

# Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures: Insights from Frontline Organizations

**Maryam Akmal, Susannah Hares, and Megan O'Donnell**

## Abstract

COVID-19 school closures pose significant operational and financial risks to frontline organizations delivering vital education services, including non-governmental organizations, school operators, and other service providers. In this survey, we ask these organizations about the challenges they are facing in light of COVID-19 closures, particularly for girls. The responses shed light on how COVID-19 is affecting education service operations—and what providers are doing in response. We uncover three major findings. First, 69 percent of the respondents believe that girls are at a greater risk than boys from COVID-19 school closures, with more than half of those respondents citing girls' exposure to gender-based violence as a major concern. Second, close to half (42 percent) of the respondents report that their organization is experiencing budget cuts, with 73 percent of those respondents citing a drop in funding from private and philanthropic donors. Third, despite the financial and operational disruptions due to school closures and lockdowns, 89 percent of the respondents report planning and delivering additional vital interventions during the pandemic. It is crucial, now more than ever, that donors and policymakers support and engage with frontline organizations delivering vital services for girls and their communities.

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The data used in this paper is available here: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/akmal-et-al-covid-girls-schools-survey.zip>. More information on CGD's research data and code disclosure policy can be found here: [www.cgdev.org/page/research-data-and-code-disclosure](http://www.cgdev.org/page/research-data-and-code-disclosure).

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## Motivation

Evidence from past pandemic contexts suggests that COVID-19 is likely to affect the education outcomes of girls and boys in adverse and differential ways. What has been less studied are the challenges and perceptions of those working for the frontline organizations delivering vital educational services to girls and boys in low- and middle- income countries: the non-governmental organizations, school operators, and other service providers whose operations have been disrupted indefinitely by school closures and lockdowns.

To better understand their challenges and how they're impacting both students and staff, we launched the Out of School Girls Survey. We aim to highlight the short- and long-term gender-related concerns of those with firsthand knowledge of how the crisis is affecting the girls and boys they serve, and to help drive gender-transformative decision-making by policymakers and donors.

## Data

The survey received 105 individual responses in total. We discarded seven responses due to lack of key data, leaving a total sample of 98 responses.<sup>1</sup> The sample covers 82 unique organizations<sup>2</sup> in at least 32 different countries.<sup>3</sup> Half of the respondents are from organizations operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, 17 percent from South Asia, 10 percent from the Middle East and North Africa, 5 percent from Latin America, and 17 percent are from respondents in organizations that worked across more than one region.

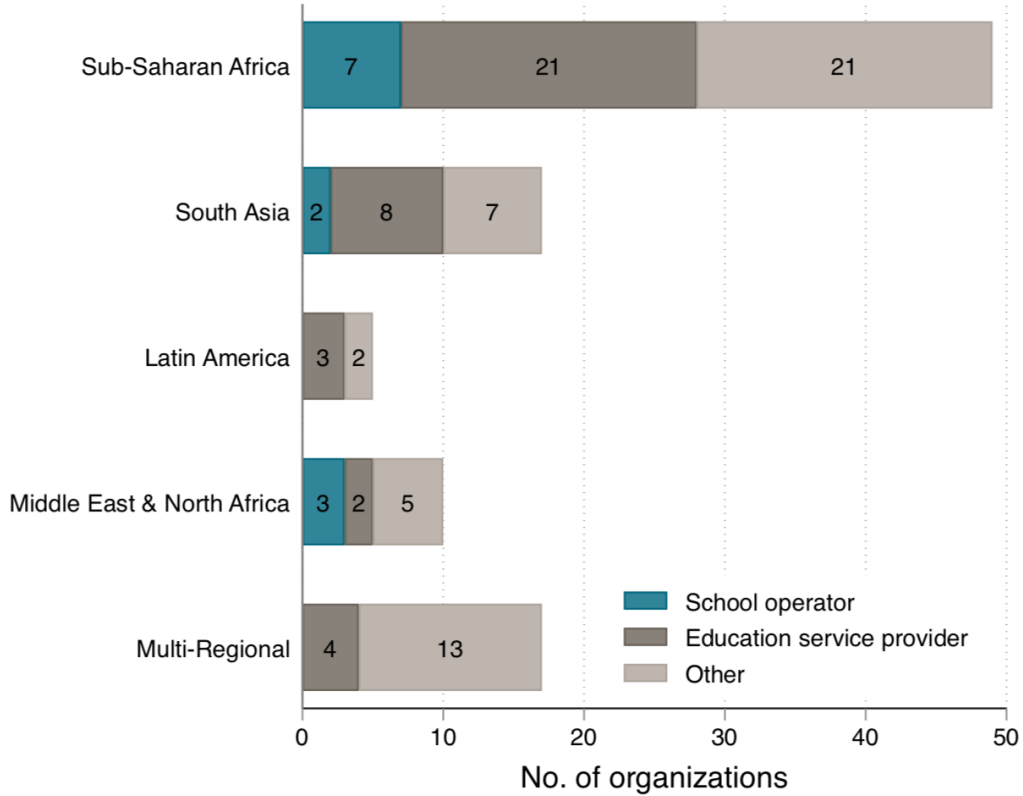
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<sup>1</sup> Key data, such as organization name among others variables, were missing, or there were duplicate entries by the same respondent.

<sup>2</sup> There were a few responses from the same organization's units in different regions, and there were instances where different individuals from the same organization submitted responses.

<sup>3</sup> We say "at least" because country information was missing for some respondents. The following countries were identified in the survey: Botswana, DRC, Ethiopia, eSwatini, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe from Sub-Saharan Africa; Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan from South Asia; Guatemala, Honduras, Panama from Latin America; Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, West Bank, Gaza Strip from the Middle East and North Africa.

