



Australian Government  
 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

# THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON GIRLS' EDUCATION AND WELLBEING IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

CASE STUDY: THE NEED FOR SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR



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Cover image: Students from Fasi Moi Afi Government primary school take part in the Just Play program which is funded by AusAID. Photo taken by Connor Ashleigh for AusAID.

# ACRONYMS

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<b>GAGE</b>	Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
<b>EMIS</b>	Education Management Information System
<b>KII</b>	Key informant interview
<b>PICs</b>	Pacific Island Countries
<b>RER</b>	Rapid evidence review
<b>SRH</b>	Sexual and reproductive health
<b>SSEA</b>	South and Southeast Asia
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UN-ESCAP</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
<b>UNESCO-UIS</b>	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund

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# INTRODUCTION

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted schooling for millions of girls and boys, threatening their access to education, and their broader health and wellbeing, albeit in different ways.

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**Evidence suggests that overall, in April 2020, at the height of the pandemic, 370 million school-aged children and adolescents in Asia and the Pacific were not in school, missing out on valuable classroom learning time** ([UNESCO-UIS, 2021](#)).

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**Evidence suggests that overall, in April 2020, at the height of the pandemic, 370 million school-aged children and adolescents in Asia and the Pacific were not in school, missing out on valuable classroom learning time** ([UNESCO-UIS, 2021](#)). Lockdowns and other restrictions prompted by the pandemic have led to increased risks of paid or unpaid child labour and gender-based violence (GBV); while limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and education has resulted in increased risks of adolescent pregnancy and associated health risks ([UNICEF & ILO, 2021](#); [Save the Children, 2021](#); [UN Women-Asia and the Pacific, 2020](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, reversing decades of progress towards gender equality in particular ([UN Women, 2020](#); [UN-ESCAP, 2022](#)). Further, those young people most at risk often experience intersecting vulnerabilities, including girls or boys who come from poorer households, refugees, ethnic or linguistic minorities, sexual and gender minorities or girls and boys with disabilities.

**Evidence is essential to understand the impact that the pandemic has had – and continues to have – on young people in the region.** Through analysis of a robust evidence base, governments can design COVID-19 response plans that effectively mitigate and address existing risks, and equip communities, schools, and families so they can support young people to continue learning. Within this evidence base, the availability of disaggregated data is vital to understanding the magnitude of the pandemic's impact on different subgroups of young people, so policy and programming responses can be tailored to them. By continuously collecting and analysing disaggregated data, stakeholders can better monitor progress towards global commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasise the vital importance of gender equality in general (SDG5), and gender equality in education in particular (SDG4, Target 4.1). Yet there is a lack of sex-disaggregated data, especially on the differential impacts that the pandemic has had on girls and boys in South and Southeast Asia (SSEA) and Pacific Island Countries (PICs).



Grade 8 student studies at Shree Dharmasthali Lower Secondary School, Pokhara, Nepal. Photo by Jim Holmes for AusAID.

## 1.1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

**Building on two rapid evidence reviews (RERs) of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls' education and wellbeing in SSEA and PICs, this case study examines the extent to which sex disaggregated data on the impact of the pandemic is available, the limitations when it is not, and the value added when it is.**

In particular it looks at the benefits and drawbacks of three types of data disaggregation: (1) comparative sex disaggregated data, or publications that disaggregate by both male and female or by multiple genders (for example non-binary genders); (2) female-only data, or publications that only present findings related to girls or women; and (3) non-disaggregated data, or publications that present evidence generally on 'students', 'children' or 'young people' without disaggregated by sex or gender.

**This thematic case study is based on analysis of 177 publications which provided primary evidence for the original RERs.** These 177 sources were all collected from May 2021 to February 2022. Most were published in 2020 or 2021; only a handful were published in early 2022. The sample was limited to primary research sources to avoid duplicating evidence (for example secondary literature drawing on the same data). We also draw on global literature and key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with four individuals from authoring organisations. These interviews explored the authors' perspectives on the importance of sex-disaggregated data, and their decision-making processes in relation to the data they presented in their studies (whether disaggregated or not).

