



GIRLS' EDUCATION AND COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

NOVEMBER 2020
Summary report





FOREWORD

COVID-19 is creating a girls' education crisis in Nigeria. Girls and young women are the first to be removed from school, the least likely to learn from home and the last to return to the classroom.

Before the pandemic, the education system in Nigeria was already strained and characterised by stark gender inequalities. Now fears of COVID-19 and the economic consequences of the pandemic threaten to prevent even more girls from returning to the classroom. If leaders don't act now, we risk losing another generation of girls.

In *Girls' education and COVID-19 in Nigeria*, Malala Fund and our Education Champions highlight the impact of school closures on girls in Kaduna state. The report details the greater domestic burdens placed on girls compared to boys during the pandemic, the lack of academic support girls receive from their families and how government distance learning initiatives have failed to reach girls.

Malala Fund's Education Champions in Nigeria work across six Northern states where girls face the biggest challenges accessing education. Since the COVID-19

outbreak, they have been fighting to break down the barriers to distance learning outlined in this report and protect progress for girls' education.

As schools begin to reopen, Malala Fund and our Education Champions are now focused on ensuring that girls are safely able to return to the classroom.

In the pages that follow, Malala Fund and our Education Champions lay out a roadmap for how government officials at the state and federal levels can provide gender-equitable distance learning during current and future school closures and ensure the safe, gender-responsive reopening of schools. Based on our field research and an extensive review of policy and relevant literature, *Girls' education and COVID-19 in Nigeria* outlines steps to improve Nigeria's education system, strengthening it against future shocks and making it easier for girls to go to school.

Girls are paying the highest price of the pandemic. By taking immediate action and following these recommendations, leaders can mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and ensure that every girl in Nigeria is able to learn during and after this crisis.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In March 2020 Nigeria closed its schools in response to the COVID-19 crisis and, shortly afterward, the government implemented a nationwide lockdown.

This report documents the impact that these closures have had on students and their families, summarises the distinct gendered effects of the lockdown and recommends policy measures that have helped — or could help — to mitigate the lockdown's worst impacts.

Our research finds that students' education has suffered as a consequence of the pandemic. The government's distance learning programme is not reaching all students: **just 10% of girls and 24% of boys are accessing distance learning** offered via television, only 18% of children are using radio for study and 2% are using mobile. Just **nine out of over 1,300 households reported having**

received education-related materials directly from schools or the education department. Within the household, girls have less support with learning than boys and one-quarter of girls — twice as many as boys — reported receiving no help from any source.

As schools begin to reopen, **families' fears of COVID-19 and concerns about the ability to pay school-related fees make returning to school uncertain** for some students. Meanwhile, the unfolding economic impact of the pandemic may jeopardise the education prospects of many marginalised girls and boys. All of this points to a **widening of educational inequalities in Nigeria** if leaders do not act.



During the lockdown, girls demonstrated their commitment to learning, despite the technical, logistical and social norm barriers they faced. We found that girls were more likely than boys to report spending time studying compared to leisure, even though they mentioned spending time on household chores and caring for family members more frequently than boys. In addition, almost 100% of girls said they want to receive educational materials during school closures.

Our full list of recommendations begins on page 22. At a high level, we are calling upon federal and state governments to:

1

Provide distance learning

Provide gender-equitable and inclusive distance learning to support all students through current and future school closures.

2

Ensure gender-responsive reopenings

Reopen schools safely and address in plans girls' needs and the harmful effects of gender norms and roles.

3

Mitigate economic effects

Mitigate economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis to help families prioritise education.

4

Protect progress

Protect progress for girls' education by investing in education, avoiding budget cuts and rebuilding the education system with gender at the centre to promote inclusive growth.



1. CONTEXT & BACKGROUND





Education before COVID-19

When COVID-19 hit, the education system in Nigeria was already strained and characterised by stark inequalities.

