIRLS' RETURN TO SCHOOL

- Almost 9 million primary and secondary school-aged children are expected to drop out of school across South Asia permanently.<sup>2</sup> In addition, projects in all three countries reported an increase in the number of girls dropping out.
- Marginalised girls were likely to have high housework burdens, which negatively impacted learning during school closures and the likelihood of returning to school.
- Projects reported the following reasons for dropout: early marriage, economic-linked migration and increased work burden. Girls did not want to return as they lost confidence in their learning abilities; girls did not return as they did not have uniforms. In addition, some parents were concerned about sending girls back to school because of fears of COVID-19.
- **Solutions:** Project interventions included: back to school campaigns: community mobilisation and follow up (for example, home visits by teachers) for those who had not returned or had low attendance; training teachers on dropout prevention; parental engagement; material support to girls (e.g. uniforms and learning materials), and remedial classes.



# Introduction

During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted 188 countries to enforce national school closures and lockdowns, impacting approximately 98.5% of the world's student population<sup>3</sup>. As the year progressed, studies and reports began to note how these school closures and lockdowns disproportionately affected women and girls, particularly the most marginalised.<sup>4</sup> Several tools were developed to track the educational effects of the pandemic. However, most did not include extensive information on girls' education.<sup>5</sup> This brief presents the work carried out with projects to provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on girls' educational opportunities and life chances, particularly in the 17 countries in which the GEC operates.

This paper focuses on the South Asia region, specifically [Afghanistan](#), [Nepal](#) and [Pakistan](#),<sup>6</sup> and is part of a series of regional papers<sup>7</sup> that provide a comprehensive review<sup>8</sup> and analysis of 90 studies, articles and reports produced on or within the 17 GEC countries regarding the impact of school closures and lockdowns on girls' learning, safety, wellbeing and return to school. The review also includes analyses of COVID-19 impacts specifically on GEC girls, drawn from GEC projects' quarterly reports.<sup>9</sup> GEC projects further validated and elaborated upon these findings and analyses during two workshops and reviews of an initial paper conducted in March and April 2021.<sup>10</sup> These workshops also explored and discussed GEC project activities and interventions that have shown promise with regard to addressing COVID-19 impacts on girls.

