Distance Learning: COVID-19 and the Digital Gap in Technology & Education

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Graduate Women International
SDG 4 Quality Education

Graduate Women International (GWI)

Distance Learning:
COVID-19 and the Digital Technology Gap

Without access to the right technology, millions of learners worldwide, especially women and girls, will be unjustly prevented from the education opportunities offered by distant learning. In a world where almost half of the population does not have access to the Internet, the pandemic has revealed first hand the limitations of such disparity.

11 million

The number of girls who may **never** return to school[1]

School closures due to COVID-19 puts their education and their futures at risk.

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1 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report. The Malala Foundation estimates at least 20 million affected girls will not go back to school

Foreward

The COVID-19 crisis is bringing into light again the significance of education while simultaneously highlighting its vulnerability during global emergencies[1]. The COVID-19 compulsory social distancing creates more dependency on technology and forces the drastic and widespread adaptation of education methods to digital platforms.

Concerningly, in an era of networked societies, COVID-19 school shutdowns are affecting women and girls particularly, putting them at higher risk of dropping out, of losing their fundamental human right to education and of jeopardizing their present and future academic and professional opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a global learning disruption of unprecedented scale and severity and has caused the most significant threat in history to education. A staggering **300 million students** are out of school[2]. The closure of schools, universities, and other knowledge institutions and the interruption of literacy and lifelong learning programmes have disrupted the lives of an estimated **1.6 billion students** globally[3].

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The pandemic threatens a seismic reversal of the hard-earned gains of 180 million more girls enrolling in primary and secondary school, and a three-fold increase in third-level education since adopting the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years ago[4]. The pandemic is the largest shock to education in history, and the magnitude of this shock is not yet realised. The World Bank report estimates a loss of **$10 trillion dollars** in earnings over time for the current generation of students.

COVID-19 has shown what digital exclusion looks like, especially for girls

Even before COVID-19, mobile e-learning using various hand-held devices was becoming more and more necessary in rural areas of the world in order to reach a much broader audience especially women and girls who have limited access to brick and mortar educational systems.
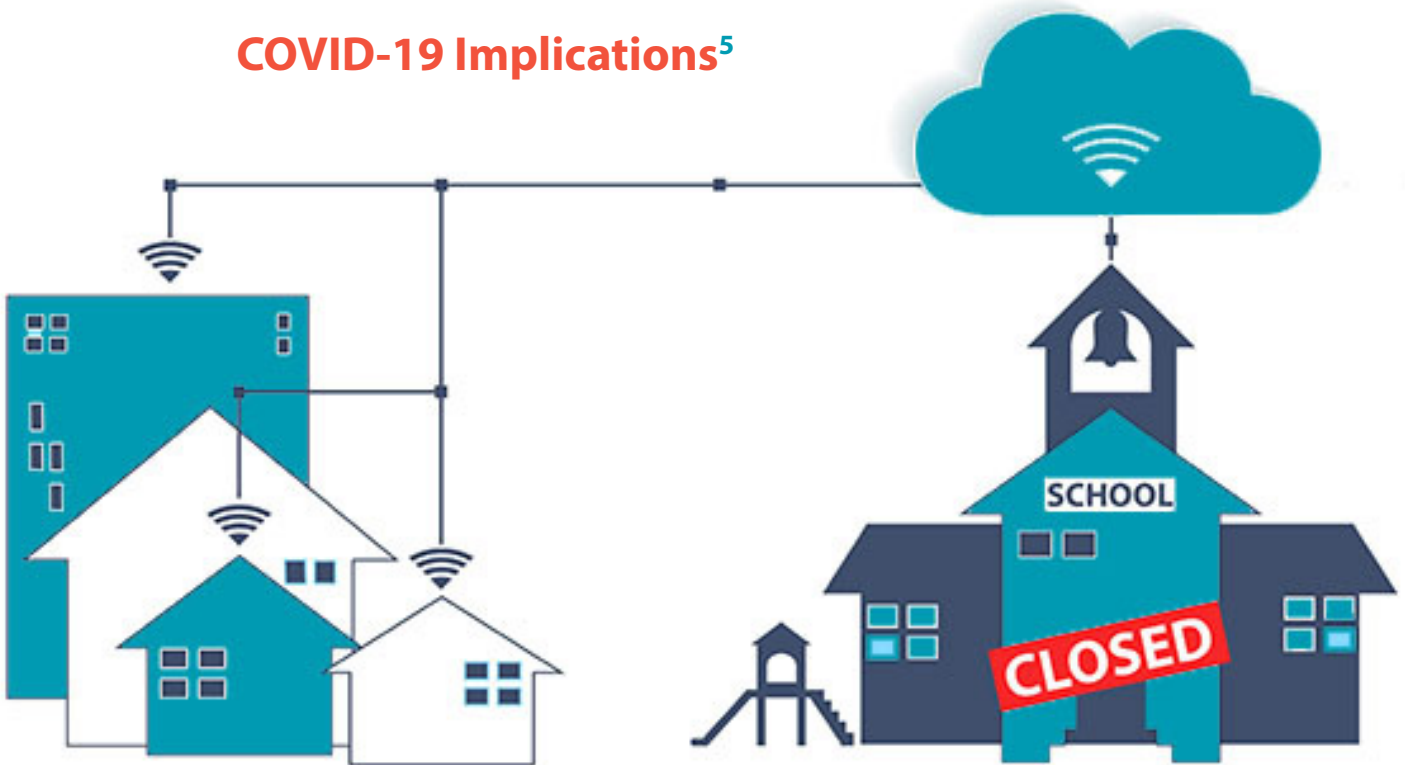
4 QUALITY EDUCATION