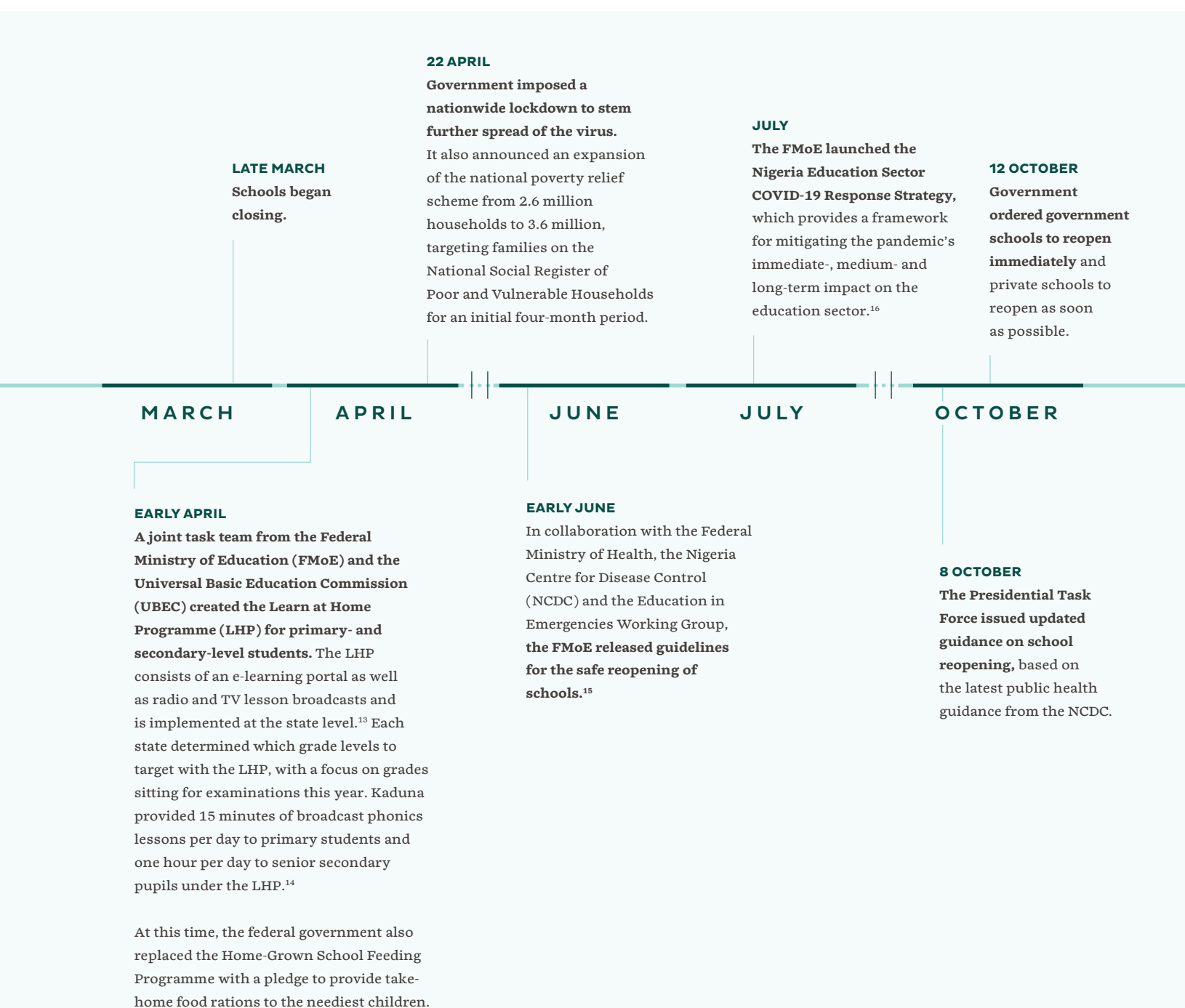
- 1 **There were persistent gender gaps** at every grade level and many children did not attend school at all.^{1 2}
- 2 **Poverty and social norms such as child marriage** prevented girls from completing their education.^{3 4}
- 3 **Conflict and displacement** kept girls out of school.^{5 6}
- 4 **Regional disparities were severe:** in the North, more than half of all girls were not in school.⁷
- 5 **Boys completed secondary education** at a higher rate than girls.⁸
- 6 **There were teacher shortages;** in particular, marginalised areas lacked female teachers.⁹
- 7 **Quality of education was poor** and learning outcomes were weak.^{10 11}
- 8 **Federal and state governments did not invest enough in schools,** and available funds were underutilised.¹²





Education: COVID-19 response timeline

Key dates related to Nigeria's COVID-19 response in 2020 and its impact on schools.