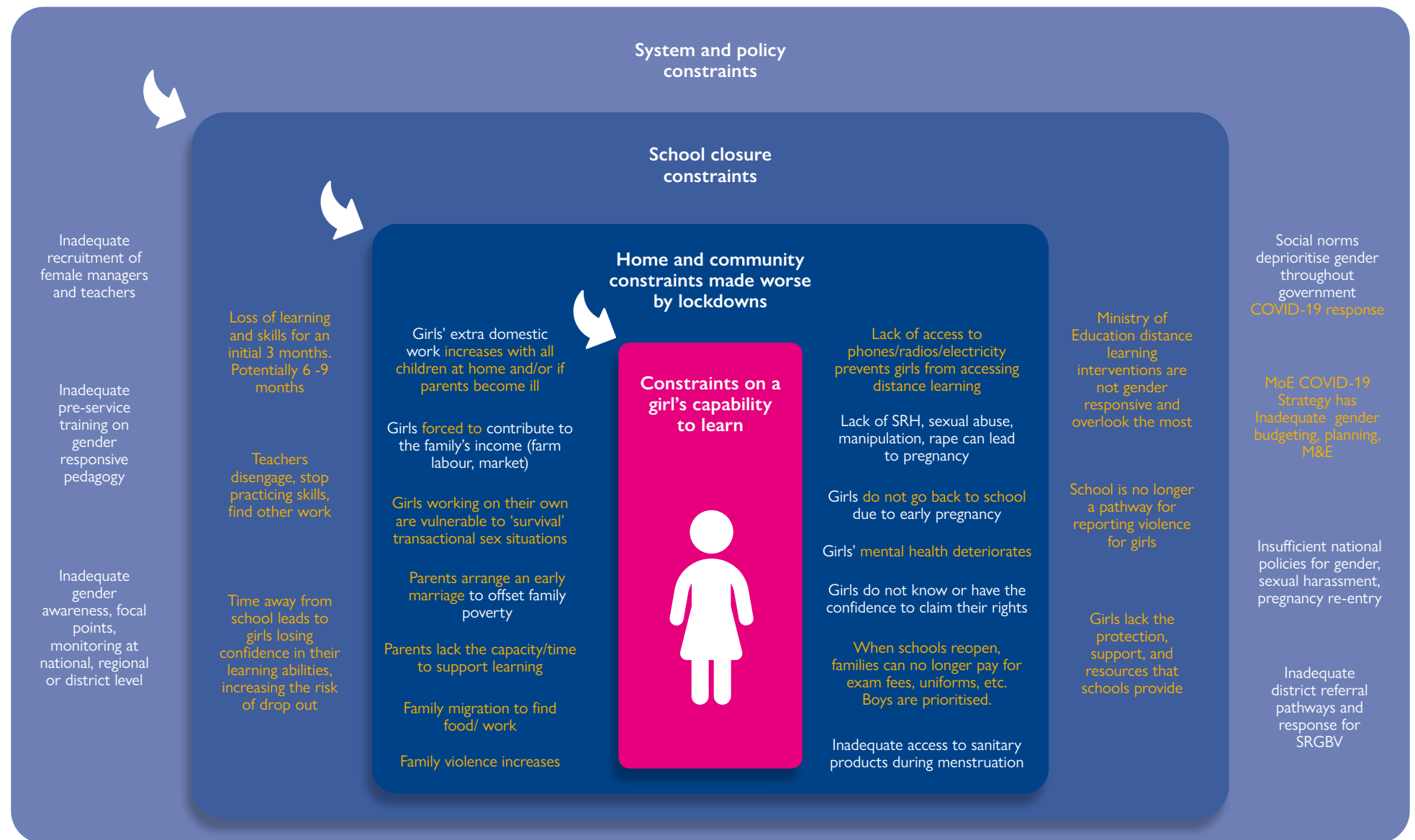
# Emerging findings

Overall, the types and degrees of COVID-19 impacts on girls varied across countries and contexts within individual countries (e.g. rural or urban locations). However, a common theme emerged, irrespective of country or context, that COVID-19 exacerbated existing constraints and created new ones on girls' educational opportunities and life chances. For example, school and community education centre closures and lockdowns increased girls' vulnerability to sexual violence and increased their domestic chore burden as they cared for siblings and sick relatives. Girls who lacked access to mobile phones, radios or electricity *before* COVID-19 were disadvantaged even further during COVID-19, as this access was needed to participate in most distance learning activities. Subgroups, such as girls with disabilities, also faced increased stigma, discrimination and safeguarding risks.

Figure 1 provides examples of the many new or exacerbated constraints (noted in yellow) experienced by girls in most GEC countries and contexts, including the girls served by projects in South Asia.<sup>11</sup> These constraints are located within the different levels of the education system: the home and community level, school (closure) level, and system and policy levels.

The following sections summarise the impact of COVID-19 on girls' learning, safety, wellbeing, and school return in the South Asia region (Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan) and provide an overview of the GEC activities and interventions that address adverse impacts.

Figure 1: New and exacerbated constraints on girls' access to education<sup>12</sup>



# Impacts on girls' learning

Across South Asia, school closures since March 2020 have left 420 million children out of school, which has impacted children's access to learning opportunities.<sup>13</sup> For example, a simulation of learning loss in Pakistan estimates that closures will result in a loss of between 0.3 and 0.8 years of learning-adjusted schooling for the average student.<sup>14</sup>

In the region, girls are less likely to be accessing remote learning opportunities than boys.<sup>15</sup> There is unequal access to distance learning in Pakistan, with the already marginalised children the most likely to be excluded with poverty, gender, and location intersecting to entrench exclusion.<sup>16</sup> Across South Asia, only 7% of children could access online learning materials during the early phases of school lockdowns.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, projects reported unequal access to distance learning, with many GEC girls unable to access it. Those most disadvantaged *before* COVID-19 (e.g., from rural areas and poorest households) were the least likely to access remote modalities during school closures ([STAGES](#) Afghanistan, [Aarambha](#) Nepal, [TEACH](#) Pakistan).

One of the reasons is simply the lack of access to distance learning modalities and the associated costs. For example, the [TEACH](#) project in Pakistan reported that government schools lacked resources to move to online learning. The project also reported issues with internet access and learners not accessing radio lessons because of the lack of mobile devices. Both were more of an issue in rural areas. In Afghanistan, only 22% of children followed classes broadcast on TV, and 7% followed classes broadcast on the radio.<sup>18</sup> In addition, 15% of parents reported that their

adolescent sons were using television programs to learn, compared to 9% reporting the same about their adolescent daughters ([STAGES](#), Afghanistan).

An additional layer of disadvantage is that many of the most marginalised girls live with parents or caregivers who are illiterate and are thus less likely to help girls with their studies. In Afghanistan, for example, 30% of women and 55% of men are literate.<sup>19</sup> In addition, those from the poorest households are more likely to have increased work burdens. Projects also found that girls faced increased pressure to do housework and agricultural labour instead of learning ([Aarambha](#) Nepal, [Closing the Gap](#) Pakistan).

