REPORT

AU/CIEFFA’s Webinars on:
“Addressing impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Girls and Women’s Education”

Two-leg Webinar series

7th & 20th May 2020
I. Background

The World Health Organization has declared the COVID-19 as a global pandemic. This situation has forced most of the globe, including Africa to adopt new numerous social protection measures such as school closures. Preoccupied by the increasing vulnerability of girls in Africa, the AU/CIEFFA has organized multi-stakeholder Webinars on “Addressing impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Girls and Women’s Education”.

II. Participation

Experts from African Union (AU) Education and Gender Ministries as well as representatives of RECs, CSOs, Traditional and Religious Leaders, AU/CIEFFA focal points, Youth/AU/CIEFFA’s Alumni network, Researchers and Development partners attended the webinar series. Broken down into two-parts, the first webinar held on May 7th, invited the Anglophone community with Dr Rita Bissoonauth as moderator. The second, targeting the Francophone community took place on May 19th with Mrs Simone Yankey-Ouattara as moderator.

III. African Union Members States’ response on the impacts on Girls’ Education

a. Strategies developed and implemented by Member States

The pandemic has widened existing inequalities in the education systems. Prior to COVID-19, girls in particular, recorded the lowest enrolment rates and remain the most vulnerable under the current crisis. Some of these girls were already affected by continued conflicts and poverty, lack of adaptability with ICTs in education, inadequate infrastructure and ineffective gender sensitive policies. Schools represent a refuge and symbolize a safe space for girls, and because of school closures, many learners now resort to bartering in the informal sector, farming for livelihoods and domestic chores. Other learners risk exposure to harmful practices such as early and forced marriage, physical and sexual assaults, early pregnancy, female genital mutilations and resort to transactional sex and prostitution.

The crisis has equally discouraged girls, dimming their hopes of succeeding through school. Parents with few means of livelihoods, alternatively pressure their girls into looking for more. If left unchecked, this situation will increase dropout rates of girls from schools.

AU Member States and respective Ministries of Education shed light on their key approaches in order to restrain COVID-19 related impacts on educational systems. Such approaches include:
Establishing key response structures: A High-Level Task Force and an Emergency Committee established in collaboration with development partners, ministries of health and donors. These structures strive to avoid duplication and ensure coordination of action and programmes of stakeholders to best address issues faced by the most vulnerable groups of learners especially, adolescent girls.

Gender responsiveness: A key framework on gender mainstreaming is established, integrating a gender dimension in all responses providing basic & preventive information and services to meet girls’ and women’ needs. In order to tackle SGBV, a male involvement strategy has been setup with a one stop Response centre against SGBV and a rape emergency call centre.

Continuous Information & Education: Efforts are deployed to disseminate reliable messages on TV, radio and social media to address education & health concerns of learners, parents and guardians. The focus is preventing GBV, HIV, STI, teenage pregnancy and promoting Menstrual and Hygiene Management (MHM) and psycho-social support amongst others. Learners without internet or radio are receiving hard copy school materials to reduce learning gaps. Radios distributed to parents and caregivers in remote areas, as teachers are actively dispensing radio learning programs to facilitate distance learning.

Framing of the response: Furthermore, ministries of Education developed a recently harmonized Learning Framework with learning packages in core subjects/themes to support learning for learners at primary and secondary education levels. In the implementation of this Framework, local governments and parents are actively engaged with an emphasis on deriving benefits for girls and young women.

Specific programs: Some countries have launched specific programs and concepts: “Mon école à la maison”, “Ecole fermée : mon cahier ouvert”, “Digital solidarity”, “Nation apprenante”

Re-opening every school: AU Member States’ mid to long term approaches aim for schools’ re-opening. These include tracking all learners, launching a campaign to bring back learners, providing remedial classes for slow learners and cash transfers for out-of-school girls while considering classroom congestion. More measures comprise of capacity building training for Ministries of Education and key stakeholders in the protection of learners, installing WASH & MHM facilities in schools as well as disinfecting school establishments & surroundings. Other responses emphasize on delivery of feeding programmes

Monitoring mechanisms: Among other key guiding documents, the Reporting, Tracking, Response and Referral Guidelines on violence against children and commitment made to its implementation by governments will be closely followed up with accountability mechanisms.
b. Strategy and implementation related challenges by AU Member States

Due to the COVID-19, multiple challenges have been identified as obstacles to AU Member States’ strategy implementation responses. These are as follows:

**Evidence based-approach:** Evidence from former pandemics has shown that when many learners are not in school, they are likely to miss out on vital services such as school meals, socializing and protection. Consequentially, the likelihood at this time for related effects is heightened.

**Vulnerability and marginalization:** Girls will be at higher risk of exposure to SGBV, transactional sex, Sexually Transmissible Diseases and Infections (STDs and STIs) and HIV/AIDs as well as early pregnancy & marriage which leads to their drop-outs. Furthermore, frontline health workers and caregivers will be at higher risk of overwork, burnout and contagion, making the task of support and alleviation in affected communities more difficult. Already marginalized communities will be harder to reach especially, learners with disabilities, pastoralist & fishing communities plus parents and caregivers without internet access or radio/TV.