2. RESEARCH PROCESS



This report presents findings from a rapid assessment that Malala Fund and our Education Champions conducted in Kaduna state in July and August 2020, complemented by a desk review of policies and relevant literature.

Our goal was to better understand the ways in which families were navigating the economic and social crises caused by the pandemic in Nigeria, with a particular focus on how the pandemic was impacting girls' education.



2.1 Survey methodology & limitations

In July and August 2020 we surveyed a sample of 2,253 respondents in Kaduna state through both door-to-door (26%) and telephone (74%) interview survey methods. Here is a summary of the people to whom we spoke:

- **The 2,253 survey participants represented 1,309 households and included 1,309 parents and 944 children. 76% of the children interviewed were girls.**
- **The children ranged from below grade five to grade 12.**
- **The majority of households (63%) were entirely dependent on the informal economy for income, with others having at least one family member in formal employment.**
- **The vast majority of parents reported having three or more children in the household.**

For more details on the survey and on the respondent profile, see Appendix.

This was a convenience sample, drawn from contacts of the Nigeria chapter of Malala Fund's Education Champions Network. Due to the sample size it cannot be considered representative of either the whole of Nigeria or of Kaduna. The majority (74%) of questionnaires were administered by phone due to the need to observe COVID-19 safety guidance.

As this was a rapid assessment without opportunity for follow-up psychosocial or legal support, the survey did not include direct questions about sensitive issues like early and forced marriage, teenage pregnancy or gender-based violence. However, media reports point to a surge in rates of all these, each of which has the potential to impact girls' education.



3. SURVEY ON COVID-19, GENDER & EDUCATION



What our survey tells us about COVID-19, gender and education

Our assessment offers a snapshot of how school closures and the nationwide lockdown have affected students and their households, and sheds light on how they have impacted girls and boys differently. The survey also assesses the distance learning efforts and other education support measures provided by the government or other sources, as well as social protection in the form of cash or in-kind support such as food aid.



3.1 Girls and boys want to return to school and remain committed to learning

When asked whether they expected to return to school when schools reopened, 91% of girls said yes compared to 78% of boys. This may be because the boys who did not expect to return to school were more likely than girls to attend private or fee-paying schools, the cost of which families may no longer be able to afford due to the economic stress caused by the pandemic (explored below).

Girls appeared to be overcoming the odds to spend time studying during lockdown. Notably, while a larger proportion of girls than boys spent time doing chores and care work, they still found time to

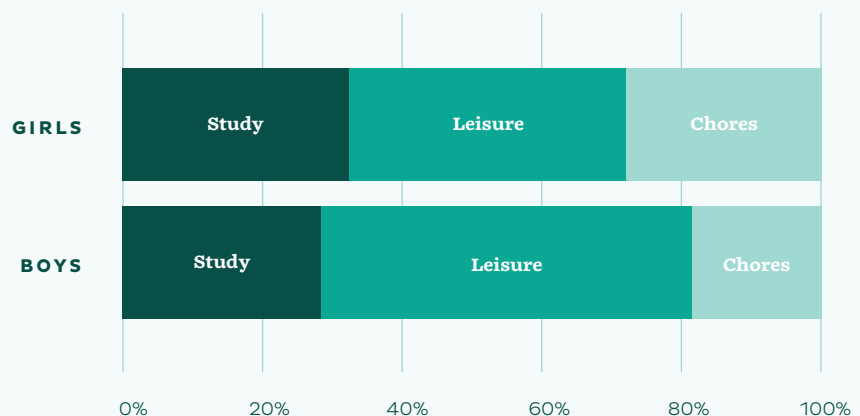
study, and fewer girls reported spending time on leisure activities. Girls were also slightly more eager than boys to receive educational materials during lockdown.