A typical intervention across the region used multiple modalities to reach different groups and ensure learning continuity for the most marginalised. These included the provision of worksheets and printed materials which included self-guided materials, audio recordings (e.g. via MP3) and the provision of radios. Projects also trained teachers to provide remote support to learners, often via phone sessions. In addition, small group sessions were established in communities across the three countries when restrictions were eased.

Some projects provided girls with remote support via phone sessions conducted regularly by teachers. The [Aarambha](#) project in Nepal assessed that phone-based distance learning was the only feasible low-tech remote modality given the lack of access to other modalities such as internet in the communities they work in. Girls received calls three times a week from their teacher which focused on a learning objective linked to a pre-decided topic and lesson plan. While there were some phone access and network issues, a pilot with 200 girls had high attendance rates in the phone sessions.



## Afghanistan

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### Literature review findings:

In Afghanistan, many parents were unable to support their children's learning due to low literacy levels (30% of women and 55% of men are literate). Furthermore, the low level of access to technology (only 14% of adults using the internet, see [Barr 2020](#)) is reflected in the number of children accessing distance learning. Of the classes broadcast on TV, 22% have accessed them and only 7% have accessed radio lessons. Note: the statistic reflects a more urban sampling than the average distribution across Afghanistan – most GEC projects are in remote areas with even less coverage and access (see [Samuel Hall 2020](#)).

### Project findings:

**STAGES** found that most government school students were unable to learn from the MoE's resources. For example, 43% of girls spent over two hours a day remote learning ([CARE 2020](#)); 15% of boys and 9% of girls used television-based classes, 4% used radio, 7% boys and 12% girls used mobile phones.

### Core interventions:

**STAGES** used home-based learning materials (e.g. worksheets) supplemented by home visits from local community-based education teachers and small groups once schools reopened. Teachers received remote continuing professional development (CPD) through Viamo (a video platform) interactive voice response modules. Phones provided to teachers enabled technology and internet access to women for the first time. Home-based materials were developed and facilitated by teachers.

The **Continuation of Education for Marginalised Girls** in Afghanistan' project provided home learning kits and guides for community-based girls. A teacher support hotline for students to call and additional remedial support classes were added upon reopening.

## Nepal

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### Literature review findings:

The majority (52%) of children were studying at home during school closures and only 12% took classes through radio, TV and online ([UNICEF 2020](#)).

### Project findings:

**Aarambha** reported that 89% of girls faced increased pressure to do housework and agricultural labour at the cost of school work. ([Grant 2020](#)). Furthermore, 27% of girls could not be reached through distance learning.

**MnM** reporting revealed that the lack of face-to-face interaction diminished girls' confidence

### Core interventions:

**MnM** during school closures, audio recordings, printed worksheets and phone-based small group sessions were supplemented by learning camps for girls with lower outcomes. This work was facilitated by community-based focal points and used a 'Teaching at the Right Level methodology' as restrictions eased.

**ENGAGE** used one-to-one and small group peer learning with home visits for children with disabilities. Peer learning by Big Sisters (older girls) and National Volunteers facilitated the literacy, numeracy, and life skills content.

**Aarambha** used lesson plans shortened or adapted to learning over the phone; small groups in Community Learning Centres (CLCs) once restrictions eased.

**STEM II** engaged and trained teachers using virtual platforms facilitated by STEM teaching and learning staff.

**SfS** used radio, TV, printed worksheets facilitated by peer group leaders, teaching English, maths, science and health, life skills.

## Pakistan

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### Literature review findings:

[Geven & Hasan 2020](#) estimated school closures will result in a loss of between 0.3 and 0.8 years of learning-adjusted schooling for the average student and unequal access to distance learning excluding the already-marginalised children ([Malik 2020](#); [Gulnaz & Malik 2020](#)).

### Project findings:

**TEACH** found that government schools did not have the resources to continue their education programmes online. However, issues were accessing the internet, particularly in the remote areas of the targeted districts. In addition, radio lessons were hard to access due to a lack of mobile devices and late communication of when lessons were being aired.

**Closing the Gap** saw a reduction in time to study due to more significant domestic and care work burdens. However, as most teachers were from rural areas, they could teach to a certain extent.

### Core interventions:

**Closing the Gap** used small groups in learning centres to teach literacy, numeracy and life skills. This was supplemented with worksheets and telephone support from local teachers during school closures.