PROGRESS towards INCLUSIVE and EQUITABLE quality educations was already too slow

Over 200 million children will still be out of school in 2030

COVID-19 Implications[5]

SCHOOL

CLOSED

Remote learning remains
OUT OF REACH FOR
at least
500 million students

School closures kept
90%
of ALL STUDENTS OUT OF SCHOOL
Reversing years of progress on education

Prior to COVID-19 only half the world's population (49%), representing 3.7 billion people, had access to digital technology.

"Although remote learning is provided to many students, children and young people in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, such as those living in remote areas, extreme poverty, fragile states and refugee camps, do not have the same access thereto. The digital divide will widen existing gaps in equality with regard to education.[6] "

During and post COVID-19, solutions to connecting the other 51% must include collaboration across sectors and a multi-stakeholder partnership approach to find ways to connect rural areas in an atmosphere that benefits the rest of the world.

In 2021 that means more

Collaboration
International solidarity
Domestic funding
COVID-19 recovery and tranformation

that all lead to
more equal and sustainable societies
and a better education and future for her.
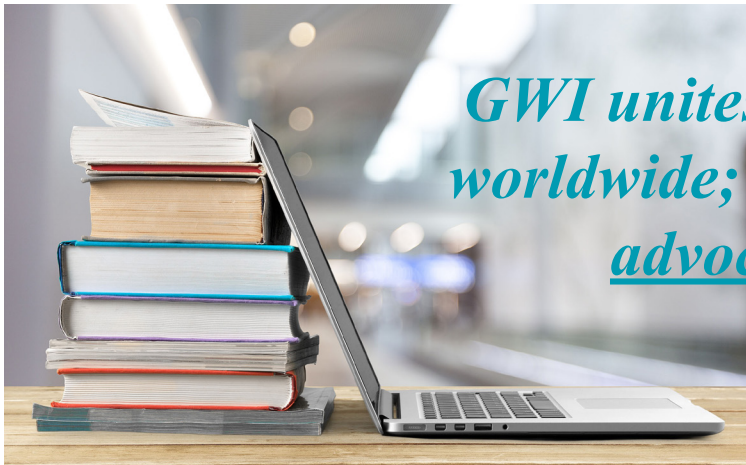
GWI unites women graduate voices worldwide; women who are staunch <u>advocates for the empowering potential of education</u>, in-classroom or online.
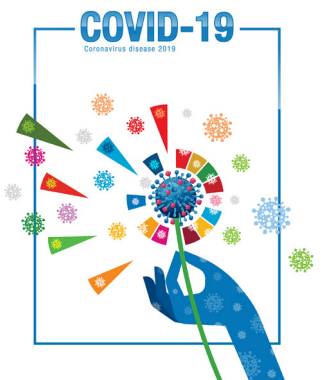
UN Conventions and Documents

Universal Declaration of Human Rights
The Declaration, Article 26, calls for free and compulsory elementary education

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
adopted in 1989, goes further to stipulate that countries shall make higher education accessible to all

Both failed to account for a global health pandemic that would drastically alter conventional classroom access to education and traditional learning methods, perhaps **forever.**

DISTANCE LEARNING

Course | Student | Learning | Communication | E-learning | Online education | Everywhere | Evaluating

The Evolution of Digital Technology in Education as a GWI advocacy priority

Over the last decade, there has been a general recognition of the increasing use of digital technologies in education and an ever-increasing need for society to acquire digital technology skills not only for education but for day-to-day activities at home such as banking and online play and entertainment not to mention the various needs of digital technology in the workplace and business, educational and academic environments and health care systems. Digital access is required for such services as access to social grants, filing for business relief, unemployment and food relief, passport and visa services, e-health services, and emergency information in times of crises.

