

This International Women's Day, the spotlight is on gender equity during and beyond the COVID-19 response

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International Women's Day offers a chance for us to reflect on progress toward achieving gender equality across all areas of development from poverty, health and well-being to decent work and economic growth. Even more, it provides an opportunity to consider how these areas intersect, such as how gender equality in learning and skills development is critical not just for achieving parity in educational outcomes but also for equality in economic opportunities for all young people, especially girls. This is the focus of UNESCO's recent publication of [*Synergies for Youth: A Situation Analysis of the intersection of decent work, quality education and gender equality in South-East Europe*](#), and in 2021, the significance of these intersections is perhaps clearer than ever before.

More than just shedding a light on existing inequalities, the pandemic has exacerbated them, leaving many young people, especially the most marginalized, out-of-learning and increasing their risk of not returning to school. Especially many girls and young women have unequal access to technologyⁱ, fewer opportunities than young men to develop digital skills¹, and lower levels of confidence and perceived competence than boysⁱⁱ, as they continue to face prejudice and social norms. The immediate consequences of this gendered, digital divide are significant for girls and young women, as countries have relied heavily on technology to ensure learning continuity in the context of COVID-19. In the long run too, however, marginalized youth and especially marginalized young women will fall even farther behind in learning, labour market access and career opportunities unless priority is given both to closing the digital divide and building young people's skills.

In addition to the potential long-term impact on learning outcomes and earnings, young people, especially young women, are significantly affected by job losses, as the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on majority-female sectors. Domestic workers, who are primarily women, for example, have been heavily impacted in the region. Many of them are young people and migrants, leaving them without jobs, social security, or the ability to return home. Women who are self-employed have been the most affectedⁱⁱⁱ. Women will take a larger hit to their wealth and purchasing power especially where they rely heavily on farming, family business, and remittances for income. Especially for young women in informal employment, the consequences could be detrimental, as many youth cannot easily access credit or benefit from formal measures such as suspended social insurance contributions and interest- and collateral-free loans^{iv} and have few social protection mechanisms in case of extended business closures.

At the same time, prolonged school closures, as well as new, pandemic-related working arrangements also mean that girls and young women are facing increased levels of unpaid care work and exposure to gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and heightened risk of child marriage and early and unintended pregnancy^v. These risks come alongside a reduction or pause in service delivery, such as for

¹ According to recent UIS data, only half of young women and slightly more young men in South-East Europe have experience with completing basic ICT tasks. The gendered gap becomes much wider for more complex skills: just 1 in 4 young women and 1 in 3 young men have installed devices and 1 in 50 women and 1 in 20 men have experience in computer programming, for example.

people with disabilities^{vi}, a decreased ability to seek help, and difficulties in accessing essential health services, including sexual and reproductive health services and gynaecological and obstetric care^{vii}.

Women are also more likely to be frontline workers in fields from healthcare to education. Yet in both instances—whether women are at risk on the frontlines or at risk at home—the consequences including on health, specifically sexual and reproductive health, psychological wellbeing and overall equality could be significant. Women in specifically vulnerable positions (such as teachers), as well as young men and women, will need increasing psychosocial and mental health support.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on all areas of young women’s lives, there is a significant risk in aiming to return to “normal.” The situation for young people, especially for young women, in South-East Europe regarding their educational outcomes and opportunities for decent work shows why “normal” was never good enough. With just over 17% of young women and slightly fewer young men between the ages of 15 and 24 in South-East Europe not in employment, education or training (NEET) prior to COVID-19, the region’s youth were already acquiring neither the skills nor professional experience needed to lead to productive employment and decent work. Young women were already far more likely than young men to be excluded from these opportunities, especially in rural areas, not only indicating poor economic outcomes but also highlighting the multiple forms of exclusion and disadvantage that young women face.

In part, this exclusion can be linked to inadequate progress in improving educational outcomes. As results from the latest (2018) round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show, learning outcomes remain low and equity gaps wide, as schooling fails to lead to relevant, transferable and job-specific skills needed for the labour market for many young people. This contributes to early school leaving for those who fall behind, while young women, especially those who leave school early, face additional risks, such as early marriage, early and unintended pregnancy.