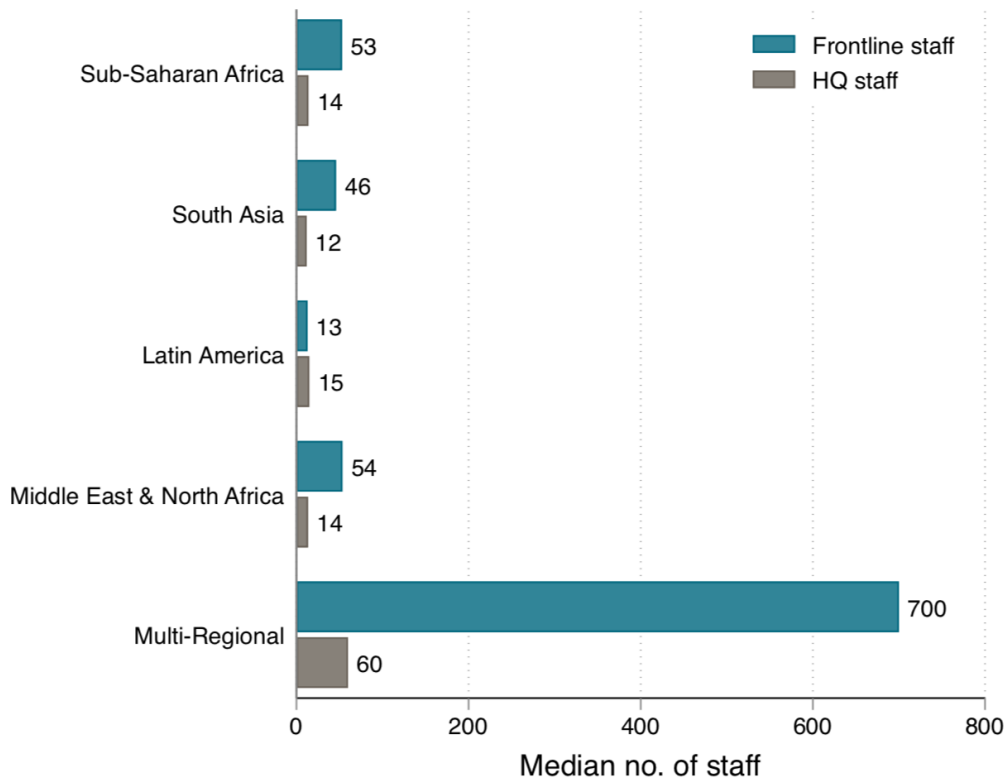
**Figure 1. Almost half of the survey respondents are from Sub-Saharan Africa**



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 98 respondents. “Other” includes all organizations apart from “School operator” and “Education service provider” as well as organizations that identify across more than one category. For example, if an organization selects both “School operator” and “Education service provider” they are classified as “Other.”

The organizations covered include school operators, education service delivery organizations, and other children’s rights, childcare, gender equality organizations, health organizations, as well as government organizations. 39 percent of the organizations are education service providers and 12 percent are school operators. The remaining organizations in the “other” category in Figure 1 include children’s rights, childcare or gender equality organizations (37 percent), government organizations including ministries (8 percent), research organizations (2 percent), and organizations that identify across more than one category (2 percent)

**Figure 2. Median staff size is only slightly larger for organizations from Sub-Saharan Africa compared to those from South Asia**



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 85 respondents for frontline staff figure and 83 respondents for HQ staff figure.

In our full sample the median number of frontline staff is 59 and the median number of headquarter staff is 15, based on approximate estimates reported by the respondents. The largest numbers of reported frontline and headquarter staff at a given organization are 28,000 and 8,000 staff respectively. The smallest number reported for headquarter staff is one, and one organization reported zero frontline staff. As shown in Figure 2, the median number of frontline and headquarter staff is only slightly larger in Sub-Saharan Africa compared to South Asia—the two regions accounting for the bulk of our sample. As expected, organizations operating across multiple regions have the largest number of median frontline and headquarter staff.

The survey was conducted online and went live on Wednesday, April 8 2020 and closed on Wednesday, April 29, 2020. The survey link was shared on online platforms such as Twitter, CGD’s external and internal mailing lists, as well as through direct outreach.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymized data from the survey can be accessed here: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/akmal-et-al-covid-girls-schools-survey.zip>

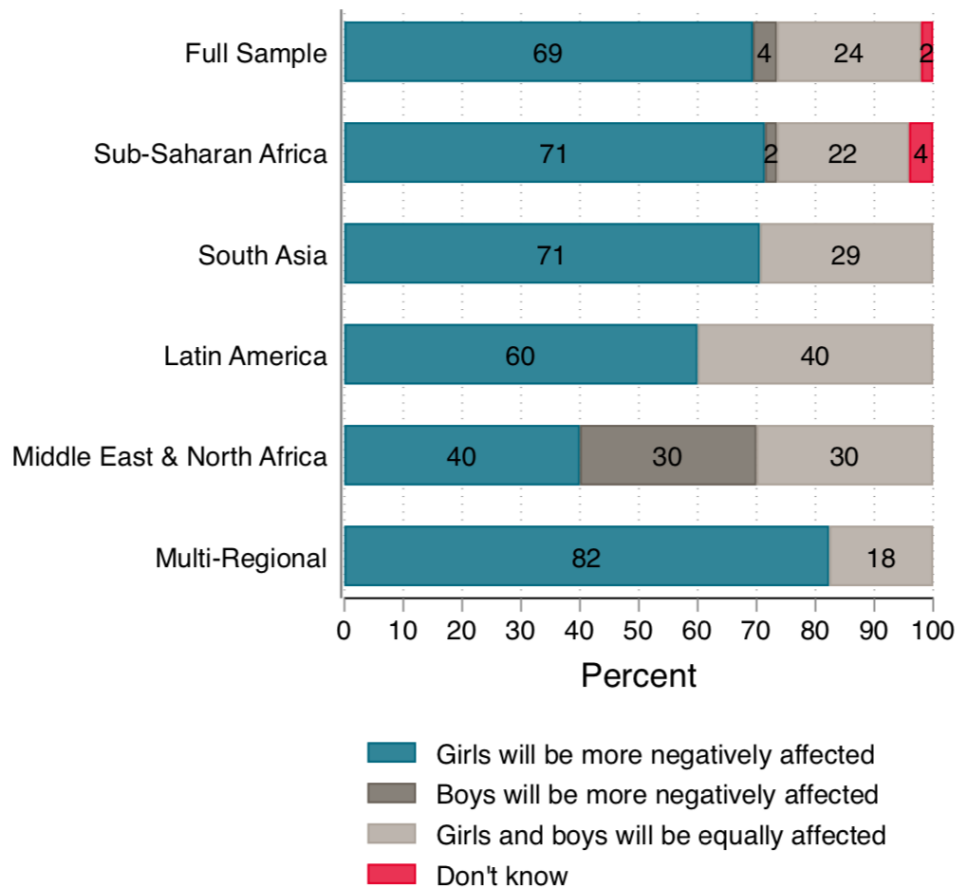
The survey uses a convenience sample of respondents that could be reached through our networks and agreed to respond. Therefore, the survey is not meant to be representative at a country, regional, or global level—it is meant to illuminate key concerns and challenges for organizations that were able to participate, to guide future priorities for more systematic research, and in the meantime, provide preliminary insights to bolster rapid response efforts.