**TEACH** broadcasted radio programmes twice a day to maximise reach with peer listening groups to share devices and contact with caregivers were prioritised to help increase the effectiveness of radio programmes. Support was provided to ensure that parents understood the radio broadcast schedule, and they were provided with tips for enhancing listening and extending learning activities with their children. In addition, the literacy and numeracy accelerated learning programmes (ALP) and female teachers facilitated life skills (aligned with the national ALP curriculum).

# Impacts on girls' safety and wellbeing

Projects have documented the negative impact of COVID-19 on the safety and wellbeing of women and girls across all three countries, which correlates with the broader external evidence both across South Asia and globally. For example, there has been an increase in reports of child abuse, child marriages, domestic violence, violence against women, rape and kidnapping in Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> In addition, there has been an increase in requests for treatment of GBV injuries and psychosocial support in Afghanistan due to domestic violence.<sup>21</sup> As with the other regions in the GEC portfolio, projects reported increasing gender-based or domestic violence in Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan.

According to the *TEACH* project (Pakistan), many survivors of domestic violence refused to seek help through referrals due to the fears of stigma and discontinuation of their education. Projects have also reported increases in child marriage in Nepal and Pakistan. In some instances, families were marrying girls during COVID-19 as it is cheaper; they do not need to pay for the whole family to attend ([Sisters for Sisters](#), Nepal).

Projects are also reporting increases in girls' stress and anxiety levels in both Afghanistan and Nepal. For example, the *STAGES* project (Afghanistan) found that 30% of girls reported anxiety or depression.<sup>22</sup> Alarmingly, there were also increased reports of attempted suicide cases,<sup>23</sup> with some projects, such as *Sisters for Sisters* in Nepal, relaying increases in actual suicides amongst adolescents – particularly girls.

Project interventions focused on individual tracking and staying in touch with girls (e.g. through weekly wellbeing checks, peer groups and home visits) and working at multiple levels to keep girls safe. For example, in Afghanistan, *Shura*<sup>24</sup> members were instrumental in checking in on girls' wellbeing, following up on violence cases, and working with families and community members to prevent early marriage.<sup>25</sup> Community awareness-raising on child marriage, GBV, COVID-19, and radio and group discussions were also common across all projects. [Marginalised No More](#) (Nepal) focused on working alongside government agencies to address gender-based violence, and other projects such as *STAGES* (Afghanistan) and [ENGAGE](#) (Nepal) focused on parental engagement. For example, *STAGES* supported household visits by teachers and staff to talk to parents about supporting children's psychosocial needs during COVID-19.

Other projects focused on supporting life skill sessions, with many projects updating their life skills curriculum to incorporate relevant psychosocial support messaging and contextualise to COVID-19. Some life skills sessions were delivered via phone or in small groups. Other projects such as [STEM II](#) and *Aarambha* (Nepal) supported psychosocial counselling and strengthened and supported referral mechanisms for girls.

Aware that COVID-19 has increased protection risks for girls, the *TEACH* project (Pakistan) engaged men and boys at the community level through informal sessions. In these sessions, information about safeguarding protocols is shared, and the risks and barriers to learning that girls faced are identified and discussed. There is a focus on prevailing gender norms and men and boys' roles in helping promote and support girls' education and empowerment.





## Afghanistan

### Literature review findings:

Literature shows increased requests for treatment of GBV injuries and psychosocial support due to domestic violence during COVID-19 (WHO EMRO 2020). Furthermore, this period also saw increases in attempted suicide cases due to GBV (Cousins 2020).

### Project findings:

STAGES estimated that 30% of girls suffered from depression or anxiety (CARE 2020). There was also an increased risk of early marriage and GBV. However, girls also reported that shura<sup>26</sup> members followed up on cases of violence against girls (19%), checked on girls' wellbeing (15%) and that shura members sought to prevent early marriages (14%).

### Core interventions:

STAGES implemented Psychological First Aid (PFA) training for teachers and staff and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum in class. In addition, household visits were carried out by teachers and staff, which engaged parents using 'Parenting without guidance' (support to understand children's feelings and how to explain the situation to different age groups). This was supported by community awareness-raising on child marriage, GBV, Psychosocial support (PSS), and COVID-19 via radio and group discussions.

The **Continuation of Education for Marginalised Girls in Afghanistan** project provided essays, creative writing, and drawing materials. This was supported by home visits to families and girls by programme organisers for girls at risk of dropout, linking girls or families to COVID-19 testing or treatment and teacher training on child abuse and response.