FIGURE 1

Activity patterns by gender

Question: What do you mostly do these days?
This chart compares the ratios of girls' and boys' responses. Respondents could give more than one answer.





3.2 Girls and boys report different barriers to returning to school

We asked those students who did not expect to return to school to explain why this was the case. Girls most commonly cited COVID-related safety concerns, while boys were most likely to say that the barrier to returning would be an inability to pay school fees.

As noted above, boys who did not expect to return to school were more likely than girls to attend fee-paying schools. In general, boys are more likely to attend such schools due to social norms around so-called “son preference,” which influence families to invest more of their household finances in boys than they do in girls.¹⁷ Survey results on the economic impact of the pandemic (see 3.4) indicate the COVID-19 crisis has intensified economic pressure on households, which could make school fees unaffordable.

Girl respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to be in government schools, many of which have been used as overflow treatment centres or shelters during lockdown.¹⁸ Their safety concerns about returning to school are reminiscent of those following the Ebola crisis, when fear of disease stopped teachers and students alike from going back to schools even after the crisis was over.¹⁹

Some girls also cited lack of money as a reason for not returning to school, perhaps

Reasons for not returning to school

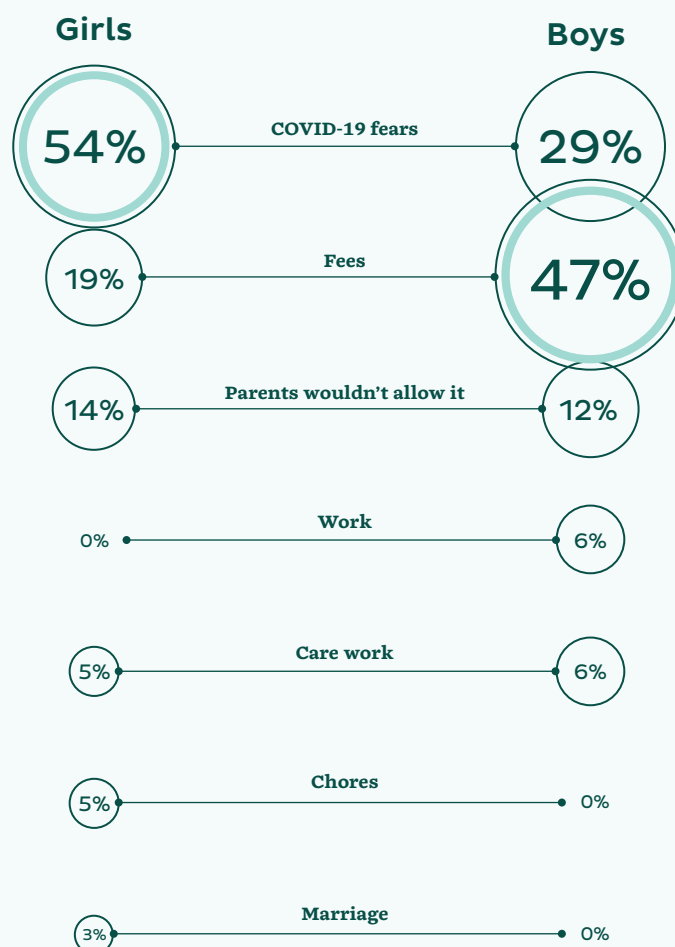


FIGURE 2

Reasons for not returning to school

Represents frequency of responses; respondents could give more than one reason.

because even attending government schools requires funds for uniforms or transportation.²⁰ In addition, girls reported that domestic chores at home would prevent them from returning to school. Although girls' answers on time-use suggested that despite chores and care work, they were finding time to study during lockdown, these responsibilities clearly still influence their prospects of returning to school.



3.3 Support is inadequate for all students, and girls fare worse than boys

A large majority of girls and boys (77%) estimated that they could spend under two hours a day studying (if they received materials); this compares with the approximately five to six hours per day that they spent on lessons at school before the pandemic.