## Section 1. Concerns and Challenges for Girls

School closures have widespread implications for both boys and girls, but they may affect girls disproportionately more by exacerbating existing gender-specific vulnerabilities. In this survey, we ask respondents if girls are more likely to be negatively affected by COVID-19 school closures than boys.

### Key Finding 1: Most respondents believe that girls are more likely to be negatively affected by COVID-19 school closures than boys.

Figure 3. Are girls more likely to be negatively affected by COVID-19 school closures than boys?



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 98 respondents. Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

A majority (69 percent) of the respondents believe that girls are more likely to be negatively affected by the COVID-19 school closures than boys. This trend is consistent with a rich evidence base underscoring the importance of educational access and attainment for girls' well-being. As shown in Figure 3, the trend holds for respondents from organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and those operating across multiple regions.

However, nearly a quarter of the respondents in our full sample believe that girls and boys will be equally affected. The opinion seems more split among organizations responding from the Middle East and North Africa, where close to one-third of the respondents believe that boys will be more negatively affected.

Why do most respondents believe that girls are at a greater risk than boys? We ask respondents to share explanations for their opinions. Oftentimes respondents point to more than one factor. A few key factors stand out:

**Gender-based violence.** Among those who believe girls are at a greater risk than boys, 56 percent report girls' exposure to abuse and violence as one of the key concerns—in fact, 63 percent of respondents in Sub-Saharan Africa raise the issue of gender-based violence. New evidence from Bangladesh suggests that violence against women has increased during COVID-19 lockdowns, partly due to poverty-related stress and prolonged periods of staying at home. Similarly, evidence from past pandemics suggests girls face heightened risks of violence during such crises, and girls who are not in school are more likely to be exposed to violence.

**Unpaid care work.** More than half of the respondents (52 percent) who believe girls are at a greater risk report girls' involvement with household chores as one of the key challenges to continued learning for girls. We know from evidence that adolescent girls as “big sisters” contribute heavily to caring for younger siblings and overall domestic work.

**Early marriage and pregnancy.** More than 40 percent of the respondents who believe girls are at a greater risk express concerns about early marriage and pregnancy as a result of school closures. With increased household economic strains and school closures, parents may decide to marry girls especially in contexts where it results in dowry payments, or girls may face pressure to engage in transactional sex. Past evidence from the Ebola outbreak suggests that adolescent pregnancies rose, particularly in Sierra Leone.

**Dropouts.** 37 percent of the respondents mention girls dropping out and not coming back to school as a key concern. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia suggests that, when faced with limited resources, households may prioritize sending boys to school rather than girls—raising concerns about whether girls will come back to schools at all. Other compounding factors such as exposure to gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy, and pressure to do household chores may also lower the likelihood of girls returning to school

It is evident from the survey responses that COVID-19 has shed light on, and in many instances magnified, pre-existing discriminatory social norms, gender roles, and power



dynamics. However, it is worth noting that some respondents point to differential harms for boys as well. These include boys facing pressure to engage in income-generating activities outside the house.

**Table 1. Select excerpts from respondents about the risks faced by girls during school closures**

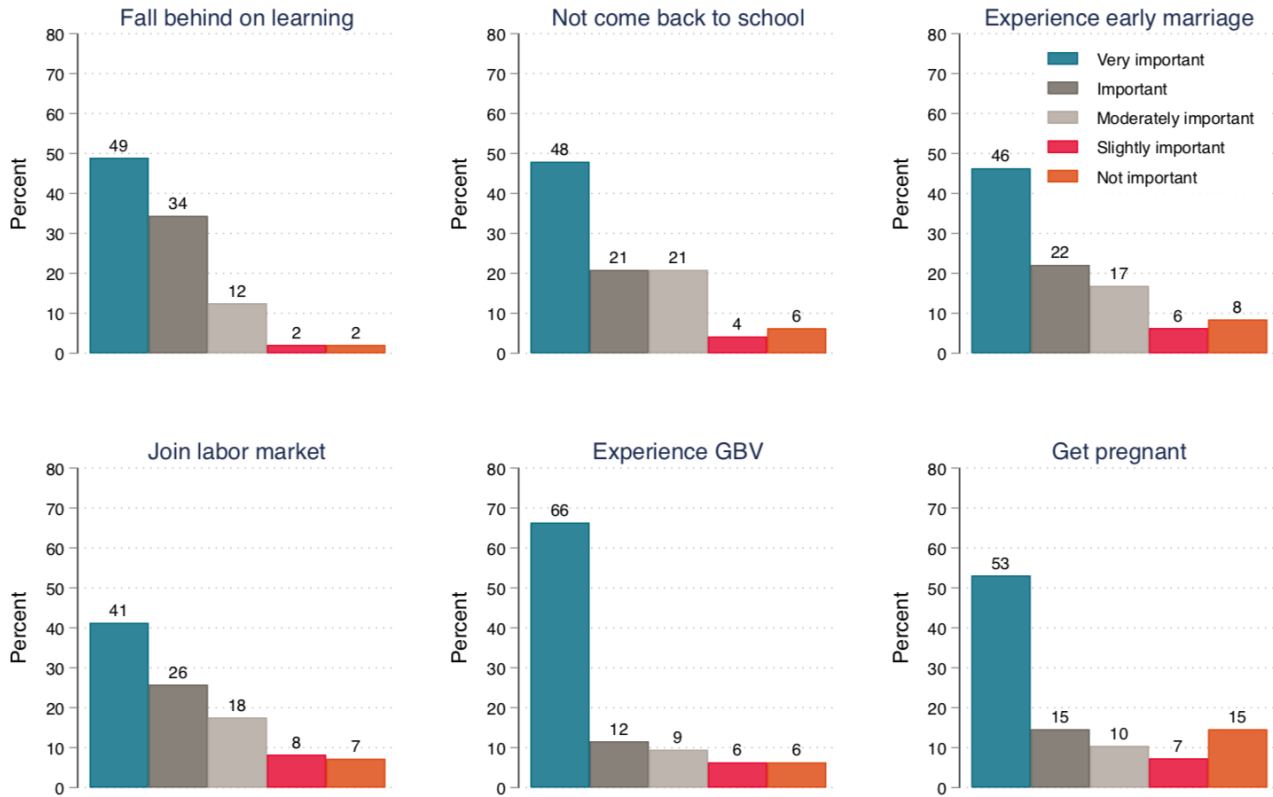
<p>“School closures increase susceptibility to GBV, sexual violence and adolescent pregnancy (all without access to services)...”</p> <p>“Girls and boys will be treated differently and given different tasks in the home. Girls will be sent to collect firewood, support in the home, and look after younger siblings. Boys will be sent to make money...”</p> <p>“Girls are more susceptible to potentially getting pregnant and dropping out as they won't be engaged in their usual school routine during this period...”</p> <p>“Due to school closures, many parents will stop sending their children to schools.”</p> <p>“In [this] district, within three weeks of closure of schools, there are reported cases of child trafficking...”</p> <p>“Girls will face household work pressure along with domestic violence...”</p> <p>“Increased time spent confined at home, with increased stress and tension, may lead to an increase in both boys and girls experiencing or observing violence....”</p>
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**Key Finding 2: Girls’ exposure to gender-based violence at home during school closures is a big concern for most respondents.**

