

! Anyone can publish on Medium per our [Policies](#), but we don't fact-check every story. For more info about the coronavirus, see [cdc.gov](#).

COVID-19 and Girls' Rights: A Series

Part Four: EDUCATION



WITH AND FOR GIRLS

Apr 7 · 6 min read

In this series With and For Girls shares learning, resources, knowledge and calls to action regarding the impact of COVID-19 on girls globally. It draws from the Collective partners, girl leaders at the grassroots level and the leadership team at Purposeful, within which With and For Girls is a programme.

The series will highlight how, in this global health and economic crisis, girls will continue to be the worst affected, and a multitude of issues will be exacerbated, whilst new concerns and inequalities will also arise. We talk to girls in organisations we work with that are responding to unique challenges under COVID-19 and we will highlight the vital work done by girl-led and girl-centred organisations that require urgent additional funding at this critical moment.





Credit: Plan International/Pieter ten Hoopen

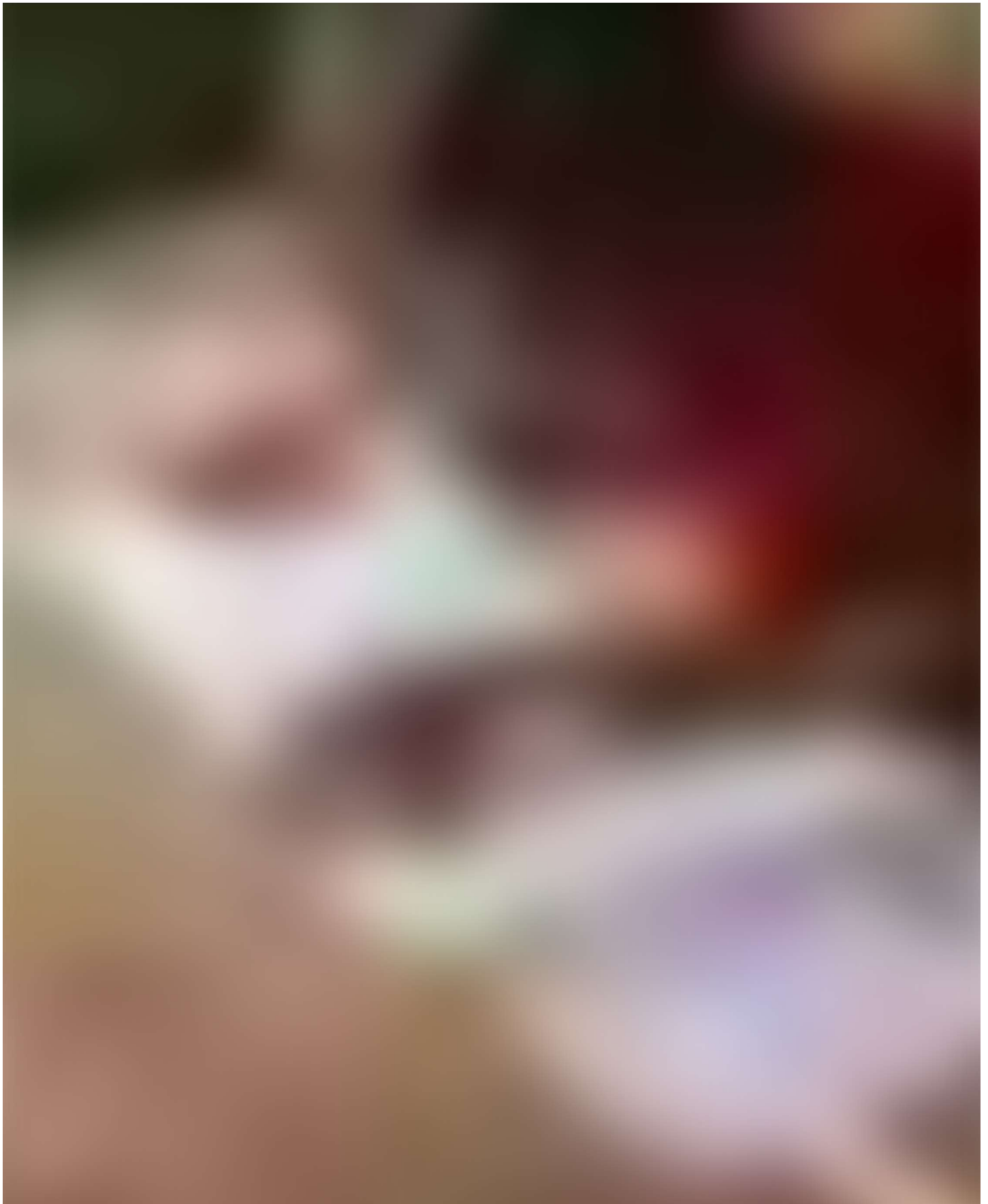
For Part Four of the **COVID-19 and Girls' Rights Series** Plan International, one of the eleven With and For Girls Collective strategic partners, and UNESCO warn of the potential for increased drop-out rates which will disproportionately affect adolescent girls, further entrench gender gaps in education and lead to increased risk of sexual exploitation, early pregnancy and early and forced marriage.