There are a number of potential reasons that students may spend markedly less time studying during lockdown than would be expected in a typical school day, some of them related to gender norms:

1

Low technology access

While the LHP theoretically makes distance learning available to many students via the internet, TV and radio, **both technological and social norm barriers constrain access to technology-dependent learning options.** Although most of the households surveyed reported owning at least one phone, the majority of respondents said that they only intermittently have access to smartphones. For girls this may be partly

due to resistance by parents: According to a recent study, 61% of fathers discourage their daughters' use of the internet.²¹ In addition, students who *were* able to use smartphones at home reported not always being able to afford the data required. Even for students with internet access, service interruptions presented challenges.²² While more households have access to TV and radio, relying on broadcasting as a learning

tool depends on strong infrastructure and uninterrupted electricity.²³ Furthermore, educational broadcasts provided under the LHP are only available at specific times of day in many states; this presents a challenge for girls in particular, whose unpaid care responsibilities and lower status can prevent them from having access to the TV or radio at certain times.²⁴



2

Lack of alternatives to tech-based learning

Only nine out of over 1,300 households reported having received any education-related materials directly from schools or the education department. And just 3% of households received support of any kind from schools, teachers or any representative of the education department; the support they did receive was mostly in the form of midday meals or health-related materials, such as soap or masks.



3

Insufficient support at home, especially for girls

Almost two-thirds of respondents said they rely on their immediate family to support them with learning at home, which represents a risk to their education in two ways. First, reliance on family risks reproducing education inequalities from generation

to generation, given the relatively low levels of parental education in Kaduna and similarly disadvantaged states and regions.^{25 26} Second, the survey found that while mothers supported sons and daughters almost equally, fathers were 36% more likely to assist their sons'

learning than their daughters'. In addition, boys are more than twice as likely to have access to a private tutor during the pandemic. Worryingly, one out of four girls, or **50% more girls than boys said they received no learning assistance of any kind at home.**



3.4 COVID-19 has intensified the economic stress on households

Poverty is a determinant of education opportunity and a major factor in driving gender gaps in education, including in Nigeria. The majority of households surveyed relied at least somewhat on income from the informal sector, and in some homes, this was the only income source. These families are most likely to be impacted by lockdowns and social distancing measures, which make it virtually impossible for them to carry out their regular work.

Our survey sought to find out how the economic impact of COVID-19 was affecting families, and revealed dire economic circumstances among households surveyed:

- **Over 80% of adults reported facing financial difficulties during the pandemic.**
- **Less than 10% felt they have sufficient employment opportunities where they live.**
- **52% stated that they did not have enough food at home and that they were using various coping strategies that could ultimately have negative impacts.**

The majority of respondents reported a cash crunch coinciding with the start of lockdown. The cash crunch came on top of a recent economic crisis that was caused by a fall in oil prices and attendant rise in inflation, which reduced households' purchasing power.²⁷