We ask respondents to rank major concerns for girls during school closures on a scale of “very important,” “important,” “moderately important,” “slightly important” and “not important”. The concerns listed include:

- Girls will fall behind on learning
- Girls will not come back to school once schools re-open
- Girls will experience an early marriage
- Girls will join the labor market to contribute economically to the household
- Girls will experience gender-based violence (GBV) at home
- Girls will become pregnant

Figure 4. Key risks for girls due to school closures

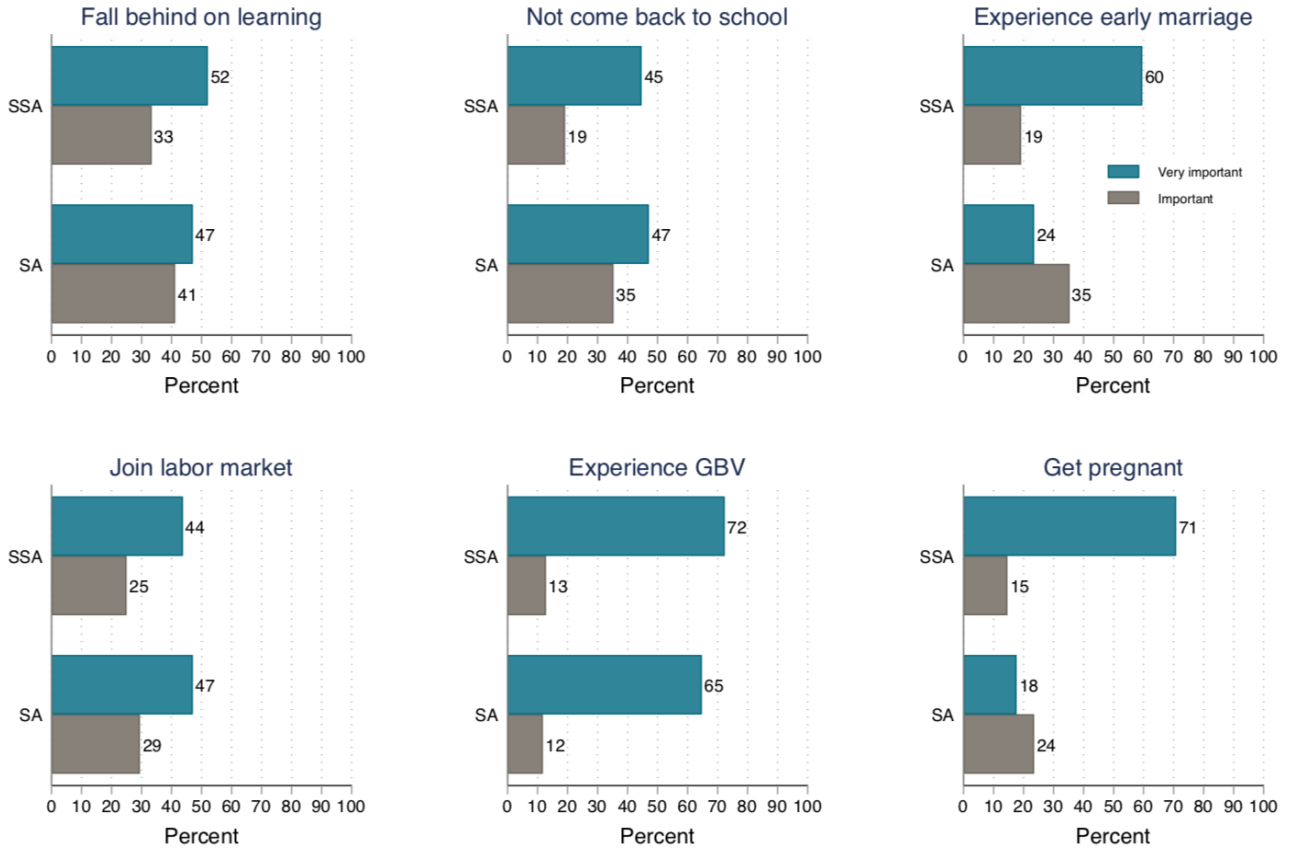


Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 95 respondents for marriage and GBV, 96 respondents for learning, not coming back to school and pregnancy, and 97 respondents for labor market. Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Overall, 66 percent of the respondents rank exposure to gender-based violence as a “very important” concern. Close to half of the respondents rank loss in learning and girls not returning to school as a “very important” concern. Pregnancy is a very important concern for more than half (53 percent) of the respondents, though opinions seem more sharply split on the topic, as pregnancy was also ranked as “not important” by 15 percent of the respondents. Similarly, while early marriage is an important concern for 46 percent of the respondents, it is ranked as “not important” by 8 percent of the respondents.

Are there regional differences in the responses to these questions? We focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia—the two regions that account for 68 percent of our sample.

**Figure 5. There are regional differences in the salience of concerns for girls due to school closures**



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 64 respondents for not coming back to school, marriage and GBV, and 65 respondents for learning, labor market and pregnancy.

90 percent of the respondents from Sub-Saharan Africa and 77 percent of the respondents from South Asia rank gender-based violence during school closures as a “very important” or “important” concern. Across the two regions, there is also similarity in responses to concerns around learning, returning to school, and joining the labor market. However, opinions in the two regions differ on pregnancy and early marriage. Less than a quarter of the respondents from South Asia ranked pregnancy and early marriage as “very important” concerns compared to a large majority of the respondents in Sub-Saharan Africa.