While tertiary enrolment may show signs of improvement, the most marginalized young people are not seeing the benefits of these increases. Factors such as socioeconomic status continue to determine participation. Women face discrimination, bias and persistent social norms and remain underrepresented in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), especially ICT. Women participate in the labour force at lower rates than men but are overrepresented among unemployed youth. Young women especially are under-represented among those who are self-employed, highlighting challenges such as lack of skills, poor working conditions in small and medium-sized enterprises, and insufficient policies to support entrepreneurship.

The importance of not only acknowledging these intersections among gender equality, education, decent work, and economic growth but also leveraging this interconnectedness to accelerate progress has perhaps never been clearer than in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interventions will be necessary that not only address gaps that existed prior to the pandemic but also respond to the immediate impact and mitigate long-term effects, especially for the most marginalized, including young women.

Action must be quick but also forward looking, holistic, and inclusive. Such actions may include leveraging partnerships and current momentum to expand access—namely, equity in access—and quality in digital learning. This serves a greater purpose than mitigating learning loss now; it also can contribute to improving the resilience of education and employment sectors to such shocks in the future. However, planning and budgeting for improving digital learning delivery may contribute to greater inequality if these

processes are not evidence-based and equity-focused with particular attention on the integration of services aimed to support marginalized and vulnerable populations, such as young women. This requires improvements at all levels of education systems, from strengthening governments' capacity for such planning and the collection and use of disaggregated data to the upskilling of teachers to deliver differentiated, competency-based, gender-sensitive, and inclusive instruction.

Preparing young people for meaningful work in an increasingly digital world will require policy-makers school leaders and educators to engage to ensure that girls and boys are equally accessing both core subjects, including STEM, and opportunities to develop transferable, job-specific, and 21st century skills, especially those relevant to the labour market. Connecting young people with practical experience, such as on the job training, and career support, such as mentorship can be valuable, especially when young women have opportunities to train with and be mentored by women in a variety of careers. Such skills development programs can also be part of strategies for supporting labour formalisation^{viii}.

Beyond learning and skills development, supporting women during and beyond the current pandemic will require efforts that ensure that women and girls are at the heart of COVID-19 response planning and longer-term decision-making. Governments must guarantee the continuity and quality of services, such as to support victims of gender-based violence and of women's health and reproductive services—including through alternative delivery. Both immediate and long-term efforts must include targeted support for frontline workers and vulnerable populations, such as through social protection and family-friendly policies, based on disaggregated data to identify those most at risk of being left behind. And it means we must look beyond government sectors alone to ensure that the voices of girls and women are heard, such as through local women's rights networks and youth organisations.

Gender inequality intersects with a broad range of other challenges facing girls and young women in South-East Europe and around the world. The multidimensional manifestation of this exclusion demands cross-sectoral and integrated efforts to bridge these gaps and improve the lives and prospects of not just girls and women but “of everyone, everywhere”.^{ix}

This International Women's Day, let us reflect on how COVID-19 has shed light on both the criticality of integrated policies and interventions in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals and the consequences of insufficient action for women and girls. But let us also not overlook the unique opportunity it has presented us to improve safeguards for young people, especially young women, and to fast-track progress toward gender equality now and for the future.

This blog is written in memory of Igor Kitaev and with warm gratitude for his mentorship over the past years.

ⁱ European Commission. (2020). Commission staff working document accompanying the document: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee.

ⁱⁱ IEA. (2018). International Computer and Information Literacy Study.

ⁱⁱⁱ UN Women. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on women's and men's lives and livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary results from a Rapid Gender Assessment.

^{iv} ILO. (2020). The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work.

^v World Bank. (22 January, 2021). Urgent, Effective Action Required to Quell the Impact of COVID-19 on Education Worldwide.

^{vi} ILO. (2020). The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work.

^{vii} UN Women. (2020a). The impact of COVID-19 on women's and men's lives and livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary results from a Rapid Gender Assessment.

^{viii} ILO. (2007). Tripartite Interregional Symposium on the Informal Economy: Enabling Transition to Formalization (27-29 November 2007). Switzerland

^{ix} United Nations. (n.d.) *The Sustainable Development Agenda. 17 Goals for People, for Planet.*