## Nepal

### Literature review findings:

Increased support by agencies was observed in Nepal during COVID-19 school closures; for example, the

National Women Commission helpline received 885 calls related to domestic violence from April to June 2020 (over twice that received from December 2019 to February 2020) (Sharma 2020a). One in ten survey respondents reported increased physical violence in the household; 5% reported noticing increased violence towards children in their communities. (UNICEF 2020). 48 complaints of child sexual assaults in the first six weeks of lockdown (compared to a total of 211 cases in the previous fiscal year) (Sharma 2020b) increased child marriage (Sharma & Gettleman 2021) and cases of GBV (K.C. 2020).

### Project findings:

SfS saw significant increases in early marriage and youth (particularly girls) suicide rates, possibly since getting girls married was cheaper during COVID-19 due to not needing to pay for the whole family to attend.

### Core interventions:

MnM used weekly wellbeing checks via phone, referrals to a specialist counsellor for most in need. Additional activities included alumni groups set up for peer support and a sustainable safeguarding mechanism. Information circles sensitised communities on topics including child marriage and GBV.

ENGAGE used peer mentoring via Big Sisters and parental engagement and support for children with disabilities via home visits. Additional activities included radio broadcasts on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), child protection, GBV and child marriage.

Aarambha implemented weekly wellbeing checks via phone tracking 96% (1,709) of girls. Wellbeing was checked and monitored through community actors (change champions) and the CLC management committee. Additional activities included a life skills curriculum updated with PSS activities and referral support delivered via phone sessions and small groups. The project also started local radio broadcasting around girls' continuous learning and critical protection concerns (GBV, child marriage, school dropout).

STEM II worked on individual tracking to understand

wellbeing and welfare, oriented on COVID-19 and set up helpline numbers for PSS counselling.

SfS used peer Mentoring to implement PFA training for Big Sisters, community mobilisers and staff. Extra activities included implementing a reporting system in schools which the local government has now scaled up.

## Pakistan

### Literature review findings:

The literature highlighted increased reports of child abuse, child marriages, domestic violence, violence against women, rape and kidnapping. (Shakil 2020). The Cyber Harassment Helpline saw increased complaints from January to February 2020 to March to April 189% (UNESCAP 2020).

### Project findings:

Closing the Gap saw nine cases of child marriage reported in three months in 2021, despite community mobilisation and consultative sessions with learners' parents.

TEACH reported that girls were concerned about domestic violence, although they refused to acquire assistance through referrals due to the fears of stigma and discontinuation of their education.

### Core interventions:

Closing the Gap implemented the following activities to support girls: life skills sessions delivered by female coaches, community mobilisation (including engaging community leaders and men and boys), consultative sessions with parents on child marriage and the importance of girls' education and awareness-raising around GBV.

TEACH trained Mother Caregivers Groups in life skills to strengthen family involvement. They also trained facilitators and mentors in PFA and Safeguarding, supplied girls' dignity and recreational kits, and ran community sensitisation through informal sessions.

# Impacts on girls' return to school

Across South Asia, almost 9 million primary and secondary school-aged children are expected to drop out of school permanently.<sup>27</sup> Pakistan has high dropout predictions, particularly among girls, with estimates as high as 930,000 dropping out of primary and secondary education.<sup>28</sup> Projects in all three countries reported an increase in the number of girls not returning to school.

As already outlined, marginalised girls are more likely to have higher housework burdens, which will likely negatively impact learning during school closures and the likelihood of returning to school. In Afghanistan, for example, women spent 18.7 hours a day on domestic and care work, while men spent 5.6 hours. Since COVID-19 domestic burdens have increased dramatically; the *Closing the Gap* project (Pakistan) has linked this to economic losses. Increased burdens have negatively impacted opportunities to learn during school closures. Many marginalised girls have not had access to remote learning opportunities. Linked to a lack of engagement with learning, girls have also reported a decreased confidence in their academic abilities as a reason for not returning to school.

Other reasons projects reported for dropout included early marriage, economic-linked migration and girls not returning as they did not have uniforms. In addition, some parents are concerned about sending girls back to school because of fears of COVID-19.

Project interventions to support the return to school have included back-to-school campaigns, community mobilisation, and follow-up for those who had not returned or had low attendance (for example, home visits by teachers). For example, the continuation of education for marginalised girls in Afghanistan trained teachers on dropout prevention. *Closing the Gap* (Pakistan) worked with parents to ensure girls can attend class during harvest timings. Other projects provided material support such as uniforms or learning materials (*ENGAGE*, Nepal). Several worked with schools and communities to establish remedial support for learners who had fallen behind their peers. Many of these interventions are having a positive impact on re-enrolment and attendance.

Many projects have focused on ensuring that classrooms are safe and are working with communities and education staff to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmissions. *STAGES* (Afghanistan) are helping ensure that there is access to soap and clean water for handwashing and there are regular temperatures checks. They are also promoting healthy behaviour such as social distancing and personal hygiene.