# A LACK OF SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA

# 2



## KEY FINDINGS – EVIDENCE TRENDS IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE

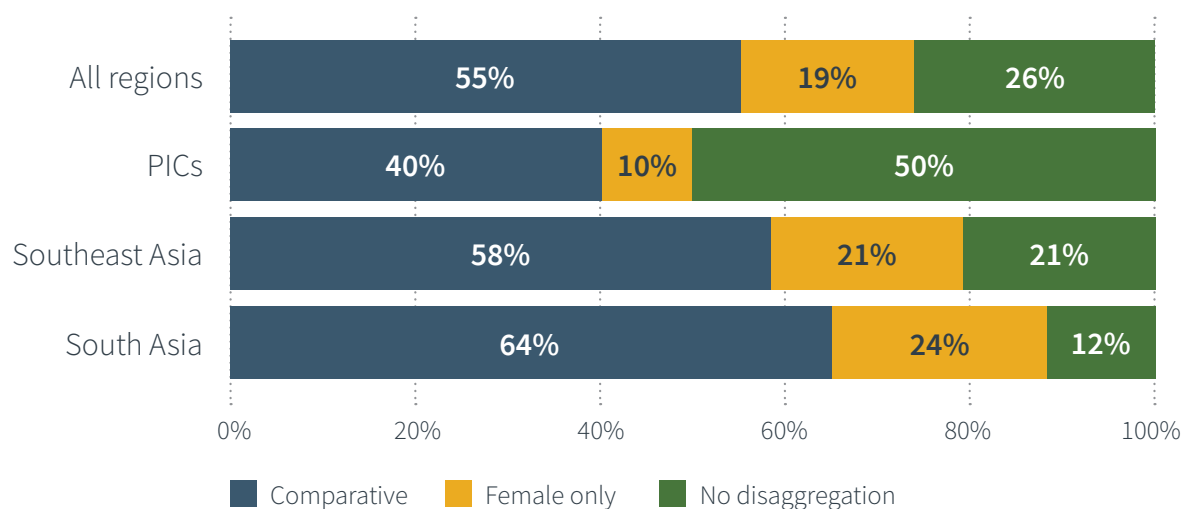
- **Geographical:** lack of sex-disaggregated data from PICs region especially, with a higher concentration of disaggregated data from South Asia (in particular, Bangladesh).
- **Authorship:** bilateral and multilateral organisations presented comparative data in just over half of their publications; academics and think tanks provided comparative sex-disaggregated data in most (three quarters) of their publications; while NGOs and INGOs tended to present more girls-only data; publications from national governments or other types of authors (for example news journalists) were minimal (just six publications each).

Nearly half (45 percent) of the 177 primary sources collected did not include any comparative sex-disaggregated data: 19 percent referred only to ‘females’ or ‘girls’ while the remaining 26 percent presented evidence related to groups of ‘children’, ‘young people’, ‘adolescents’ or ‘students’ generally, with no level of sex disaggregation at all (see Figure 1 below and Appendix 1 for all country data). This was despite the fact that these sources were intentionally selected for the RERs, having been identified as being more likely to include disaggregated data than other sources.

A smaller proportion of publications from the PICs included sex disaggregated data compared to those from SSEA. Among the 52 PICs publications, half of them did not provide any comparative sex disaggregation. A further 10 percent focused only on girls and 40 percent did sex disaggregate – at least to some extent. For some PICs - **Cook Islands, Nauru, and Tuvalu** - not one piece of sex disaggregated data was found on the impact of the pandemic on education and wellbeing.



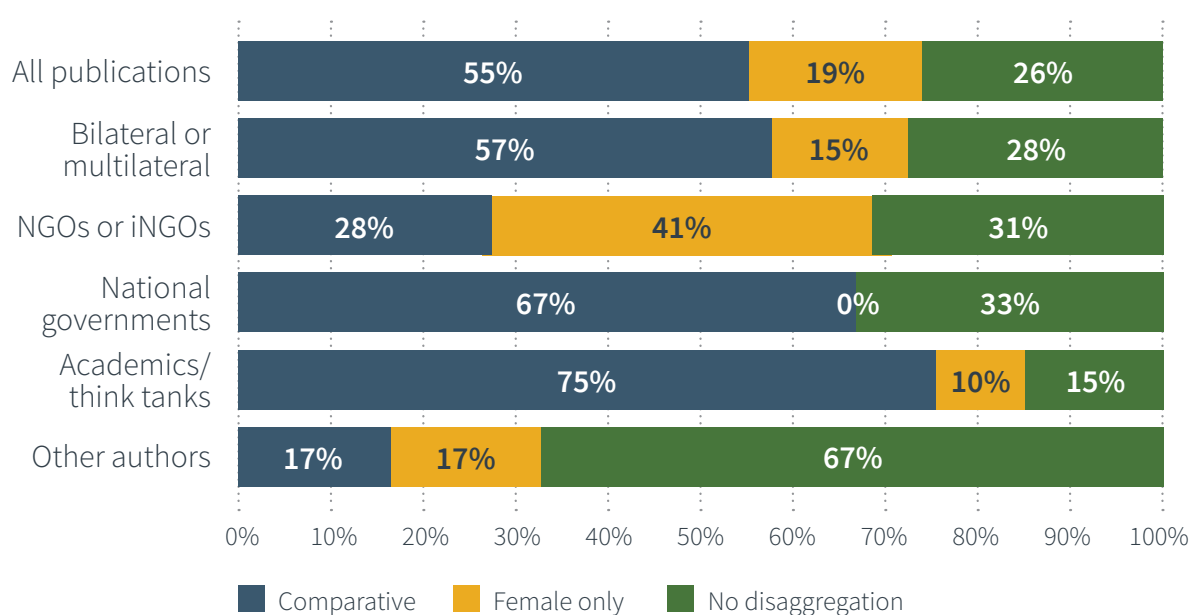
FIGURE 1. AVAILABILITY OF DISAGGREGATED DATA, BY REGION