Strategies employed to cope with food and cash shortages

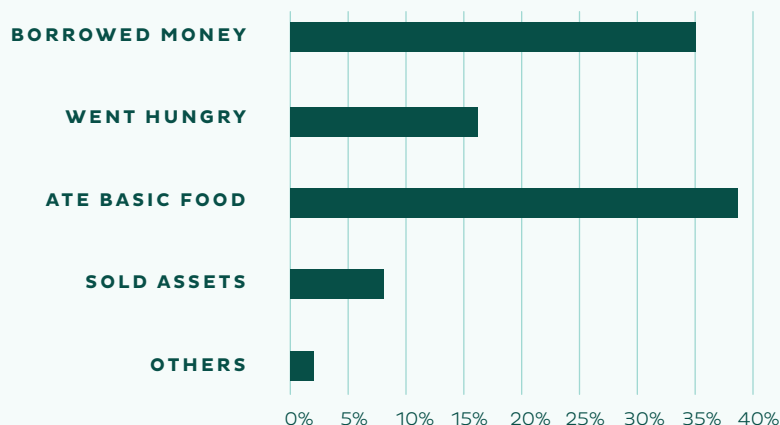


FIGURE 3

Length of experience of financial difficulties

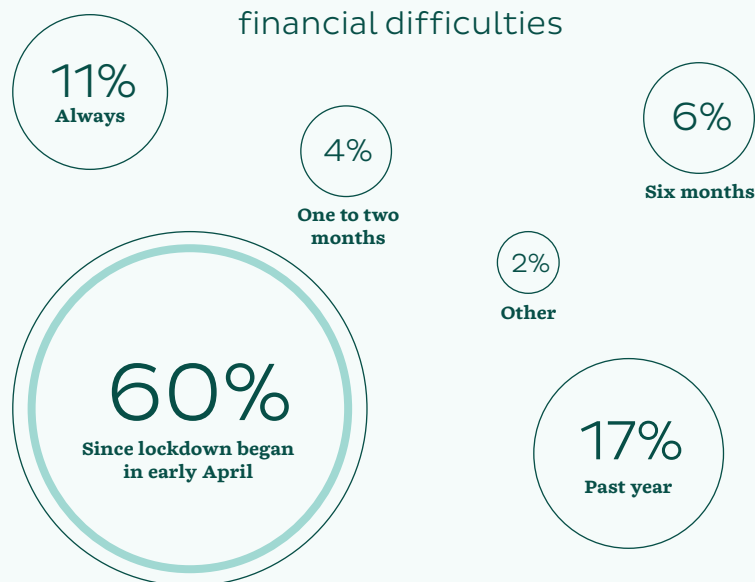


FIGURE 4

Despite the evident severity of the situation, just 3% of respondents had received any cash support from the government.



4. EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNMENT PROVISIONS



4.1 Distance learning

As discussed, the uptake of e-learning and/or educational TV and radio among the sample was sparse, even when the required devices were present in the home. Offline materials such as take-home packs or textbooks were not available; in a government survey, just one of 22 states surveyed was providing offline distance learning options, and this did not include Kaduna.²⁸ What's more, even those few students who did have access to offline materials may have required parental or other guidance, which our study showed to be scarce, particularly for girls.



4.2 Bringing children back to school

The FMoE's "Guidelines for Schools and Learning Facilities Reopening after COVID-19 Pandemic Closures" details the health and training requirements that educational institutions must meet in order to reopen; unfortunately, public schools do not have the capacity to handle these requirements.²⁹ Our findings suggest that students are reluctant to return to school due to fears of being exposed to the virus, so it is

imperative that governments find ways not only to ensure that schools are safe, but also, to communicate school safety to students.

Our findings also suggest a need for specific, tailored interventions to bring girls and members of other marginalised groups back to school and help them catch up given that they have received limited support during the closures.

While one of the underlying principles of the FMoE guidelines is to take "responsibility for meeting the learning needs of all students" and they include a number of positive commitments, our analysis also revealed some weaknesses in terms of specific guidance or proven interventions to reach more marginalised girls including:

- **Little evidence of targeted support or catch-up provisions for marginalised girls;**
- **No formal mandate on automatic grade promotion or lowering the pass-grade threshold to mitigate for lost learning;**
- **Failure to address the shortage of female teachers in Nigeria;³⁰ and**
- **Insufficient guidance on *how* to ensure that girls, students with special needs or disabilities and those in lower socio-economic and conflict-affected states will reenrol in school when the pandemic is over.**



Building back equal: Girls back to school guide

Evidence from past crises shows that girls are particularly vulnerable when schools are closed for a long time.³¹ In September 2020 Malala Fund joined with UNESCO, UNICEF, Plan International and the UN Girls' Education Initiative — a sub-group of the UNESCO-convened **COVID-19 Global Education Coalition** — to provide guidance for education ministries.³²

Building back equal: Girls back to school guide recommends how policymakers can help

keep girls learning during school closures and ensure they are able to return to the classroom once it is safe.

The guide makes suggestions around four dimensions of school closures, highlighted in the diagram below. They include actions needed prior to, during and after school reopening and are grounded in an awareness that schools may close again to respond to subsequent waves of the pandemic.

Dimensions of school closures





4.3 Supporting livelihoods

Our survey revealed the difficult financial straits facing many households in Nigeria during the pandemic, especially those dependent on the informal economy for income.