What might explain this divergence of opinion? Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that local income shocks may increase child marriage for girls because marriage payments from the groom’s family could be a source of consumption smoothing. The same study found the opposite pattern in India, where the bride’s family often has to take the financial burden of arranging the dowry. This could explain why early marriage in times of crises might be a bigger concern in Sub-Saharan Africa than in South Asia. Similarly, pregnancy seems to be a major concern for respondents from Sub-Saharan Africa, but relatively less salient for respondents from South Asia, where child-bearing outside of marriage can carry significant social sanctions and is less likely as a result. In addition, organizations in Sub-

Saharan Africa have past experience with pandemic contexts and their impact on fertility rates, such as during the Ebola crisis, which led to rising adolescent pregnancies, particularly in Sierra Leone, with girls reporting school closures as a key contributing factor, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

We ask respondents to list any additional concerns for girls apart from the ones listed above. Particularly notable were concerns about mental and emotional health, such as anxiety and depression (19 percent). Other responses highlight health-related concerns. 7 percent of the respondents mention disrupted access to life-saving information and health supplies, including disruptions in HPV vaccinations for girls and an increased risk in transmission of sexually transmitted infections. Another 7 percent express concerns about disrupted access to menstrual hygiene products for girls.

Our survey data reflect that education organizations' services extend well beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic lessons. Schools and education programs serve as safe havens against physical violence or harmful traditional practices like child marriage. They also serve as platforms providing health services, like vaccinations, which have now been put on hold due to school closures.

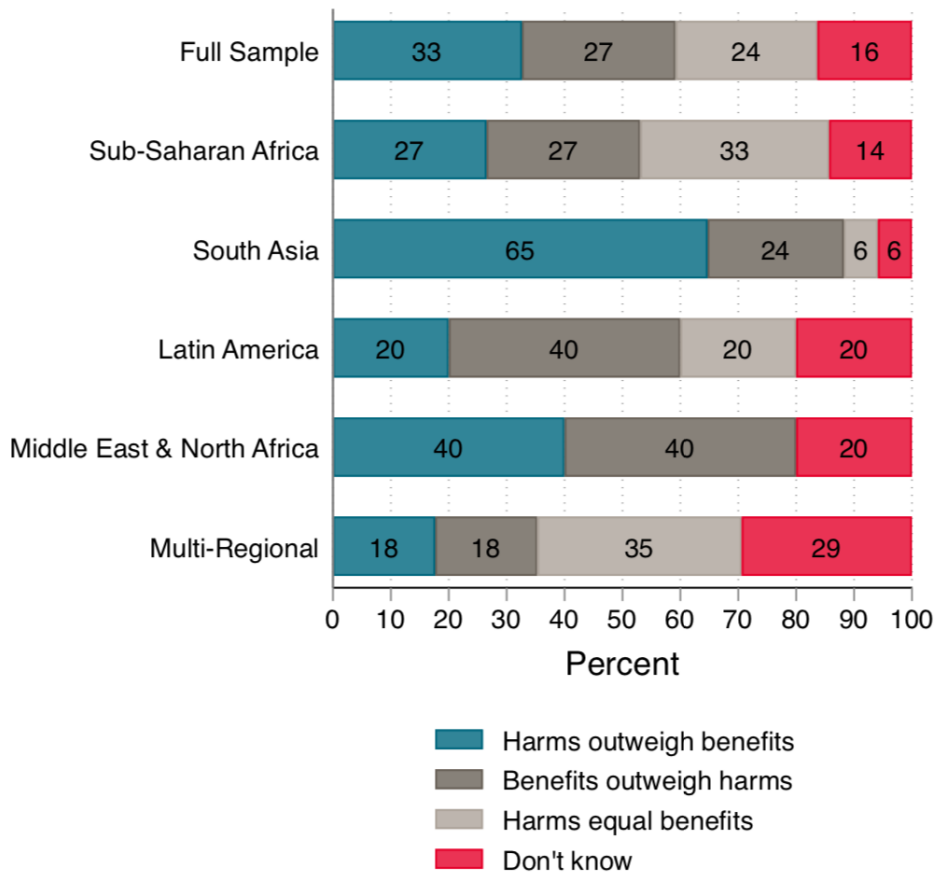
**Table 2. Select excerpts from respondents about additional concerns for girls during school closures**

<p>“Inequitable access to life-saving information, supplies and services...”</p> <p>“They are already being challenged by menstrual hygiene management, need for medicare and psychosocial support as well as inability to reach out / communicate due to no power, money, and availability of service providers.”</p> <p>“They might develop mental health problems like depression and anxiety.”</p> <p>“They will resort to unhygienic menstrual health.”</p> <p>“Access to contraceptives, sanitary napkins, related menstrual health and hygiene issues, and mental health is also a big concern.”</p> <p>“They will miss the HPV vaccination.”</p> <p>“Contracting HIV and STIs as they will be forced into sex.”</p> <p>“Removing females (adults and girls) from public square into places where more “traditional” norms—childcare, etc.—are reinforced.”</p> <p>“Sexism and patriarchy will be further entrenched.”</p> <p>“Parents may de-prioritize girls' education all together if they have been out of school for some time.”</p> <p>“Starvation and poverty...”</p> <p>“They will spend more time watching love series on TV.”</p> <p>“They will lose a lot of social capital that they get from being in school.”</p>
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**Key Finding 3: There is no clear consensus on whether respondents believe that the benefits of school closures outweigh the harms for girls.**

While most governments have closed schools in response to COVID-19 public health concerns, questions loom about when they should re-open. Some countries like Denmark and Israel have already opened schools while others are planning to follow suit. The Economist recently featured an article arguing that closing schools causes lifelong harm and widens inequalities. Policymakers are weighing the reduction in disease transmission against the adverse social and economic consequences of school closures, which can particularly exacerbate inequalities for girls. We asked respondents whether they believe that the benefits of school closures outweigh the harms for girls.

**Figure 6. Do the benefits of school closures outweigh the harms for girls?**



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 98 respondents. Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Overall, 27 percent of the respondents believe that the benefits of school closures outweigh the harms for girls. A slightly larger proportion (33 percent) believe that the harms outweigh the benefits for girls. While opinions on benefits and harms of school closures are split among respondents from different regions, a significant majority (65 percent) in South Asia believes that harms of school closures outweigh the benefits for girls.

We ask respondents to share explanations for their opinions. The responses highlight the tension between public health concerns on one hand, and education and gender-related concerns on the other. 88 percent of the respondents who believe that the benefits of school closures outweigh the harms for girls believe that school closures help mitigate transmission of the virus. In contrast, among those who say harms outweigh benefits, 52 percent are concerned about learning loss and 30 percent are concerned about gender-related issues, such as gender-based violence, early marriage, pregnancy, lack of access to health services and lack of empowerment. Among those respondents who believe that the harms of school closures outweigh benefits and cite gender-related concerns, 78 percent express concern about gender-based violence due to increased vulnerability and lack of safety for girls.