In contrast, a larger proportion of publications from SSEA did include at least some sex disaggregation, especially those from South Asia, in particular Bangladesh. Nearly two thirds (64 percent) of all publications presenting evidence from South Asia provided at least one piece of sex disaggregated data. However, even in this region, 12 percent of the publications did not disaggregate at all and 24 percent provided data only on girls. In Southeast Asia, 42 percent of the publications did not disaggregate by sex, equally split between those which focused only on girls and those which reported generally about ‘students’ (or an equivalent term).

Even large and well-resourced organisations published evidence which had no comparative sex disaggregation. In fact, more than a quarter (28 percent) of all publications from bilateral or multilateral organisations did not include any level of disaggregation in their findings. A further 15 percent provided girl-only data, which allowed no comparison with boys. Similarly, almost a third of sources (31 percent) published by national or international NGOs did not sex disaggregate at all, and a further 41 percent provided evidence only on girls (Figure 2, or Table 1 in Appendix 2).

FIGURE 2. AVAILABILITY OF SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA, BY TYPE OF AUTHOR



# WHAT WE MISS WHEN DATA IS NOT DISAGGREGATED – AND WHAT WE GAIN WHEN IT IS

# 3

Without sex-disaggregated data, we miss out on the nuances of how girls and boys have been affected differently by the COVID-19 pandemic.



**This ultimately creates programmatic risks, limiting the efficacy of interventions, leaving beneficiaries with unmet needs and undermining the principle of ‘do no harm’. It also jeopardises the efficiency of education services and expenditure (UNESCO-UIS, 2019).**

As one key informant from a think tank noted, “if you don’t use data to make decisions, there is a serious risk of overlap of funding going to the same programmes or targeting the same communities or large mass group of women.” Without disaggregated data, it is difficult to identify those ‘left behind’ or the most vulnerable populations, hindering government efforts to reach commitments such as the SDGs (KIIs, multilateral and think tank). The 177 primary data sources analysed for the original RERs highlighted several thematic evidence gaps that hinder our understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls’ education and wellbeing (see Table 2 in Appendix 2). These gaps tended to be created or exaggerated by a lack of comparative sex disaggregated data.

## 3.1 EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS

KEY FINDINGS – EVIDENCE TRENDS IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE

- Lack of sex-disaggregated data on student learning outcomes and assessment in most countries
- Lack of sex-disaggregated data on teaching and learning practices and curriculum in most countries
- Concentration of sex-disaggregated data on student access to home learning during the pandemic, and substantial girls’ only data that examines access to learning materials, including technology

**A lack of sex disaggregated data has made it particularly difficult to understand the gendered impacts of the pandemic on educational outcomes.**

Of the 119 sources that provided evidence on the educational impact of the pandemic, almost a third (30 percent or 36 publications) provided no comparative sex disaggregation whatsoever and a further 14 percent (or 17 publications) provided data only on girls.

**The most notable evidence gap was the low number of publications (just nine) that provided any comparative sex-disaggregated data on learning or assessment during the pandemic.** A further three provided girl-only data. Much of the sex-disaggregated data that was available was spread thinly across a subset of countries, largely with just one source each. For 13 countries,<sup>1</sup> no comparative data on learning or assessment was found at all. This makes it difficult to understand the different ways the pandemic has impacted on girls' and boys' learning, and therefore what needs to be done to mitigate learning loss and target interventions to improve learning outcomes. Exemplar 1 below underlines the important role of sex disaggregation in terms of pointing out which students are in particular need of support.



## EXEMPLAR 1. USING SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA TO UNDERSTAND GIRLS' AND BOYS' LEARNING LOSS

Comparative analysis of test scores in **Samoa** shows that girls' learning was negatively affected by school closures caused by the pandemic. Learning data comparing years 2019-20 and 2020-21 show the percentage of Year 4 students at government schools meeting minimum competency requirements for literacy and numeracy. Changes over the two academic years – during and after COVID-19 school closures – suggest that literacy rates fell, especially for girls (by 21 points, compared to by 4 points for boys); and numeracy rates increased, especially for boys (by 17 points, compared to by 9 points only for girls). The figures suggest that not only did girls experience greater learning loss than boys in reading, but they also experienced significantly lower learning gains in mathematics. This comparative sex-disaggregated data on student learning loss helps point governments to where they need to target remedial learning and catch-up classes for girls, and in which subjects.