COVID-19 School Closures Around the World Will Hit Girls Hardest

Out of the total population of students enrolled in education globally, UNESCO estimates that over 89% are currently out of school because of COVID-19 closures. This represents 1.54 billion children and youth enrolled in school or university, including nearly 743 million girls.

Over 111 million of these girls are living in the world's least developed countries where getting an education is already a struggle. These are contexts of extreme poverty, economic vulnerability and crisis where gender disparities in education are highest. In Mali, Niger and South Sudan — 3 countries with some of the lowest enrolment and completion rates for girls — closures have forced over 4 million girls out of school.

For girls living in refugee camps or who are internally displaced, school closures will be most devastating as school often represents the only stable environment refugee girls have access to. Refugee girls at secondary level are only half as likely to enrol as their male peers: when refugee girls experience a break in their education they are even less likely to return.



Credit: Plan International/Tommy Trenchard

We are only just beginning to understand the economic impacts of COVID-19, but they are expected to be widespread and devastating, particularly for women and girls. In the Global South, where limited social protection measures are in place, economic

hardships caused by the crisis will have spill-over effects as families consider the financial and opportunity costs of educating their daughters.

While many girls globally will continue with their education once the school gates reopen, many of the most vulnerable girls will never return to school. Education responses must prioritise the needs of adolescent girls' at the risk of reversing 20 years of gains made for girls' education.

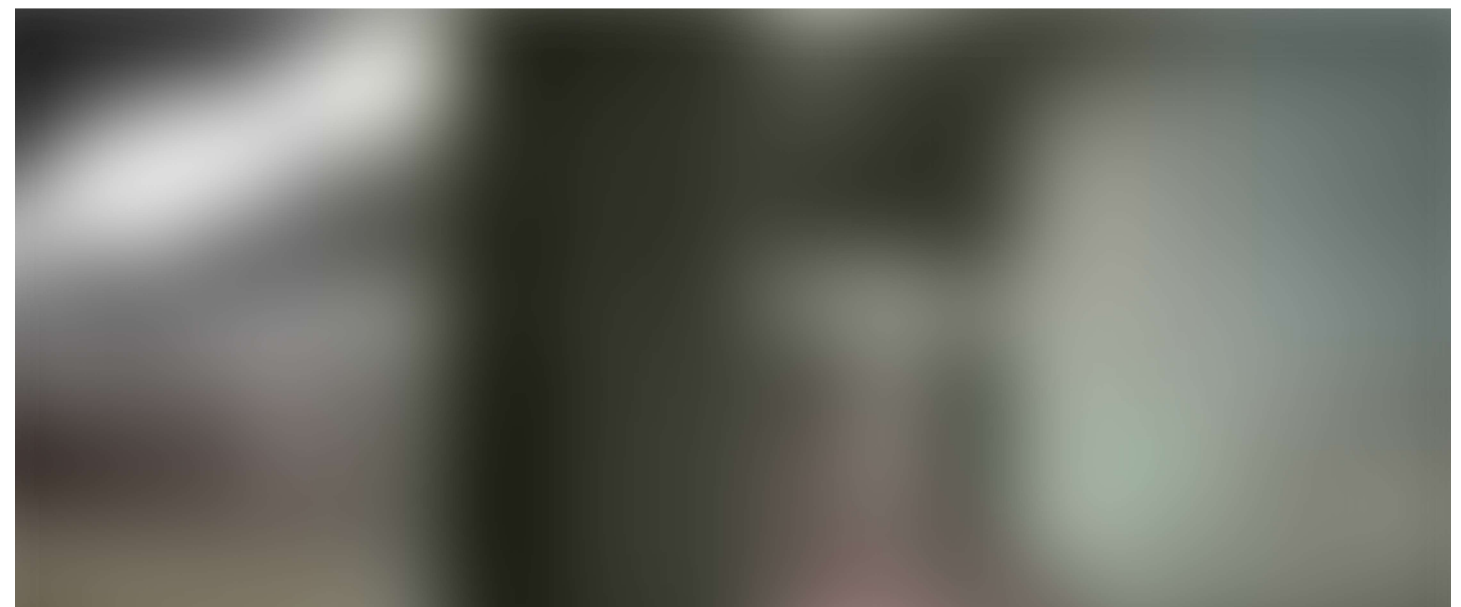
Learning from the impact of Ebola on girls' education