## Afghanistan

### Literature review findings:

Pre-COVID-19, 5 million out of 12 million school-aged children were already out of school ([Mehrdad 2020](#)). It is anticipated that many more will have dropped out, particularly girls, as they face more significant housework burdens, social isolation and less internet access. More significant housework burdens exist for girls reducing access to school. A 2019 study reported that Afghan women spent 18.7 hours on domestic and care work, while men spent 5.6 hours ([Barr 2020](#)).

### Project findings:

**STAGES** – reported that parents were concerned about the lack of classroom space and WASH facilities (see [Hall 2020](#) study: parents raised health concerns: “I will not allow my children to go to school until I am sure that COVID-19 is gone”). However, it is more challenging to convince girls who have never been to school to enrol as they have become accustomed to the COVID-19 learning centres.

### Core interventions:

**STAGES** used Viamo to run dropout prevention training for teachers. In addition, they organised group discussions with community members, shura members, and parents on COVID-19 classroom procedures. Small group classes in larger spaces for social distancing with heating was provided and classes ran in shifts. Emerging findings indicate that for the ALP cohort, retention of girls has been successful and learning assessments show gains in learning from their initial zero or no literacy level.

The **Continuation of Education for Marginalised Girls** in Afghanistan’ project used back-to-school campaigns, teachers’ home visits, and project staff to students who hadn’t returned or had irregular attendance after reopening. They also provide COVID-19 materials (e.g. masks, hand sanitiser), extra catch up classes, remedial classes and continued the teacher hotline support after reopening for homework help. Early findings show that most girls retained and re-entered school and active usage of the teacher hotline by students.

## Nepal

### Literature review findings:

Literature highlights that 53% of female students may not return to school. Risks identified include: girls not studying at home, loss of income in the household and girls reported concerns around not being able to return (need to work or provide care at home, lack of parental support, limited financial resources) ([Sharma 2020](#)). 49% of girls surveyed are at higher risk of not returning to school ([Room to Read 2020](#)).

### Project findings:

**MnM** reported that girls have dropped out due to early marriage or economic-linked migration. In addition, some girls were unable to re-enrol as they did not have a school uniform and some girls did not want to return to school (e.g. because they are concerned about looking older than their peers, lack confidence in their learning abilities).

### Core interventions:

**MnM** Implemented robust tracking of the cohort and targeted support based on needs and barriers. Wrap-around support and community management committees made home visits to support girls. In addition, the project used alumni groups, counselling, inclusive training for teachers and gender focal points to support retention. Early findings show that 80% of the cohort aged 10-14 (highly marginalised) has enrolled.

**ENGAGE** used remedial classes to support the transition to school. In addition, seed money was given to families for school costs (uniforms, stationary). Return to school was supported by radio campaigns. Early findings show that 1,014 girls have now transitioned back to school after passing their achievement test. In addition, 51% of girls could retain their learning over the lockdown period and transition to schools.

**Aarambha** enrolled a new cohort of 2,454 out-of-school girls in 122 CLCs supported by CLC management committees to encourage family engagement and support

retention. Results show that 2,454 new girls enrolled in non-formal education. All these girls completed part 1 of the non-formal education (NFE) curriculum and attended life skill sessions. In addition, 1,135 girls prepared transitional life plans, out of which 12 girls were enrolled in formal schools.

## Pakistan

### Literature review findings:

26.1 million students were unenrolled and dropped out of school in March 2020. Approximately 13 million remain unenrolled, of which 60% are girls. EduFinance COVID-19 impact assessment findings reported that 63% of parents stated they do not plan to send their daughters back to school; 94% said they would send their sons back ([Ali 2020](#)). Globally, Pakistan is where expectations are that the highest dropouts due to COVID-19 will occur, particularly among girls ([Geven & Hasan 2020](#)).

### Project findings:

**Closing the Gap** reported the reasons for increased dropout to include increased work burden on the family linked to economic losses, child marriage and migration issues.

### Core interventions:

**STAGES** opened 80 centres in 2020, enrolling 2,359 girls in November. In addition, an engagement strategy to motivate parents to allow girls to attend class during harvest season, so adjusted timings, was implemented with increased attendance. Early results show that attendance has increased by 16%, with learners increasing from 949 to 1,049.

**TEACH** implemented small groups that used a shift system that was able to continue during school closures. Results show that 8,980 adolescent girls were studying in home-based classes.



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# What next?