<sup>1</sup> Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, or Vanuatu.

**More than half of the publications that presented evidence on teaching and curricula did not include comparative sex disaggregated data.** The 43 publications that did provide at least some sex disaggregation of evidence related to teaching and curricula were all based on data from just six countries.<sup>2</sup> This meant that no comparative sex disaggregated data was available for 14 countries.<sup>3</sup> **Papua New Guinea** was the only PIC with comparative data on teaching and curricula (based on evidence from two publications). This lack of sex disaggregated data hinders understanding of the use and experience of gender-responsive pedagogies and curricula during remote learning. Exemplar 2 illustrates the importance of sex-disaggregated data to design gender-responsive pedagogies for home learning during the pandemic.



## EXEMPLAR 2. USING COMPARATIVE QUALITATIVE DATA TO EXPLORE GENDER-RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGIES

Comparative qualitative sex-disaggregated data from **Afghanistan** helped to explore how gender norms were shaping girls' access to online learning. Two studies included interviews with parents and students during COVID-19-related school closures and found that parents, especially those living in rural communities, were reluctant to let their daughters participate in online learning due to concerns over privacy and safeguarding (Khlaif et al., 2021a/b). The authors pointed out how this was likely due to traditional gender norms and concerns over girls' safety, including in online environments. As a result, girls – more so than boys – were less likely to participate in synchronous online learning and, when they did, they were more hesitant about turning their cameras on or participating in live virtual discussions. This comparative qualitative data highlighted a number of implications to consider when designing digital home learning modalities: (1) the need to sensitise caregivers to online safety and gender norms that inhibit girls' access to digital learning; (2) the importance of blended learning models that use digital and paper-based activities or a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning; and (3) the importance of placing internet safety and protection at the forefront of digital or online education interventions. In other words, this comparative qualitative data allowed us “to dig deeper into why these [gender] variations exist and how we can address them” (KIIs, multilateral organisation and think tank).

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea

<sup>3</sup> Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, or Vanuatu.

A slightly higher percentage of sources related to access to - and participation in – home learning included at least some sex disaggregation, although a third of these publications (27 documents) did not. The comparative sex-disaggregated data that was available was heavily concentrated in two countries: **Bangladesh** and **Vietnam**. There was no comparative sex disaggregated data available from **Cook Islands, Nauru, or Tuvalu**. This is concerning, given that sex-disaggregated data can help identify what types of technology or wider teaching and learning materials girls and boys have access to at home, so that education interventions can be designed to leverage these tools to maximise the efficacy of home learning (see Exemplar 3).



### EXEMPLAR 3. USING SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA TO IDENTIFY GIRLS' AND BOYS' ACCESS TO ICT DEVICES

One of the main reasons that girls may have been more disadvantaged than boys during school closures is the digital gender divide. One study that demonstrates this with comparative sex-disaggregated data is an education needs assessment conducted by the **Cambodia** Ministry of Education (MOE), UNICEF, and Save the Children (2021), which drew on a nationally representative survey of 15,000 students, caregivers, and education personnel. In this survey, researchers asked students (and their caregivers) to identify whether girls or boys had access to ten different infrastructure or ICT tools at home. Results indicated that boys had greater access to all but one (learning and workspaces). The largest differences observed across boys and girls was related to access to a personal computer or laptop (28 percent of boys had access compared to 18 percent of girls), smartphones (78 percent of girls had access compared to 74 percent of boys), and the internet (34 percent of boys had access compared to 31 percent of girls).

## 3.2 WELLBEING IMPACTS

### KEY FINDINGS – EVIDENCE TRENDS IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE

- **Lack of sex-disaggregated data and concentration of girls’ only data on topics such as GBV, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH)**
- **Substantial sex-disaggregated data on the impact of the pandemic on young people’s mental health, household livelihoods, and child labour for some countries; no data in other countries)**
- **Few studies on agency, voice, and mobility (except for in Bangladesh), but those that are available tend to be sex-disaggregated**

**The dearth of sex-disaggregated data, especially in some countries and thematic areas, has made it difficult to discern the differentiating impacts of the pandemic on girls’ and boys’ wellbeing.** Of the 118 sources that provided evidence on the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing outcomes, 20 percent (or 24 publications) provided no sex disaggregation whatsoever and a further 21 percent (or 25 publications) provided data only on girls. The most notable evidence gaps were in relation to GBV and access to sexual and reproductive health, where approximately half of all publications did not provide comparative sex-disaggregated data.