**Internet connectivity:** Many countries have experienced connectivity challenges due to high cost of internet and poor coverage especially in remote areas.

**Effects of lockdown restrictions:**

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IV. Key stakeholders contributing to the Education response with a focus on girls

a. Contributions from International organisations

- UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation) highlighted its key measures, which include a virtual ministerial meeting, rallying 73 countries including 23 AU member states. An Ad-hoc Ministerial task force group has thus been established as an Education response. Furthermore, a Global Education coalition comprised of 100 member states, representatives from the private sector, CSO and UN agencies, has been developed to spearhead Flagships for a one-year period. These Flagship projects seek to address connectivity and content challenges, match learners needs with free digital solutions, whilst placing special attention on data security and privacy of learners & teachers. To better understand the gender dimensions of COVID related school closures, UNESCO runs a weekly webinar to promote knowledge and expand evidence base. On its website, national distance learning solutions and digital resources are curated. One exemplified practice is in Kenya which offers STEM education focused digital learning resources for inclusive education.

- GPE (Global Partnership for Education)’s anti-COVID responses have included virtual exchanges bringing together Ministers of Education from 67 partner countries to put the spotlight on gender. Recently, GPE held a ministerial discussion to learn and exchange on multimodal continuous learning & teaching approaches and to integrate gender equity as well as girls’ protection in governmental response plans. Furthermore, GPE has launched a call for proposals for grants through the Education Out Loud fund to engage CSOs in the design of approaches ensuring equity for the most vulnerable, and implementation of transparent and accountable national education sector policies to meet communities’ basic needs.
GPE used the opportunity of the meeting to present the existing types of funding mechanisms such as the UNESCO/World Bank/UNICEF consortium for regional interventions, as well as the support to countries to reduce the immediate and long-term impact of school disruption.

b. Contributions from Religious & Traditional leaders, Civil Society Organisations and Alumni Youth network

- Religious and Traditional Leaders have showed their support and compliance to the proposed measures from ministries of Education. Through their influential position, they have contributed to sensitizing their respective communities with regards to social distancing measures. Traditional and religious leaders from the Kingdom of Eswatini and Niger shared their contributions to ensure that no one is left behind. For example in the Kingdom of Eswatini, to make sure learning continues, the ministry of education is providing digital learning equipment to all learners especially, those in rural areas with limited online resources.

- CSOs are also playing a key role in contributing to the work undertaken by governments and education institutions. Through its existing partnership with Mastercard Foundation, the Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE) is implementing school projects and scholarship programmes to help meet basic needs through providing stipends, airtime, internet and sanitary items. FAWE is also exploring opportunities of promoting online learning by providing laptops or smart phones to university students. Through their national chapters, FAWE advocates against GBV and lobbies for tax subsidies on sanitary pads.

- ANCEFA (The African Campaign Network for Education for All) through its national coalitions, works to ensure governments’ response plans are gender sensitive and inclusive. ANCEFA takes part in strategic and technical meetings looking at the development of relevant responses, and contributes to information sharing processes within the education community, and lobbies for more funding toward strategic education and protection responses.

- Save the Children equally shared its work with governments, civil societies, religious leaders and children especially girls in some countries. For example, in Rwanda, radios are being distributed to the most vulnerable families because it is one of the best ways to reach children learners. Additionally, the international organization is working with Ethiopia and their mobilized religious leaders to avail 8 TV channels exclusively for distance learning.

- As one AU/CIEFFA Alumni Youth-led initiative, a private sector firm from Tunisia was showcased. The firm runs learning projects through the Augmented Reality mobile app. Its app avails online learning guides, manuals and videos for 500 children from unprivileged backgrounds. Furthermore, AU/CIEFFA Alumni Youth in the teaching profession informed they returned to schools in anticipation for the reopening of schools.
in mid-May. They are addressing issues of class congestion, social distancing and supply of sanitisers, temperature guns and food. For now and for learning not to stop, it is mandatory for children under 15 to stay at home.

V. Recommendations

Participants also formulated recommendations which can be summarized as follows.

- Provide the needed infrastructures and strengthen the logistical and technical structures to reach children in rural areas and ensure distance learning;
- Consider UNESCO's guidelines with regards to safety and hygiene measures in terms of the provision of masks, water and soap for girl and boy learners and teachers, and carry out social distancing measures;
- Promote inclusive, gender sensitive education response plans, and catch up strategies for girls in anticipation of the schools re-opening;
- Develop programs that include education in emergencies, while considering the specific needs of displaced girls or living in conflict zones;
- Promote the use of ICT in educational programs as mid to long term measures; this entails capacity building trainings for teachers and school administration on ICT and distance learning;
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VI. Closing

Dr Rita Bissoonauth thanked all the participants for attending AU/CIEFFA’s webinars despite ICT and connectivity interruptions. She underlined that this pandemic has shown that most of the AU Members States were not very prepared to face such a situation. She urged all the stakeholders to rally as one to ensure every girl returns to school.