Because economic stress has ripple effects on students' access to education as well as their general well-being, we felt it was relevant to include a brief analysis of the government's response to the economic impacts of the pandemic in this report.

In harder times, families tend to prioritise educating sons to daughters; in addition, families often resort to early and forced marriage for girls as a way to generate income or relieve pressure on finances by having "one less mouth to feed."³³ Poverty also increases girls' vulnerability to sexual exploitation, which can result in increased teenage pregnancy and dropout rates or exclusion from school.³⁴ Social protection is thus vital to prevent the worst impacts of poverty on girls' education.

In addition, as noted earlier, school closures during the pandemic have reduced children's access to food. Since the majority of students receiving free meals are among the two poorest quintiles of the population, the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme could potentially help address the nutritional impacts of the pandemic.³⁵ However, the survey results show that the vast majority of these households were receiving neither school meal rations nor cash transfers. In the latter case, this is probably because of pre-existing limitations of the National Social Register of Poor and Vulnerable Households. Exceptional measures are needed to ensure that both food and cash transfers reach households in need.



4.4 Resourcing education

For an education system already struggling with limited financing, the pandemic has only strained resources further; in the face of this crisis, however, the government has actually cut education financing.

In June 2020 the federal government reduced the Universal Basic Education Intervention Fund by 47% and cut the FMoE budget by 20%. States have made similar cuts to their education budgets. Many items in the 2020 Education Sector appropriation bill will

not be implemented due to the now-drastic financial shortfall, let alone the additional measures required to meet the challenges of COVID-19, including those that address the needs of girls and other marginalised groups.

4.5 Building schools' resilience and inclusivity

Contingency planning is essential to ensure learning continuity during times of crisis to protect students and educators and to build resilience within the education sector.

The government's COVID-19 contingency plan focuses on keeping schools safe during the pandemic and providing information to students about preventative measures and actions to take to curb the spread of the virus.³⁶ While this information is certainly critical, the contingency plan does not adequately address continuity of learning during school closures.

The government's COVID-19 education response focuses solely on reenrolling those children

who were already in school before the pandemic. While this is vital, the government should also take this opportunity to formulate plans for bringing previously out-of-school children into the education system. For example, the distance learning strategies adopted during the crisis, such as those in the School Meets Learner programme, could perhaps offer a way to reach children who were out of school long before the crisis due to cultural and economic circumstances.³⁷





5. RECOMMENDATIONS



Our research has highlighted the depth and scale of the educational challenges facing girls and boys in more marginalised communities in Nigeria.

School closures are exacerbated by economic stress and social norms to create a perfect storm for Kaduna's girls and boys. Other states are facing similar challenges. Government provisions, however well-intended, have not proved adequate to keep children learning. Girls continue to face gender norm barriers to their education.



One thing is clear: girls are determined to learn and are finding ways to do so against the odds. But they are not getting the support they need.

Without urgent and targeted action, they risk being pushed out of school or falling behind. Gender gaps — already plaguing Nigeria's education system — will widen. Actors at all levels can help, but ultimately the government, at both federal and state levels, must take the lead.



1

Provide gender-equitable and inclusive distance learning to support all students through current and future school closures.

- The federal government should review the Learn at Home Programme to be more adaptive to the needs of marginalised populations of all kinds, especially taking into account social norm barriers that girls face.
- State governments should work with development partners and State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) to scale up efforts to provide offline learning materials. This is particularly critical for the most vulnerable and marginalised girls who cannot access or utilise other forms of distance learning due to inadequate infrastructure or gendered social norms.



2

Ensure safe and gender-responsive school reopenings.