**For many countries, there was no comparative sex-disaggregated on GBV, or sexual and reproductive health, making it difficult to identify the differing risks that girls and boys were facing during the pandemic.**

The comparative sex disaggregated data on GBV that was available was heavily concentrated in **Bangladesh** (25 of the 32 publications did provide sex-disaggregated data). No sex disaggregated evidence on gender-based violence was available for 10 countries.<sup>4</sup> Almost a third of the sources related to the pandemic’s impact on GBV provided evidence on women and girls only. This rendered invisible the GBV being perpetrated against boys and young men, thus hindering effective prevention and response efforts. Despite many reports presenting data only on girls’ experiences, those studies with comparative sex-disaggregated data suggested that boys were also being affected by increased levels of violence during the pandemic (see Exemplar 4). Similarly, more than a third of sources related to sexual and reproductive health focused only on women and girls and were silent on the roles and experiences of boys. As noted by one key informant, research on girls only may be sparked by certain assumptions that girls are at a disadvantage; however, “if we collect data on both girls and boys, we can help move away from our assumptions and really understand the gendered impacts [of the pandemic]” (KII, multilateral organisation). Indeed, a second key informant from a think tank described how girls only data, “not only discounts 50 percent of the population” and thus poses inherent methodological challenges, but also “the comparative factor” is critical to identify gendered experiences for both girls and boys. Further, “girls must be situated within the wider ecological context,” where boys and men play significant roles as “gatekeepers of opportunities”; the informant noted that “I don’t really think that follows the ‘do no harm’ principal... if men and boys aren’t sensitised and aren’t participating... then girls are acting in isolation for themselves” (KII, think tank).

<sup>4</sup> Laos, Myanmar, Timor Leste, Vietnam, Cook Islands, Federate States of Micronesia, Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.



## EXEMPLAR 4. USING SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA TO UNPACK BOYS' AND GIRLS' EXPERIENCES WITH VIOLENCE

A cross-sectional comparative study of six countries in SSEA by Wang et al. (2021) found female adolescents aged 10-18 years in the **Philippines** and **Vietnam** were much more likely (2.22 times and 1.23 times, respectively) than males to report feeling unsafe during the pandemic. In contrast, in **Myanmar**, female adolescents were less than half (0.44 times) as likely as their male peers to report feeling unsafe. The authors suggest that findings in the **Philippines** and **Vietnam** could be explained by increased risks of domestic violence or sexual abuse amongst females in South Asia; but it does not, however, present a potential explanation for the experiences of boys. This points to an urgent need to identify context specific risks and factors associated with feelings of insecurity among boys and girls in order to design appropriate and tailored safeguarding policies and programmatic responses.

**Most publications providing evidence on the impact of the pandemic on young people's voice, agency, or mobility, did include comparative sex-disaggregated data, though they were fewer in number (with only 18 publications).** This data largely focused on travel restrictions, caused in part by COVID-19 more generally, but also those particularly shaped by gender norms and affecting women and girls directly. Likewise, most publications that provided evidence on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health outcomes of young people was sex disaggregated. For example, intersectional data from **Bangladesh** unpacks differentiating impacts on girls and boys from Rohingya and host communities (see Exemplar 5). Intersectional data is critical, given that certain characteristics, such as refugee status, marriage status, disability status, socio-economic status, and whether young people are from female- or male-headed households, can create "incredible differences" for young people (KII, think tank).



## EXEMPLAR 5. USING INTERSECTIONAL DATA AND RESTRICTIONS TO GIRLS' AGENCY AND MOBILITY IN BANGLADESH

GAGE research from urban Dhaka, **Bangladesh**, found that 66 percent of adolescent girls reported staying at home in the previous week, compared to 33 percent of boys; and 26 percent of girls reported interacting with friends in the previous week compared to 38 percent of boys (Oakley et al., 2020). A second study in Cox's Bazar, however, further disaggregated data by age and ethnicity to indicate more significant gender differences for both older and younger Rohingya and Bangladeshi host adolescents (Baird et al., 2020). Older adolescent girls were nearly half as likely as boys the same age to report interacting with friends in person in the previous week (48 compared to 24 percent) and younger adolescent girls – though reporting slightly more social interaction – were still more than 20 percent less likely than their male peers to have interacted with friends in the previous week (31 compared to 51 percent). This intersectional data allows us to see how gender norms, age, migration status, and the location where young people live all shape the way lockdown imposes restrictions upon them.

