



Teachers leading global drive to improve girls' education became frontline workers during COVID-19 closures



Interviews with teachers at the forefront of international efforts to improve girls' education reveal that many have taken on humanitarian roles, as well as working as educators, during the COVID-19 crisis.

Their experiences are captured in a Government-commissioned report assessing UK-funded programmes for marginalised girls in some of the poorest parts of the world. It shows that when COVID-19 forced schools to close, the roles of educators working for these projects expanded dramatically.

Around 85% of those interviewed by researchers said they had provided some form of physical or mental health assistance on top of their educational duties. Many appear to have gone to extraordinary lengths to provide critical healthcare, safeguarding and pastoral care to girls who were at extreme risk of dropping out of education, amid efforts to keep them learning.

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The independent report for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office assesses the Government-backed 'Girls' Education Challenge' (GEC), which is providing literacy,

numeracy and life skills education to a million of the world's most marginalised girls.

Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge, and one of the authors, said: "When schools closed, the GEC projects underwent a transformation, operating not just as educational initiatives, but assuming a humanitarian role. Without this, the pandemic's impact on girls' learning might have been even more severe."

The research team analysed 10 GEC projects, all of which use networks of teachers, volunteers and 'para-educators' (such as mentors) to meet the complex challenge of supporting girls in communities that are under-resourced, remote and often in recent or current war zones.

They focused in particular detail on two projects in Afghanistan, and one each in Ghana and Sierra Leone. Their analysis involved interviews with staff, pupils, government officials and other stakeholders; as well as classroom observations and a wider impact assessment. The work was undertaken before the international withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.



The report highlights how the pandemic unleashed new difficulties which further impeded educational opportunities for girls in countries where their enrolment and attainment is already low. Once schools closed, their families often expected them to perform domestic or income-

generating labour, or get married, rather than learn. Closures also cut off their access to teachers, who for some were trusted confidantes. This contributed to a surge in health problems, stress and anxiety.

At the same time, national-level remote learning programmes often failed to reach these girls, who often lacked not just computers, televisions and radios, but sometimes a reliable electricity supply. In Ghana, for example, 80% of the pupils interviewed were aware that TV lessons were being broadcast in their country, but only 34% had been able to watch them

Under these circumstances, the report finds, educators on the GEC projects took on a pivotal 'bridging' role – especially female, community-based teachers, who were able to establish vital face-to-face contact with students. For safeguarding reasons, male staff were unable to do the same.

To keep students learning, teachers provided numerous other forms of support. Some helped refer pupils who were struggling to community or social services, while many disseminated COVID-19 safety information and dropped off PPE supplies. The report records cases of teachers helping girls who were pregnant, or in one case providing ad hoc support to a pupil with epilepsy.

"The lack of guidance prevented us from studying so we could not read our lessons well. When I called the teacher, our mobile card ran out."

Student in Afghanistan

Project managers organised extra training for staff in areas such as psychological first aid, stress management, wellbeing support, and COVID-19 mitigation. Teachers also received child protection and gender equality training, partly in response to evidence of a rise in gender-related violence. The Sierra Leonean project, which gathered specific data on this issue, found that 19% of girls and 20% of female mentors reported increased violence towards women and girls during the pandemic, rising to 38% in one district. In recognition of the

extent of gender-based violence, projects put in place several measures to address it and ensure teachers were equipped to do the same. Many teachers interviewed for the report particularly welcome this guidance.

In general, teachers felt that the additional training they have received during the pandemic improved their ability to do their job by attending to the welfare of their students. Little attention appears to have been paid to their own wellbeing, however. “The additional work they were shouldering affected their own mental health, led to work-related burnout, and put extra pressure on their home life,” Rose said. This was especially the case for female teachers.

Among multiple recommendations, the report calls for:

- The recruitment of more community-based, female teachers, who played a critical role in keeping girls’ learning going during closures.
- Closer integration between the GEC projects and health, social care, and other services, given teachers’ widened responsibilities.
- More provision for two-way contact between teachers and students in future lockdowns, to ensure that pupils receive appropriate guidance and feedback when learning remotely.
- More wellbeing support for teachers, as well as their students.

Rose added: “As we start to build back from COVID-19, we need to examine what these additional expectations and pressures mean for teachers and education systems. We should look particularly hard at the implications for burnout, recruitment, retention and training.”

The full report is available on the [Girls’ Education Challenge website](#).

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