- Federal and state governments should take the recommended, gender-responsive actions detailed in the *Girls back to school guide*.
- The federal government should provide states with financial, technical and enhanced capacity support — including allowing for flexibility in 2021 UBEC grant spending — to make schools safe from COVID-19.
- The federal government should effectively communicate the health and safety measures they are taking to make schools safe from COVID-19 to reassure teachers, students and their families.
- The federal government should work with development partners to establish and roll out a programme of education-specific conditional cash transfers or stipends that encourage girls and at-risk groups to reenrol.
- The FMoE should provide states with a framework for timely, gender-disaggregated data collection on reenrolment and retention. Data should be publicly available and disaggregated at the state level.
- State governments should work with SUBEBs to develop targeted remedial and catch-up learning support to marginalised girls and other vulnerable groups, following *Teaching at the Right Level* approaches to foster foundational skills.
- State governments should roll out Girls Back to School campaigns, including community outreach to the most marginalised groups, working with faith groups, community-based organisations and religious and traditional leaders.
- State governments should stop using schools as temporary health facilities, isolation centres, markets and shelters to avoid the risk of contamination, as well as fears of contamination, both of which could delay students' and teachers' return to school.



3

Mitigate the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis to help families prioritise education.

- The federal and state governments should scale up social protection to help mitigate negative coping strategies that could impact reenrolment, such as rushing girls to get married. These protections should target the most vulnerable students, including girls, children with special needs or disabilities and those in lower socio-economic and conflict-affected states.
- The federal government should launch an independent audit into the effectiveness of the adapted Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in reaching vulnerable and marginalised communities with take-home rations.

4

Protect progress for girls' education and rebuild the education system with gender at the centre to promote inclusive growth and ensure every girl can learn.

- Federal and state governments should establish emergency financing packages for education.
- Federal and state governments should make education a key component of their disaster risk preparedness strategies and ensure that these strategies address gender-specific challenges.
- Federal and state governments should roll back cuts made to education budgets, including to the UBE Intervention Fund, and commit to maintaining and eventually increasing public spending on education through prioritising education as part of the recovery plan.
- Federal and state governments should adopt — or, in some cases, continue to use — education sector planning and budgeting approaches that take gender-specific challenges into account.
- The federal government should expand crisis modalities developed during the pandemic to reach children who were out of school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.





APPENDIX

Survey administration

The selection of households was purposive. Enumerators were familiar with the communities they surveyed. Malala Fund staff divided the survey into two parts, with one set of questions for children (944 participants, of whom 76% were girls and 24% were boys) and another set of questions for parents or guardians (1,309 participants). The questions for children explored the educational profile of the children, access and use of technology and time use during lockdown. Enumerators ensured adherence to principles of anonymity and informed consent. The questions for parents and guardians explored the social and demographic profile of the household, the economic status of the family and the kind of support the household received from the government or civil society.

Profile of respondents

In terms of employment, the majority of adult respondents and their partners (63%) are involved in the informal economy.

The highest number of respondents in the unorganised sector report working as tailors (12%) and farmers on their own land (10.5%). The highest proportion of respondents' partners are daily wage labourers (8.8%). Respondents also reported that almost 20% of their partners are unemployed.

26% of adult respondents and 16% of their partners are employed in the formal economy. This includes employment in government services (17% and 11%), NGOs (1% each), factories (0.7% and 0.1%), religious work (0.1%) and private schools (3%).

Within the sample population, the average family size is about seven members, with almost half of all respondents reporting family sizes of between five and eight (48.97%). More than 34% of respondents belong to households with eight or more family members, and this large family size may exacerbate the impact of COVID-19 on cash availability and food security.

Profile of respondents

	GIRLS	BOYS
BELOW GRADE FIVE	20%	26%
GRADE FIVE	5%	4%
GRADE SIX	6%	2%
GRADE SEVEN	14%	6%
GRADE EIGHT	9%	10%
GRADE NINE	11%	10%
GRADE 10	14%	10%
GRADE 11	11%	10%
GRADE 12	10%	21%



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Most of all, we thank the young people and their parents who participated and shared their experiences during a challenging and uncertain time.



EDUCATION
CHAMPIONS
NIGERIA

Malala Fund Education Champions in Nigeria

The Nigeria chapter of the Malala Fund Education Champion Network is a national cohort of educators and activists who advocate for policy and programmatic solutions to ensure that all girls can have access to 12 years of free, safe, quality education.

Through our Education Champion Network, Malala Fund supports the work of local leaders in Afghanistan, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey who understand challenges in their communities and are best placed to identify, innovate and advocate for progress towards girls' secondary education around the world.



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