**Overall, a large proportion of evidence examining the pandemic's impact on livelihoods was sex-disaggregated, but this was not the case across all countries and many completely lacked comparative sex disaggregated data on this topic.** Of 39 publications with comparative sex-disaggregated data on livelihoods, 20 come from **Bangladesh**. In contrast, eight countries did not have any publications with comparative sex-disaggregated data, limiting our understanding of the gendered impacts of the pandemic on girls' and boys' economic wellbeing. This is an important evidence gap given the risk of ongoing economic shocks and the increased need for girls and boys to participate in paid and unpaid labour, which may interfere with their access to education (see, for example, Exemplar 6).





## EXEMPLAR 6. USING INTERSECTIONAL DATA TO IDENTIFY RISKS OF OLDER GIRLS AND BOYS DROPPING OUT

In **Cambodia**, a CARE and Plan International (2020) assessment found a similarly low proportion (four and five percent respectively) of male and female students reported that their parents or family members had forced them to drop out of school during the pandemic. Of these, a similar proportion of students had been asked to drop out of school to support their families, again with a similar split between male and female students (eight percent and nine percent respectively). However, age placed older adolescents, especially boys, at a disadvantage, whereby 18-to-20-year-old boys were nearly twice as likely than girls their age to be asked to drop out of school in order to support their household income (seven and four percent respectively). This evidence points to a particular need to support adolescent boys and young adults in **Cambodia** through flexible education interventions that allow them to manage formal schooling with participation in income generating activities.

# WHY ORGANISATIONS AND AUTHORS DO NOT DISAGGREGATE DATA BY SEX

# 4

The findings summarised show a lack of available sex-disaggregated data to understand the pandemic's gendered impacts on girls' education and wellbeing.



**All 20 countries included in the scope of the original RER are UN member states, and have committed to the SDGs. Despite having gender equality policy commitments, and sex disaggregation recognised as an international standard encapsulated in gender equality markers, indexes, and instruments, data gaps persist.**

**Given these evidence gaps, it is important to consider why different organisations or researchers are not disaggregating their findings and, conversely, how others are able to generate robust sex-disaggregated (and in some cases, even intersectional) data.**

Interviews with key informants and review of the broader literature base point to four interconnected reasons for the lack of sex-disaggregated data: priorities, commitment, funding, and capacity.

**Competing priorities or an overall lack of commitment to sex disaggregation or gender equality in research in general, are two critical factors contributing to the lack of sex-disaggregated data.** For example, a lack of sex-disaggregated data may simply be due to some stakeholders' limited understanding of the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in a specific country or context (KII, multilateral organisation). A key informant from a multilateral organisation described how in some countries – such as **Bangladesh** – the high volume of sex-disaggregated data is likely a result of increased donor presence, due to recognition of various challenges to

gender equity in the country (for example child marriage). In other cases, however, researchers write reports for governments who may not show as much interest or commitment towards gender equity, as noted by a key informant from an authoring CSO. The informant described how patriarchal norms within government institutions, and the lack of women in positions of leadership or power, may contribute to hampering political commitment to gender equality. They also noted that the focus of some organisations is on equity and social inclusion more broadly – not gender in particular – and therefore research outputs, though providing some level of sex-disaggregation, do not delve more deeply into gender and how it intersects with other factors to shape inequality. For this reason, their findings may not be presented from an intersectional lens. Likewise, many of the NGOs that provided girls' only data often engaged only the female beneficiaries in their projects, and thus did not include boys in their research sample. Indeed, a third key informant from a think tank noted how organisations should “embed [disaggregation] into their methodology from the start” to create a model for researchers to follow, and ultimately foster institutional commitment to equality in research.

**Even when sex-disaggregation is a priority, and organisations are committed, a lack of funding may hinder efforts (KII, think tank).** For example, limited financial resources may force researchers to narrow the focus of their studies to only include girls (KII, multilateral). From a government perspective, there is also a need for more funding from donors: in a 2019 UN high-level political forum on sustainable development,



Secondary School students in Bikenibeu, Kiribati 2007.  
Photo: Lorrie Graham

delegates from the **Asia-Pacific** region reported that “greater investment was needed in national statistical systems that were struggling to meet the demand for more and better data for the Global Goals and targets” (UN-ESCAP, 2019: p.8).

**In addition to funding and financial resources, the capacity of research institutes may also limit researchers’ ability to disaggregate and provide a robust analysis of data (KII, think tank).** All four key informants mentioned the capacity of national governments, research institutes, or statistical databases. For example, outdated and paper-based data systems cause general challenges, and in many cases available sex-disaggregated data may not be representative of the population, thus affecting researchers’ ability to draw on it in simulations (KII, multilateral organisation). One key informant also identified the need to engage young researchers from the global south in the research process, to build local capacity, especially that of young female researchers (KII, think tank). Lack of female

enumerators to conduct research with women and girls (which is good practice from a safety perspective and where gender norms restrict access for male researchers) was indeed highlighted as a challenge in the literature (Beam et al., 2021) and by key informants. In particular, challenges arise when trying to access some of the most vulnerable girls, such as young married girls, without their husbands or in-laws, thus “skewing” the data collected; it is thus vital that female researchers are trained on how to build rapport with vulnerable women and girl research participants (KII, think tank). On the other hand, a key informant described how the large quantity of disaggregated data from **Bangladesh** may be due to the strong network or agencies and organisations working on data collection in the country. In addition, ministerial policies in **Bangladesh** have strongly aligned to the SDGs, and various forms of reporting that come with this, have fostered a “strong statistical history” in the country (KII, think tank).