This paper has reported the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls' learning, wellbeing and return to school. Projects have reported what they did in response to COVID-19, the activities they implemented and the pivots they made to programming. As we move into the next phase of COVID-19, where at the time of writing, COVID-19 case rates are rising in some places and schools are re-closing (Pakistan and Nepal), the need to continue to collect evidence and document the evolving challenges faced by girls and what interventions are successful or not is crucial.

The evidence reported here will be revisited in 2021 through projects' discussion and reporting, resulting in an updated paper. The intention is to find out and document, as schools reopen, evolving challenges faced by girls, what interventions were successful and why, using project data, assessment data and reporting.



# Annexes

## A: GEC South Asia Project Glossary

Project Lead Organisation	Project Name (linked to GEC website project page)	Country	Funding window <sup>29</sup>
ACTED	<a href="#">Closing the Gap</a>	Pakistan	LNGB
NB: Organisation name is not included for security reasons	<a href="#">Steps Towards Afghan Girls' Education Success (STAGES)</a>	Afghanistan	GEC-T
NB: Organisation name is not included for security reasons	<a href="#">Steps Towards Afghan Girls' Education Success (STAGES)</a>	Afghanistan	LNGB
Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC)	<a href="#">Continuation of education for marginalised girls in Afghanistan</a>	Afghanistan	GEC-T
International Rescue Committee (IRC)	<a href="#">Teach and Educate Adolescent Girls with Community Help (TEACH)</a>	Pakistan	LNGB
Mercy Corps	<a href="#">Supporting the Education of Marginalised Girls in Kailali II (STEM II)</a>	Nepal	GEC-T
People in Need (PIN)	<a href="#">Aarambha (Our Turn)</a>	Nepal	LNGB
Street Child	<a href="#">Marginalised no More (MnM)</a>	Nepal	LNGB
Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)	<a href="#">Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls with Education (ENGAGE)</a>	Nepal	LNGB
Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)	<a href="#">Sisters for Sisters' Education (SfS)</a>	Nepal	GEC-T

## B. Collation of findings

This paper brings together two types of data and information regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on girls' learning, safety, wellbeing and return to school:

1. Contextual findings for the South Asia region, including information and data at the national level or a particular area or city
2. GEC project findings, entailing information and data about project beneficiaries

Both these sets of findings have their limitations. Based on the GEC review of country-level research and data at the time, it became apparent that there is a shortage of rigorous research conducted on the impacts of COVID-19, particularly regarding adolescent girls. This can be attributed to several factors, including the recentness of the pandemic, the limited systematic focus of response efforts and research on adolescent girls and the lack of gender-disaggregated data.<sup>30</sup> Most global, country or regional-level reports based their predictions or estimates of effects mainly on data from previous crises such as the Ebola outbreak in 2016 or on emerging evidence from countries with reporting systems in place<sup>31</sup> or on emerging evidence from countries with reporting systems in place.<sup>32</sup> A [UNICEF Report](#) (2021) modelled their dropout rate predictions in South Asia on both rates of school dropouts during Ebola in Guinea and Sierra Leone and dropout rates during the 1997 financial crisis in Indonesia. No comprehensive or rigorous research has been conducted on the impacts of COVID-19 on adolescent girls in Global South countries. Information and data presented in this paper should, therefore, generally be viewed as indicative.

At the GEC project level, the rigour of findings varies from project to project. Reports of COVID-19 effects on girls span a wide range, including anecdotal findings from project Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and results from robust surveys or assessments. Given the different types of data reported and the differing sizes of projects, sample

sizes for this GEC project information and data vary. This is understandable and not necessarily problematic, as this paper aims to provide an understanding of what we know and do not know via the collation of information at project and country levels (with further validation from workshops).

The following sections present this collation of information on the impacts of COVID-19 via three thematic areas:

1. Impacts on learning (i.e., loss or gains and why these occurred)
2. Impacts on safety and wellbeing (particularly regarding pregnancy, early marriage, gender-based violence (GBV), mental health)
3. Impacts on girls' return to school

For each theme, country and contextual data are presented together with GEC project-level data for comparative purposes.

It should be noted that the findings presented, particularly with regard to learning, highlight the impacts on girls' *opportunities* to learn as opposed to the actual *achievements* in this area. There are several reasons for this:

1. National exams for many countries have been delayed or cancelled due to school closures (exam data are also limited to students in exam grades, which applies to a relatively small proportion of GEC girls)
2. No comprehensive or rigorous assessment of learning achievements has been conducted in GEC countries (that has been published or is in the public domain), generally due to the difficulties of inter and intranational travel
3. GEC projects have conducted only a very limited number of learning assessments for similar reasons; however, the assessments that have been conducted are certainly noted in the findings

With regard to girls' safety, it is only possible to understand levels of 'negative achievement' via reports of violence, marriages, pregnancies, female genital mutilation (FGM), etc. Unfortunately, reporting systems on these incidents at

district or national levels before COVID-19 were patchy at best in many countries. However, GEC projects actively pick up these incidents regarding their beneficiaries due to increased capacity development in safeguarding and the Fund Manager's SHE system.<sup>33</sup> That said, wellbeing is a much more nuanced and complex area to report systematically; however, projects have reported on cases they have noted.