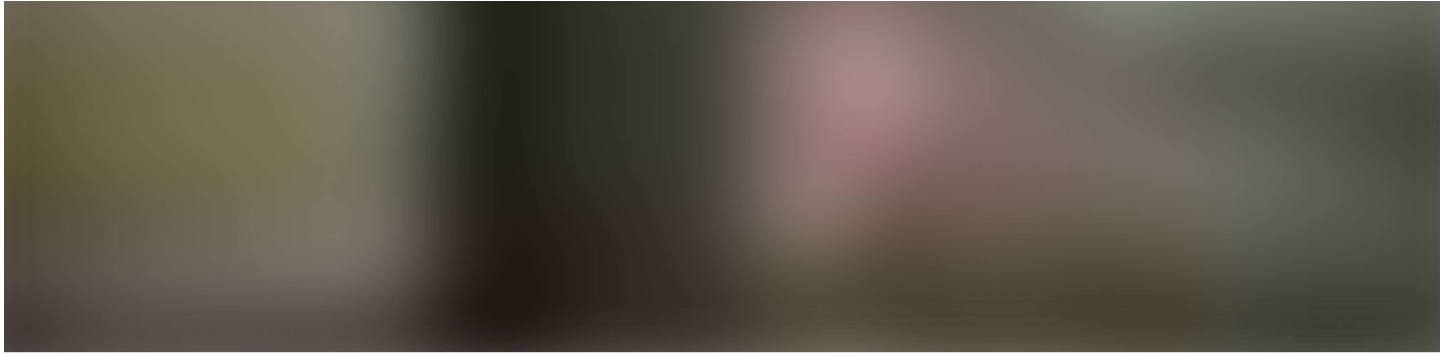
“Schools are left empty as an abandoned nest. I am so sad. Being at school can help to protect girls from pregnancy and marriage. Many of my friends are getting pregnant and I realised some have been forced into early marriage.”

— Christiana, 17, Sierra Leone (during the Ebola Crisis of 2014)

While the magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented, we can look to the lessons learnt from the Ebola epidemic in Africa. At the height of the epidemic, 5 million children were affected by school closures across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, countries hardest hit by the outbreak. And poverty levels rose significantly as education was interrupted.

In many cases, school drop-outs were caused by an increase in domestic and caring responsibilities and a shift towards income generation. This means that girls' learning at home was limited, as shown by Plan International's analysis. In villages with established “girls' clubs” and existing sensitization efforts to promote girls' education, fewer girls experienced adverse effects and were more likely to continue their learning.





Credit: Plan International/Vincent Tremeau

Several studies found that the closure of schools increased girls' vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse both by their peers and by older men, as girls were often at home alone and unsupervised. Sexual exploitation, in the context of selling sex for food and other essentials, was also widely reported as vulnerable girls and their families struggled to cover basic needs. As family breadwinners perished from Ebola and livelihoods were destroyed, many families chose to marry their daughters off and bring an end to their education, falsely hoping this would offer them protection.

In Sierra Leone, adolescent pregnancy increased by up to 65% in some communities during the Ebola crisis. In one study, most girls reported this increase was a direct result of being outside the protective environment provided by schools. Many of these girls never returned to the classroom, largely due to a recently revoked policy preventing pregnant girls from attending school.

Protecting girls' education from COVID-19

For girls like Christiana, who have lived or are living through a crisis, education is a lifeline, offering protection from violence and exploitation and providing them with skills and hope for a brighter future.

As governments prepare for indefinite school closures, policy makers and practitioners can look to lessons from past crises to address the specific challenges faced by girls. We therefore call on governments to protect progress made in favour of girls' education through these six gender-responsive, evidence-based and context-specific actions:

- **Leverage teachers and communities:** Work closely with teachers, school staff and communities to ensure inclusive methods of distance learning are adopted and communicated to call for continued investments in girls' learning. Community sensitization on the importance of girls' education should continue as part of any distance learning programme.


- **Adopt appropriate distance learning practices:** In contexts where digital solutions are less accessible, consider low-tech and gender-responsive approaches. Send reading and writing materials home and use radio and television broadcasts to reach the most marginalised. Ensure programme scheduling and learning structures are flexible and allow self-paced learning so as not to deter girls who often disproportionately shoulder the burden of care.
- **Consider the gender digital divide:** In contexts where digital solutions and internet connection for distance learning is accessible, ensure that girls are trained with the necessary digital skills, including the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe online.
- **Safeguard vital services:** Girls and the most vulnerable children and youth miss out on vital services when schools are closed, specifically school meals and social protection. Make schools access points for psychosocial support and food distribution, work across sectors to ensure alternative social services and deliver support over the phone, text or other forms of media.
- **Engage young people:** Give space to youth, particularly girls, to shape the decisions made about their education. Include them in the development of strategies and policies around school closures and distance learning based on their experiences and needs.
- **Ensure return to school:** Provide flexible learning approaches so that girls are not deterred from returning to school when they re-open. This includes pregnant girls and young mothers who often face stigma and discriminatory school re-entry laws that prevent them from accessing education. Allow automatic promotion and appropriate opportunities in admissions processes that recognise the particular challenges faced by girls. Catch-up courses and accelerated learning may be necessary for girls who return to school.


More information on UNESCO's response to the COVID-19 crisis is available [here](#).

More information on Plan International's response to the COVID-19 crisis is available [here](#)

[About](#) [Help](#) [Legal](#)

Get the Medium app

 A button that says 'Download on the App Store', and if clicked it will lead you to the iOS App store

 A button that says 'Get it on, Google Play', and if clicked it will lead you to the Google Play store