# 5

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Understanding girls’ and boys’ diverse experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is critical to designing policies and programmes that protect and uphold the rights and the wellbeing of all young people.**

**UNESCO has called for robust gender analysis as part of governments’ COVID-19 response and wider education sector planning (KII, multilateral organisation).** Yet this study has shown that there is currently a lack of sex-disaggregated data on the gendered impacts of the pandemic in **SSEA** and **PICs**, hampering efforts to design gender equitable COVID-19 response plans and education, health and wellbeing-focused interventions. This ultimately hinders progress towards the SDGs and other global commitments to gender equality and social inclusion.

**The findings from this study are not unique to SSEA and PICs alone.** Globally, fewer than half of countries report data on important SDG indicators ([Montoya, 2019](#)); and a data mapping conducted in 2020 identified five key gender data gaps in relation to the SDGs, many of which were also noted in this study: learning outcomes, digital literacy, excluded girls, gender-responsive education infrastructure and facilities, and subjective dimensions of girls’ education (for example aspirations and expectations) (Grantham, 2020). The following recommendations – aimed at donors, bilateral and multilateral organisations and other international development practitioners – are designed to address these evidence gaps, and to strengthen evidence generation efforts in **SSEA** and **PICs**:

### COMMISSION AND FUND RESEARCH THAT EXAMINES GENDER EQUITY THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS



This study has shown that although sex-disaggregated data is pivotal to identifying risks and barriers to gender equality, it is only through intersectional data that the most marginalised girls and boys can be identified. A focus on equity in education “means looking beyond basic indices to capture more disaggregated data on the compounding and cumulative impacts of poverty, gender, disability, conflict as well as on learning outcomes” ([Montoya, 2019](#)).

### CREATE ENABLING RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS AND SUPPORT RESEARCH TEAMS



Funding research is not enough. Research teams need to be equipped with the skills and resources needed to collect, analyse and report on rigorous, disaggregated data. To do this, gender focal persons can be assigned within institutions to ensure that commitments towards gender equality are carried out in research and practice and provide support and technical assistance to research teams, for example, through peer reviews focused on gender and/or intersectionality (KII, CSO). This also means engaging, training, and empowering local researchers, especially women.

### SUPPORT GOVERNMENTS IN STRENGTHENING EMIS AND THE USE OF DATA FOR POLICY DECISION-MAKING



Few countries disaggregate data from administrative records and national learning assessments beyond sex, and the lack of robust data systems at the national level is a major obstacle to gender equality (Grantham, 2020). Improving research on gender in education requires building national capacity at the level of ministries and national research institutes (KII, multilateral organisation). Government actors should be engaged in the design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination of research findings. Involving the government closely from the onset, can generate ownership and increase the uptake of evidence for policy design or reform ([de Paz Nieves & Muller, 2021](#)).

### COLLABORATE WITH DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS TO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT RESEARCH AND TO ANALYSE, DISCUSS, AND DISSEMINATE RESEARCH FINDINGS



Collaboration amongst development partners, donors, governments, CSOs or NGOs, and academics/think tanks can effectively contribute to building and sustaining dialogue and action towards gender equality. In order to examine the breadth and depth of gender inequality it is important to work across sectors (e.g. education, health, finance) and methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, participatory, etc.) (de Paz Nieves & Muller, 2021; and multiple KIIs). At a grassroots level, this may also involve using participatory research design approaches and engaging young people in the design of research questions and tools, so that young people can voice their concerns over matters that affect them (KII, multilateral organisation). At a global level, this may also mean creating global coalitions (e.g. the Adolescent Girl Investment Plan) that focus on girls' and young women's agency, leadership, and participation in research (KII, think tank).

### RAISE AWARENESS AND CHALLENGE MISUNDERSTANDINGS AROUND GENDER



Focusing on gender does not mean looking at the experiences of girls only or boys only; it means understanding how girls and boys may be engaging with – and benefiting from – education interventions in different ways. This includes potential differential impacts of COVID-19 responses efforts. There is a need to raise awareness on the importance of breaking away from working in silos and helping people understand what it means to collect and analyse data on gender (KII, multilateral).

