The closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic affected an estimated 94 per cent of all students worldwide, or 1.6 billion children and youth. It is estimated that 40 per cent of the poorest countries did not support at-risk students during the pandemic, resulting in limited access to quality and inclusive learning modalities and safety nets to those who needed them the most.

Girls were particularly affected by the limited availability of time to study at home. Many faced increased burdens of caring for sick family members, fetching water, and caring for younger siblings. Students have also been facing limited access to basic needs and mental health issues. As of July 2020, the proportion of families of marginalised girls without cash income in Somalia had increased by 48 percentage points, affecting food security; 62 per cent of adolescent girls were facing severe anxiety, while 60 per cent reported severe depression.

As schools reopen, many girls are being left behind. In March 2021, UNESCO estimated that 11 million girls might not return to class after the reopening of schools. For girls living in areas affected by conflict and natural disasters, the likelihood of returning to school is even lower.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>As of (date)</th>
<th>% of girls who did not return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Somalia</td>
<td>November 2020</td>
<td>20 per cent (formal education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern-Central Somalia</td>
<td>June 2021</td>
<td>14 per cent (accelerated classes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
<td>4 per cent dropout, 8 per cent unable to return due to security issues (formal education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
<td>5 per cent (formal education)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Girls were particularly affected by the limited availability of time to study at home. Many faced increased burdens of caring for sick family members, fetching water, and caring for younger siblings.”

Developing Positive Solutions

Data from six CARE projects show that the majority of the marginalised students accessed remote learning through the use of printed materials (Figure 1). Television, radio, and internet-based options were mostly inaccessible in rural and remote areas and in the poorest households.

When done well, some interventions are proving to be successful in mitigating the impact of the crisis. For example, the provision of printed materials tailored to girls’ learning levels and linguistic backgrounds, compounded with remote support by teachers, contributed to increased uptake of remote learning in South Somalia: from 53 per cent in July 2020 to 70 per cent in May 2021. The participation in remote learning modalities adapted to marginalised girls’ needs is mitigating learning losses: girls who studied remotely in Somalia had higher literacy and numeracy scores than their peers who did not study at home. In Timor-Leste, 67 per cent of the primary female students engaged in remote learning had used a children’s magazine published in the main local language to study at home. Children’s use of the magazine at home resulted in improved literacy outcomes, mitigating learning losses.

The development of blended learning options, where students have the option of combining in-person and remote learning, is opening new opportunities for adolescent girls who struggle to attend class regularly due to security issues and/or work. The success of COVID-19 responses depends, however, on an integrated response where girls not only have access to adequate remote learning options and teacher support, but are also leading on the design and implementation of activities to prevent absenteeism and dropout and mitigate mental health issues.
The Power of Girl-Led Groups

Over the past decade, CARE has included girls’ leadership skills development as a core component of our education programming, acknowledging the transformational impact of strengthening girls’ agency and shifting gender norms on learning outcomes. Before the pandemic, adolescent girls taking part in leadership clubs in Somalia had increased their learning scores by 16 percentage points over a comparison group who were not in leadership clubs.\textsuperscript{14} Leadership scores were found to predict learning outcomes in Somalia\textsuperscript{15} and Nepal\textsuperscript{16}. The development of leadership skills enhances girls’ ability to ‘learn to learn’, giving them an expanded vision of different future possibilities, increased participation in class, and an increased capacity to work with others to reduce barriers to education.\textsuperscript{17}

During the pandemic, adolescent girls who engaged in leadership clubs took a key role in disseminating information about COVID-19 in their communities, mobilising study groups, tracking cases of absenteeism and dropout, and preventing early marriages, with support from adult and youth mentors. Girls participating in leadership clubs have been instrumental in ensuring that their peers’ return to school. In Zimbabwe, adolescent peer leaders have co-ordinated the distribution of learning materials to other students during lockdown, organised small groups for remote learning, and sought to engage out-of-school girls in learning circles, mitigating the impact of the pandemic.\textsuperscript{18}

Girls have also been supporting their peers through psychosocial first aid and helping to break taboos about seeking support for mental health issues. In South Somalia, the proportion of adolescent girls facing depression was found to be 50 per cent lower among those attending Girls’ Empowerment Forums, compared to girls who did not participate in this activity (9.6 per cent compared to 19 per cent).\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, 60 per cent of the assessed girls were able to discuss depression with friends.\textsuperscript{20}

Girl-led action has been a key strategy to disseminate information on COVID-19 prevention in rural and remote areas, among low-literate populations and minority groups. In India, girls’ collectives have designed their own posters and messages and used phone calls to share information on prevention measures among low-literate Dalit communities, helping to dispel myths and disinformation about COVID-19.\textsuperscript{21}
By taking the lead in the COVID-19 response, adolescent girls are also contributing to shift perceptions about traditional gender roles and female capacity. Similar girl-led efforts supported communities in Mali, Somalia and Zimbabwe, reducing vulnerability among some of the most fragile communities globally. In Mali, adolescent-led groups (brigades) took the lead in mapping issues and improving hygiene and sanitation conditions in their schools. The local education office acknowledged the effective impact of student training.22

By taking the lead in the COVID-19 response, adolescent girls are also contributing to shift perceptions about traditional gender roles and female capacity. The leadership skills practiced through girl-led action also contribute to maximizing their participation in class and reinforcing individual and collective capabilities that enhance girls’ engagement in remote learning. Skills they have demonstrated include the ability to plan, self-organise, have a vision for a different future, as well as the capacity to work with others to realise it. At a moment when most governments are struggling to mitigate the impact of combined crises, particularly in fragile contexts, girls’ leadership skills development and girl-led action offer valuable levers of change, maximising the potential of remote learning and the likelihood of return to school, as well as the promise of long-term change in traditional gender norms and age-related power relationships.

This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.

2 Ibid, p.8


5 Monitoring findings, AGES project, November 2020

6 Monitoring findings, SOMGEP-T project, June 2021

7 Preliminary findings of the final evaluation of the STAGES II project

8 Daouna Développement Conseils (2021) *Evaluation Finale du Projet Education pour le Changement (Jannde Yiriwere)*, p.38


12 Secondary analysis of data from the midterm evaluation of CARE’s Lafaek Learning Media project, February-March 2021


15 Ibid


18 Limestone Analytics (2021) *IGATE-T Endline Evaluation*, p.45-46

19 Secondary analysis of monitoring data, AGES project, June 2021


22 CARE Mali (2021) *Education for Change Final Report*, p.21; p.23