Respondents who argue that harms outweigh benefits also raise concerns about whether school closures actually help reduce transmission for marginalized communities where living arrangements or occupations do not allow for social distancing, or contexts where medical systems are already overburdened prior to the pandemic and “flattening the curve” may yield minimal health dividends for those already marginalized.

Those who believe that the harms of school closures are equal to benefits are largely torn between the higher risk of GBV for girls (38 percent) and mitigation of the virus transmission (29 percent). Respondents who answer “don’t know” largely cite uncertainty about the effects of school closures as the main explanation (55 percent).

**Table 3. Select excerpts from respondents about whether the benefits of school closures outweigh the harms for girls**

<p>“The risks associated with the illness are high, particularly because our health infrastructure is weak and inadequate, but with many girls living in marginalized communities, are the risks of infection actually reduced by school closures?”</p> <p>“Particularly in extremely poor and conflict-affected contexts where social distancing will not have the same level of success as in more developed and resourced contexts, and health systems cannot cope even prior to the pandemic, the adverse effects of long-term disruptions to society will be hugely detrimental and outweigh the minimal impacts of measures that are not fit for purpose in these contexts.”</p> <p>“In homes, girls are exposed to violence as well as COVID-19.”</p> <p>“School closure in the most part exposes girls to more domestic and gender-based violence...”</p> <p>“They might get the disease if in school, but life at home is certainly going to be rougher!”</p> <p>“Many students depend on the school system for food and now for months they may not even get at least one meal a day...”</p> <p>“The risk of death through infection from COVID is scarier than the potential harm that girls may face. “</p> <p>“At least they will be safe and not be infected with the virus. When you are alive then you can achieve your dreams.”</p> <p>“This varies from context to context...”</p>
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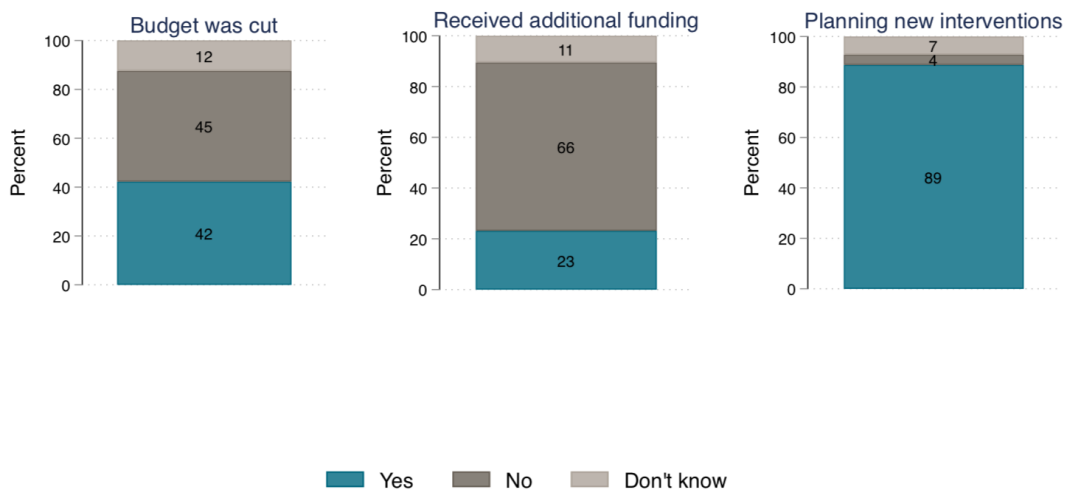
## Section 2. Organizational Impact

Economic shocks to frontline organizations delivering vital education services will have significant short- and long-term consequences for students, staff and the wider community. We asked respondents about the financial impact of the crisis on their organization, specifically whether the crisis has led to budget cuts and changes in their programming.

### Key Finding 4: A significant proportion of frontline organizations are experiencing budget cuts and have not received additional funding, yet a majority report planning interventions in response to concerns for girls.

Overall, 42 percent of the respondents report experiencing budget cuts. As shown in Figure 8, a significant number (73 percent) of organizations that experience budget cuts cite reductions in contributions from private and philanthropic donors as at least one source of budget cuts, with 39 percent citing cuts from multilateral or bilateral donors.

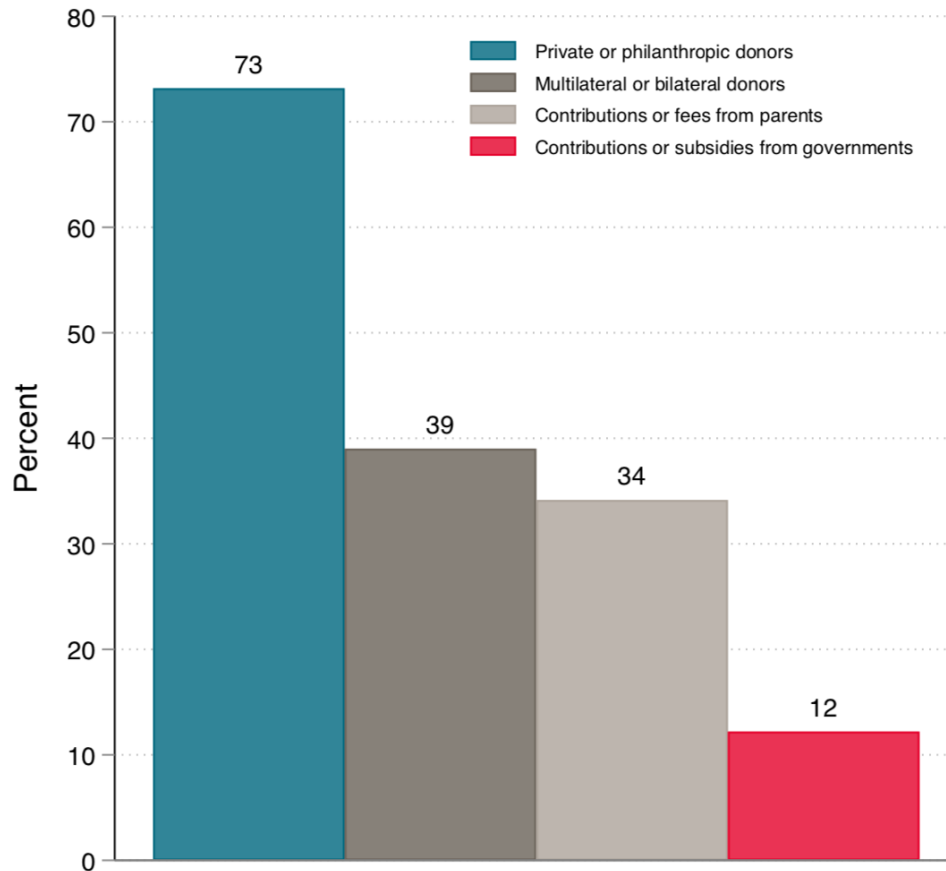
Figure 7. While many respondents report experiencing budget cuts, a majority also report planning new interventions to respond to concerns for girls



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 97 respondents for budget cuts, 95 respondents for additional funding, and 98 respondents for new interventions questions. Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Only 23 percent of the respondents report receiving extra funding, mostly from certain private and philanthropic donors, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Mastercard Foundation, Echidna Giving, Education Cannot Wait Fund, UNICEF, among others. The majority of organizations report receiving no extra funding.