Finally, reporting on achievements in girls' return to school is the most straightforward area to track and measure, and as such, many projects and countries have been able to report on this.

As discussed, the limitations in both global and GEC data make it difficult to draw any hard and fast conclusions about the impacts of COVID-19 on girls; hence this paper aims to more broadly provide an understanding of what we know and do not know at this point. However, our growing understanding of COVID-19's impacts on girls' *opportunities* to learn, be safe and return to school will prepare us for when robust data on achievements (or lack thereof) is produced. More importantly, it has already allowed GEC projects to develop strategies to improve girls' opportunities in the face of school closures and lockdowns and will continue to do so.

## Endnotes

- 1 See [Cousins 2020](#).
- 2 [Main Report.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#).
- 3 See [UNICEF 2021](#).
- 4 See [de Paz et al. 2020](#) and [UN Women 2020](#).
- 5 Education tracker tools are summarised here: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/8-tracking-tools-covid-19-data-education>.
- 6 The countries listed here are not meant to represent South Asia as a region, rather they are the projects included in the GEC in this geographical area.
- 7 There are 5 Emerging Findings briefs that cover South Asia, Southern Africa, Central Africa, West Africa and East Africa. [Click here](#) to access the GEC website resources page.
- 8 Literature was collected via a wide online search and included documents produced from March 2020- March 2021. All documents cited in this paper are listed in the bibliography where links are available.
- 9 [Annex A](#) provides a list of all Girls' Education Challenge Transition (GEC-T) and Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects in South Asia.
- 10 These workshops initiated the GEC's broader strategic refresh, which aims to set the direction of the GEC from 2021–2025. Please note that not all GEC projects were represented at each workshop; hence, additional validation was gleaned through circulation of this draft report.
- 11 It should be noted that the figure does not unpack additional constraints due to intersections with disability, ethnicity and other forms of marginalisation.
- 12 It should also be noted that under normal circumstances (prior to COVID), there are also numerous constraints at the school/classroom level.
- 13 [Main Report.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#).
- 14 See [Geven & Hasan 2020](#).
- 15 [Main Report.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#).
- 16 See [Malik 2020](#) and [Gulnaz & Malik 2020](#).
- 17 [FCDO – GEC 2021](#).
- 18 See [Samuel Hall 2020](#).
- 19 See [Barr 2020](#).
- 20 [Shakil 2020](#).
- 21 [WHO EMRO 2020](#).
- 22 STAGES II (2020) COVID-19 Rapid Gender Analysis June 2020: Summary of Findings, Girl Survey, p.10-11
- 23 See [Cousins 2020](#).
- 24 Shuras are school or community-based education committees in Afghanistan
- 25 STAGES project reporting
- 26 Shuras are school or community education centre based management committees
- 27 [Main Report.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#).
- 28 [World Bank Document](#).
- 29 The GEC has two funding windows GEC-T and LNGB. Projects funded through the GEC-Transition window primarily reach girls in the formal education system and projects in the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) window focus on reaching out-of-school girls primarily through community-based education initiatives.
- 30 See [Rafaeli & Hutchinson 2020](#).
- 31 For example, the [Malala Fund 2020a](#) draws on data from the Ebola epidemic and estimates that approximately 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school after the crisis has passed, if dropouts increase by the same rate. Other estimates/predictions include: [Save The Children International 2020a](#) estimates that 9.7 million children may never return to school post-COVID-19 and that an additional 2.5 million girls are at risk of child marriage and adolescent pregnancies are expected to rise by up to 1 million in 2020. [World Vision International 2020](#) estimates that as many as one million girls across sub-Saharan Africa may be blocked from returning to school due to pregnancy during COVID-19 school closures. [UNESCO 2020](#) estimates that about 24 million students (from pre-primary to tertiary) will be at risk of not returning to education. [UNFPRA 2020](#) estimates a one-third reduction in progress towards ending GBV by 2030, including FGM and child marriage.
- 32 For example, in some countries with robust reporting systems in place, reported cases of violence against women have doubled ([UN 2020](#))
- 33 The GEC FM incident reporting system used primarily for safeguarding and fraud cases.



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