With the strict social and physical distancing measures in place due to COVID those offline populations are further isolated and risk being excluded from various services that are being increasingly digitalized.

The world is currently witnessing large-scale efforts to implement the use of technology in support of distance learning with a commendable adaptation capacity of educators globally. The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) makes education more flexible and accessible, allowing disenfranchised populations to cross the systemic barriers they face to access quality lifelong education[7]. Multiple studies have further highlighted the benefits of virtual education from the learner's perspective: e-learning requires 40 to 60% less time to learn than in a traditional classroom. It allows students to work at their own pace and to focus on concepts of interest[8].

With digital technology and ever-increasing applications for education, GWI began expanding its support to embrace the new realities.

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The Digital Divide

Abruptly in early 2019, along came COVID-19 with unprecedented school shutdowns world-wide and the almost instantaneous need for educational institutions to go virtual and along with it, the recognition of global inequalities in access to digital technologies.

GWI quickly recognized that in order to reduce digital technology gap inequalities, a holistic approach to the problem is needed that includes:

- extended digital access, with an aim at attaining universal access to the internet;

- reduced cost of connection and digital devices;

- developing digital skills training for basic literacy for digital access for people of all ages; and

- raising awareness of the benefits and risks of all technologies.

Without access to the right technology, millions of learners worldwide, especially women and girls, will be unjustly prevented from the education opportunities offered by distance learning.

Digital Equity

"Digital Equity" is about making sure students have equal access to technology like devices, software, sufficient bandwidth and connections speeds for the internet, and that they have trained educators to help them navigate those tools.

Equity of access [to technology] in education refers to the ability of all students to receive an education from qualified teachers with sufficient resources that are reasonably equally available for all students in same system.

Equity of access now includes access to devices to use digital content and connect to fellow students, educators and experts throughout the world. It also means sufficient high-speed broadband to the district, the school building, the classroom and the home.

"Building back better" post-COVID-19 means closing the gap in the technological divide. The use of educational technologies must accompany large-scale enterprises of expanding Internet connectivity. Mobile phones alone are not enough to guarantee digital inclusion. Many online activities, such as job searches, creation of a curriculum, school education for children or training courses for adults, need adequate tools to be carried out.

Without access to the right technology, millions of learners worldwide, especially women and girls, will be unjustly prevented from the education opportunities offered by distant learning. In a world where almost half of the population does not have access to the Internet, the pandemic has revealed first hand the limitations of such disparity[9]. Reliable and inexpensive connectivity is required, especially in remote places if digital learning is to thrive.

The digital divide prevents those farthest behind from accessing online resources to continue education. As example, in Western Europe and North America, at least one in seven students do not have access to the Internet at home. This figure rises to 80% in sub-Saharan Africa and 88% in Least Developed Countries. Unless we take urgent action, more than 24 million children are at risk of dropping out of school.