**Figure 8. Respondents most often cite cuts from private or philanthropic donors**



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 41 respondents who report budget cuts. Respondents can mention multiple sources of budget cuts (for example, private or philanthropic donors and multilateral or bilateral donors). Therefore, the same respondent can be counted towards multiple categories of budget cuts.

Despite the budget cuts and lack of new funding, 89 percent of the respondents mention that their organizations are planning interventions in response to concerns for girls. Key initiatives focus on the following themes:

**Distance learning.** Among those reporting new interventions, one in five respondents mention new interventions for distance learning, particularly through radio, to provide some continuity in learning, and 7 percent mention providing books and worksheets to students. Without evidenced guidance on successful education technology models, especially in low-technology settings, governments around the world are grappling with how to facilitate distance learning. It is important to evaluate these ongoing efforts to inform future decisions, and to support frontline organizations playing a key role in maintaining learning continuity.

**Community engagement.** A key focus of the new efforts is on fostering engagement with communities. 64 percent of the respondents providing an intervention mention programs focusing on greater engagement with girls, parents and communities through phone calls, messages and house visits—both to raise awareness about COVID-19 and other social



issues, and to check in. Previous evidence from Tostan's community engagement approach shows it is possible to shift attitudes about violence against girls (though their regular model will have to be adapted in light of social distancing regulations). As a complement to direct community engagement, interventions delivered over mass media also show promise and may be particularly useful in the COVID-19 context.

**Emotional health.** School closures and social distancing have altered the emotional support structures available to girls (and boys). 33 percent of the respondents mention providing interventions around emotional support services during the pandemic given the mental health concerns raised by many respondents.

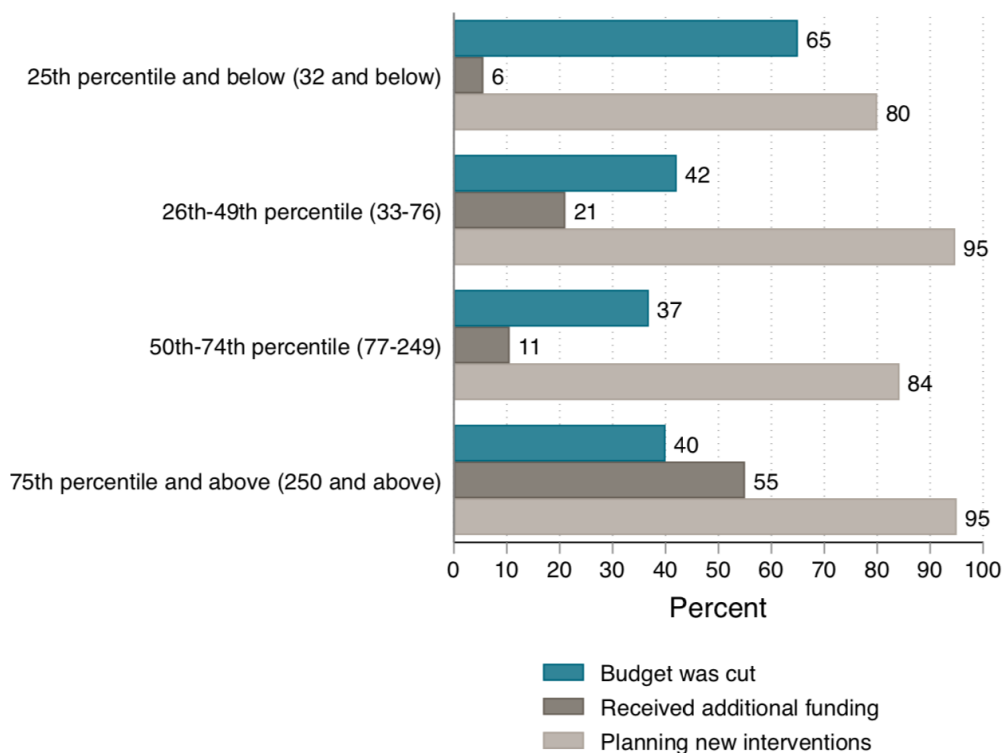
**Menstrual hygiene.** For some girls, schools are a key source of access to menstrual hygiene products. Given concerns about school closures disrupting access to menstrual hygiene products, 9 percent of the respondents mention providing access to sanitary products for girls.

**Economic relief.** A number of education organizations are also stepping up to provide relief to households facing economic shocks—17 percent of the respondents mention providing support to families and communities to deal with the economic crisis such as food rations. Economic relief is a vital complement to other interventions to ensure that girls are safe, healthy, nourished and able to return to school in the future.

**Key Finding 5: Smaller organizations seem relatively more likely to experience budget cuts and less likely to receive additional funding.**

COVID-19 school closures are likely to affect organizations in differential ways, but may disproportionately impact smaller school operators and organizations.

**Figure 9. Budget cuts, additional funding and gender-focused interventions by total staff size**



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 78 respondents for budget cuts and interventions, and 76 respondents for additional funding. The percentiles refer to total staff size by adding up estimated frontline and headquarter staff figures. The figures in the parentheses refer to actual staff sizes corresponding to each percentile group.

Respondents from organizations with the largest staff sizes (above 75th percentile) report relatively fewer budget cuts compared to those from smaller organizations, though the numbers are still sizable at 40 percent. At the same time, respondents from the biggest organizations are much more likely to receive additional funding, with more than half receiving extra funding during the crisis. Respondents from smaller organizations (below 25th percentile) are most likely to report budget cuts and least likely to report additional funding.