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# APPENDIX 1: LIST OF DISAGGREGATED DATA BY COUNTRY



## APPENDIX 1. LIST OF DISAGGREGATED DATA BY COUNTRY

REGION/COUNTRY	COMPARATIVE DATA	FEMALE ONLY	NO LEVEL OF DISAGGREGATION	TOTAL (100%)
<b>SOUTH ASIA</b>	<b>50 (64%)</b>	<b>19 (24%)</b>	<b>9 (12%)</b>	<b>72</b>
Afghanistan	11 (58%)	6 (32%)	2 (11%)	19
Bangladesh	43 (66%)	14 (22%)	8 (12%)	65
<b>SOUTHEAST ASIA</b>	<b>33 (58%)</b>	<b>12 (21%)</b>	<b>12 (21%)</b>	<b>57</b>
Cambodia	7 (78%)	1 (11%)	1 (11%)	9
Indonesia	15 (54%)	5 (18%)	8 (29%)	28
Lao	4 (57%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	7
Myanmar	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	5
Philippines	11 (65%)	4 (24%)	2 (12%)	17
Timor Leste	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	4
Vietnam	8 (50%)	6 (38%)	2 (13%)	16
<b>PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES (PICs)</b>	<b>21 (40%)</b>	<b>5 (10%)</b>	<b>26 (50%)</b>	<b>52</b>
Cook Islands	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	1
FSM	3 (75%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	4
Fiji	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	4 (57%)	7
Kiribati	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	5
Nauru	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	1
PNG	7 (39%)	2 (11%)	9 (50%)	18
Samoa Islands	3 (50%)	0 (0%)	3 (50%)	6
Solomon Islands	6 (46%)	1 (8%)	6 (46%)	13
Tonga	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	2
Tuvalu	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	2
Vanuatu	2 (25%)	1 (13%)	5 (63%)	8
<b>ALL PUBLICATIONS ACROSS ALL REGIONS</b>	<b>98 (55%) WITH COMPARATIVE DATA</b>	<b>33 (19%) WITH FEMALE ONLY DATA</b>	<b>46 (26%) WITH NO LEVEL OF DISAGGREGATION</b>	<b>177</b>

Note: Numbers may not sum due to rounding.



# APPENDIX 2: ADDITIONAL TABLES AND FIGURES

# 2

**TABLE 1. SEX-DISAGGREGATED PRIMARY DATA, BY TYPE OF AUTHOR**

REGION/COUNTRY	COMPARATIVE DATA	FEMALE ONLY	NO LEVEL OF DISAGGREGATION	TOTAL (100%)
Bilateral or multilateral	38 (57%)	10 (15%)	19 (28%)	67
NGOs or INGOs	11 (28%)	16 (41%)	12 (31%)	39
Academics/think tanks	44 (75%)	6 (10%)	9 (15%)	59
National governments	4 (67%)	0 (0%)	2 (33%)	6
Other authors	1 (17%)	1 (17%)	4 (67%)	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>98 (55%) WITH COMPARATIVE DATA</b>	<b>33 (19%) WITH FEMALE ONLY DATA</b>	<b>46 (26%) WITH NO LEVEL OF DISAGGREGATION</b>	<b>177 TOTAL</b>

Note: Numbers may not sum due to rounding.

**TABLE 2. SEX-DISAGGREGATED PRIMARY DATA, BY THEMATIC AREA**

REGION/COUNTRY	COMPARATIVE DATA	FEMALE ONLY	NO LEVEL OF DISAGGREGATION	TOTAL (100%)
<b>EDUCATION</b>	<b>66 (55%)</b>	<b>17 (14%)</b>	<b>36 (30%)</b>	<b>119</b>
Access and participation	44 (54%)	12 (15%)	27 (33%)	82
Teaching and curricula	18 (42%)	2 (5%)	23 (53%)	43
Learning and assessment	9 (33%)	3 (11%)	15 (56%)	27
<b>WELLBEING</b>	<b>69 (58%)</b>	<b>25 (21%)</b>	<b>24 (20%)</b>	<b>118</b>
Mental health	52 (72%)	7 (10%)	13 (18%)	72
Livelihoods	39 (58%)	13 (19%)	15 (22%)	67
Gender-based violence	32 (49%)	19 (29%)	14 (22%)	65
Physical health and nutrition	29 (62%)	6 (13%)	12 (26%)	47
Sexual and reproductive health	21 (53%)	14 (35%)	5 (13%)	40
Voice, agency, mobility	16 (89%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>98 WITH COMPARATIVE DATA</b>	<b>33 WITH FEMALE ONLY DATA</b>	<b>46 WITH NO LEVEL OF DATA DISAGGREGATION</b>	<b>177 TOTAL</b>

Note: Numbers may not sum due to rounding.



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