All students should have an equal opportunity to succeed.
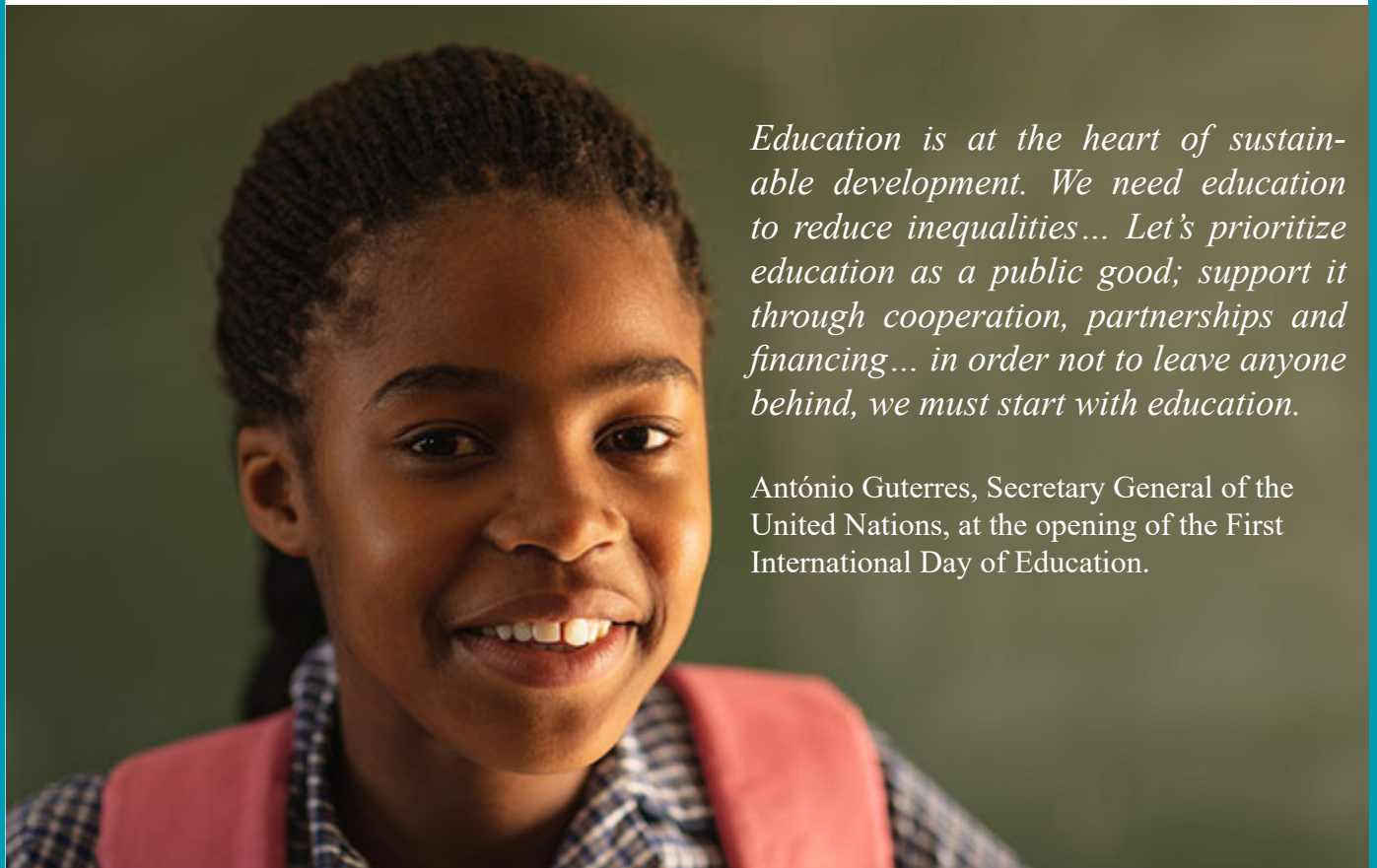
Education is at the heart of sustainable development. We need education to reduce inequalities... Let's prioritize education as a public good; support it through cooperation, partnerships and financing... in order not to leave anyone behind, we must start with education.

António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, at the opening of the First International Day of Education.

GWI's Position

Graduate Women International (GWI) acknowledges the promising possibilities of distance learning as a means towards equal, safe and inclusive access to education for all and especially critical for women and girls.

GWI warns that implementing distance learning:
- *necessitates overcoming crucial challenges*
- *highlights the imperative of leaving no one behind. This is true for children and youth affected by a lack of resources or enabling environment to access learning, the teaching profession and their need for training in new methods and for the education community at large including local communities upon whom the education community depends during a crisis, key to building back better.*

The Need for Systemic Change

All of the above events have triggered the full blown recognition of a need for a reset in the approach to education for the current generation and those generations to follow leading to an obvious need for systemic change in our education systems globally.

Not since World War II have so many countries around the world seen schools and educational institutions go into lockdown at around the same time and for the same reason. While we know that the impact of this virus will be far-reaching, what might it mean in the longer term for education? For a while now, educators around the world have been talking about the need to rethink how to educate future generations.

Is COVID-19 the disruptor needed to get educators to:
- rethink how they educate
- question what they need to teach, and what they are preparing students for and
- what technologies will be needed to do so?

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis how will students of today best be prepared for the world of tomorrow? According to a Dell Technologies report[10], 85% of the jobs in 2030 that Generation Z and Alpha will enter into have not been invented yet. According to this World Economic Forum report[11], 65% of primary-school children today will be working in job types that do not exist yet.

The COVID-19 crisis may well change our world and our global outlook; it may also teach us about how education needs to change to be able to better prepare our young learners for what the future might hold.

How can education change today to prepare this young learner for job types that have not even been invented yet?

Possible systemic changes might include:

1. Educating citizens in an interconnected world

COVID-19 illustrates how globally interconnected we are; there is no longer such a thing as isolated issues and actions. Successful people in the coming decades will need to leverage their differences and work in a globally collaborative way.

2. Redefining the role of the educator

With students being able to gain access to knowledge, and even learn a technical skill, through a few clicks on their phones, tablets and computers, the role of the educator in the classroom will need to be redefined.

3. Teaching life skills needed for the future

In the future, employers will be looking for skills such as creativity, communication and collaboration, alongside empathy and emotional intelligence.

4. Unlocking technology to deliver education

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in educational institutions across the world being compelled to suddenly harness and utilize the suite of available technological tools to create content for remote learning for students in all sectors.

International Day of Education (24 January 2021)
'Recover and Revitalise Education for the COVID 19 Generation'

GWI believes that if the education sector is to fully "recover and revitalise" inequalities emerging in digital education must be addressed now rather than waiting for a post-COVID 19 world.

COVID-19 has demonstrated what it means to be digitally excluded. In a world where almost half of the population does not have access to the Internet, building back "recovered and revitalised" post-COVID-19 requires governments, the private and public sectors, institutes of learning, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society to increase their commitments and undertakings to reduce the digital divide, this namely the intense uptake of infrastructure and education funding.

GWI Recommendations

GWI stresses the need for governments to ensure that e-learning will not broaden existing digital inequalities and urges them to participate in reducing such imbalances by ensuring equal access to digital tools and skills.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda and its centrepiece, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), call for transforming how societies interact with the planet and each other. This transformation requires new technologies, new ways of structuring societies and economies and, above all else, innovative and equal educational opportunities.

GWI insists on the crucial importance of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 on the power of partnerships. Governments are urged to partner with telecom industries, to collaborate with the Ministries of Education and Energy, NGOs, educational institutions and teachers to identify local requirements and domestic funding partners to reduce the digital divide. At the heart of partnerships must be the commitment to SDG 4 (education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), alongside SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

GWI aims to heighten awareness about the critical digital learning crisis continuing as pandemic fallout. GWI voices deep concerns about the disturbing inequalities in education exacerbated globally by the COVID 19 pandemic, especially the digital divide affecting women and girls and lack of domestic funding for education. Therefore, Graduate Women International calls for the increase in domestic funding for education as a means to confront the seismic results of the COVID 19 pandemic on education[12].

The ongoing pandemic has stressed the vast discrepancy in home e-learning environments and working conditions between men and women. Women working and studying remotely are more likely than men to spend time on housework and care work, preventing them from solely concentrating on work or studies. GWI urges states to ensure decent working conditions to all women and girls.

The provision of decent learning conditions must be completed with a vital follow-up of all students learning remotely. In this sense, GWI states that distance learning should not replace face-to-face lessons, as women and girls are at higher risk of dropping out. Studies build identity and strengthen essential social bonds, which are at the core of integration in societies.

GWI urges the following actions by all stakeholders:

- Increase domestic funding for education and protect education budgets to include controls and accountability in place that the money is used for the educational benefit and enhancement of the girls in the educational system.
- Partner with telecom companies and invest in expanding the Internet network to extend coverage and broadband quality of public WiFi and allow free access in all cities and municipalities and reliable connectively in remote areas.
- Invest in infrastructure for training staff and students, especially women and girls, to use IT services and digital devices.
- Partner with local higher education institutions to enquire about the possibility for students to follow online classes in decent conditions, and safe and secure environments.
- Develop specific training systems for educators to enhance their digital instruction skills[13].
- Partner with private and public sectors to provide the necessary hardware (computer, digital devices) to those who cannot afford it.
- Ensure e-learning is augmented with digital face-to-face meetings as social exchange and coursework follow-up.
- Encourage women and girls to seize the opportunity of e-learning to undertake higher- level education and training.
- Provide a program of incentives to those in situations of economic difficulty for the acquisition of devices with an Internet connection.
- Ensure that all asylum seekers in reception centres have Internet access and the appropriate devices to achieve this.
- Optimize use of radio and public television as platforms for delivery of education.
- Improve access to electricity in all areas rural and urban.

"It is up to the Member States to ensure this [recovery] becomes a reality. We need to take urgent action in this Decade of Action and Delivery to invest in our education systems, including improving access to technology so that we can recover from this tumultuous period. We need to seize all opportunity to turn this [COVID 19] situation around", said António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, at the opening of the third International Day of Education on 24 January 2021.

The internet is not just technology.
It is knowledge, opportunity, empowerment, and often critical to
survival and life in today's world[14].

Targets and Influencers

Ministries of Education
Educational Institutions
Ministries responsible for energy and connectivity
Governments
Telecom industries
[State] Education Department(s)
Legislators
Community leaders
Advisory committees
NGOs
Financial Institutions

GWI Resources

Support for Girls in ICT Day: Girls in ICT tools and toolkits.
Funding for needed and necessary digital technology-- Bina Roy Projects in Development and Hegg Hoffet Fund

GWI Press Releases and Infographics

- 11 February 2021: International Day of Women and Girls in Science Infographic and Social Media Pack
- 24 January 2021: Graduate Women International celebrates education – echoes digital divide concerns
- 23 April 2020: On International Girls in ICT Day, GWI promotes opportunities for girls in the tech sector with an awareness-raising infographic.
- 11 February 2020: Graduate Women International highlights underlying issues due to the lack of women in STEM fields
- 25 April 2019: On International Girls in ICT Day, GWI envisions young girls as ICT creators
- 8 March 2019: On International Women's Day GWI galvanizes towards gender equal innovation opportunities

GWI Source Documents

- GWI UNHRC Written Statement (2020): Distance learning and digital technologies as a strategical and challenging turn towards inclusive access to education for women and girls
- GWI UNHRC Written Statement (2021): Increase in domestic funding for education as a means to confront the seismic results of the COVID 19 pandemic on education
- GWI VP Advocacy Report: High Level Political Forum 2020
- GWI Advocacy Webinar: Putting the Pieces Together for Advocacy: Digitial Technology Gap in Education

Being out of school puts a girl at risk

3x
Girls with no education likely to marry by 18 compared to those with a secondary or higher education

60%
of women ages 20-24 with no education were married before the age of 18.

When a girl gets married she is often expected to drop out of school: when a girl is out of school she is more vulnerable to child marriage.

Education can be one of the most powerful tools to enable girls to avoid child marriage and fulfil their potential. The longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married before the age of 18 and have children during her teenage years.

When girls have access to safe, quality secondary education, the benefits are widely felt. Educated girls develop skills, knowledge and confidence to make informed decisions including if, when and whom to marry.

When a girl does not go to school: Early child marriage, gender inequality, poverty, hunger, insecurity, and a lack of economic and social opportunities are the results.

1 NO POVERTY

2 ZERO HUNGER

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

5 GENDER EQUALITY

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Endnotes

1	Gwi UNHRC Written statement (2020): Distance learning and digital technologies as a strategical and challenging turn towards inclusive access to education for women and girls

2	https://en.unesco.org/news/290-million-students-out-school-due-covid-19-unesco-releases-first-global-numbers-and-mobilizes

3	UNESCO Policy Brief: Education During COVID 19 and Beyond, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

4	https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-report-illustrates-leap-forward-girls-education-over-past-25-years-now-threatened-1

5	https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4

6	https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4

7	Alex Twinomugisha, "The promise and the challenges of virtual schools", World Bank Blogs, 4 October 2019

8	Cathy Li, Farah Lalani, "The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how", World Economic Forum, 29 April 2020

9	"ICTs to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals", ITU Plenipotentiary Conference 2018 website

10	https://www.delltechnologies.com/content/dam/delltechnologies/assets/perspectives/2030/pdf/SR1940_IFTFforDellTechnologies_Human-Machine_070517_readerhigh-res.pdf

11	https://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/chapter-1-the-future-of-jobs-and-skills/

12	GWI Statement to the 46th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

13	https://elearningindustry.com/distance-learning-pedagogy-developing-countries/amp

14	NYC UN Representative Report: UN DESA's Division for Inclusive Social Development (CSocD59) February 16, 2021 CSocD59-Online Global Dialogue on Digital Inclusion for All

15	NYC UN Representative Report: UN DESA's Division for Inclusive Social Development (CSocD59) February 16, 2021 CSocD59-Online Global Dialogue on Digital Inclusion for All

16	NYC UN Representative Report: UN DESA's Division for Inclusive Social Development (CSocD59) February 16, 2021 CSocD59-Online Global Dialogue on Digital Inclusion for All

Empowering women and girls through lifelong education for leadership, decision-making and peace.

GWI, formerly International Federation of University Women, is in special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 1947 and is a nongovernmental organisation maintaining official relations with UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation.

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