Similarly, respondents from multi-regional organizations, which also tend to be larger as shown in Figure 2, report fewer budget cuts (19 percent) and are more likely to receive additional funding (31 percent), compared to organizations operating in a single region—for example, 41 percent and 65 percent of organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia respectively report budget cuts and only 27 and 19 percent respectively report receiving additional funding. One explanation is that multi-regional firms are more likely to be well-resourced and have access to a larger donor base.

However, it is important to note that despite these differences across staff size, the number of organizations facing budget cuts is sizable across the board—all types of organizations are being affected by the crisis.

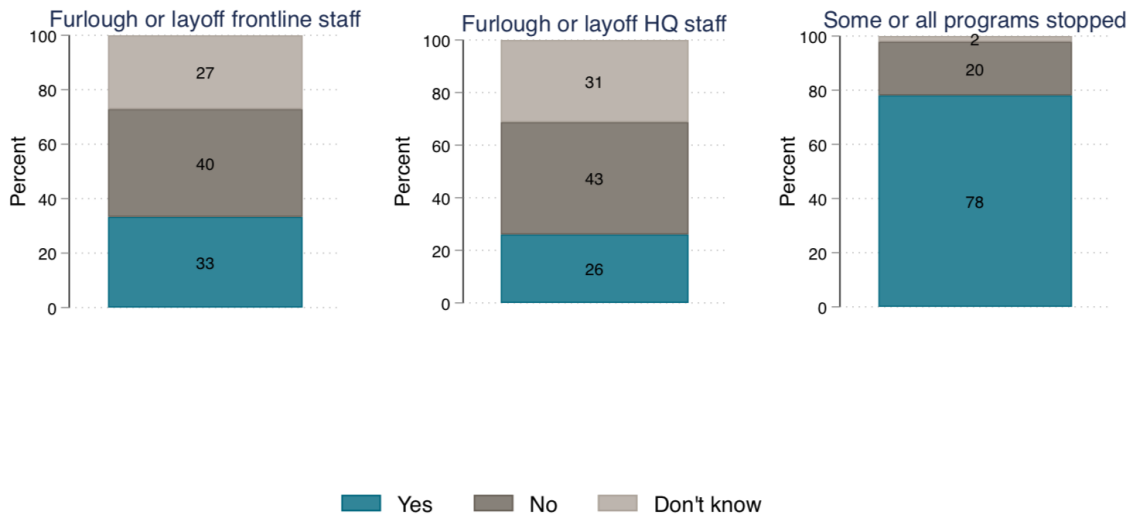
## Key Finding 6: Most organizations have stopped programs.

A large majority of the respondents (78 percent) report that some or all of their programs have been stopped. Examples of stopped programs include:

- School-based activities including exams and testing, and support to school management committees and head teachers (24 percent);
- Field-based programs including data collection, community outreach, parental engagement activities, vaccination programs, and fundraising efforts (29 percent);
- All training programs such as teacher training and certifications, sexual/reproductive health training, and volunteer training (24 percent).

While organizations report that some programs have stopped due to school closures, they also report starting new interventions to address concerns during the crisis, as seen in Figure 7.

Figure 10. Staffing and program disruptions



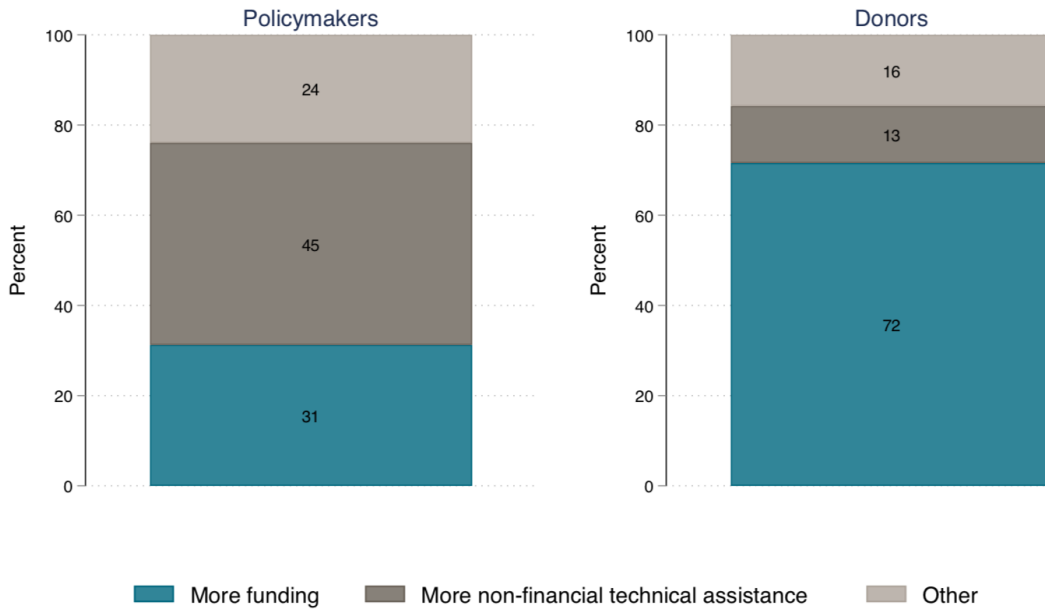
Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 96 respondents. Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Firms around the world have been laying off or furloughing staff due to the economic distress brought on by COVID-19 disruptions. For example, Oxfam recently [announced](#) that it's laying off almost a third of its program staff. Education organizations that rely on donors' contributions are particularly at risk. 71 percent of the respondents report funding cuts from private or philanthropic donors, as seen in Figure 8. 33 percent of the respondents report that they believe that their organizations will have to lay off or furlough frontline staff due to COVID-19 school closures, while 27 percent report the same for headquarter staff. These layoffs are likely to have acute economic consequences for women's labor force participation, particularly in sectors that employ a larger proportion of women, such as low-cost private schools in [Pakistan](#) and elsewhere. Recent reports from [Jordan](#) suggest that non-payment of teacher salaries in the private sector is mostly affecting women.

**Key Finding 7: Frontline organizations want donors to be more generous with funding and for policymakers to be more generous with non-financial technical assistance.**

Lastly, we ask respondents about how policymakers and donors can best help frontline organizations.

**Figure 11. What can donors and policymakers do to help?**



Note: Graph is based on a sample size of 96 respondents. Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

A majority of the respondents (72 percent) believe that donors would be most helpful by providing more funding compared to 13 percent who value non-financial technical assistance. Other notable suggestions for how donors can be more effective include creating communities of practice for partner organizations to share lessons from other geographies and organizations, and offering more flexibility with funding decisions during the crisis.

The picture is less clear-cut on the role of policymakers—45 percent value non-financial technical assistance from policymakers compared to 31 percent in favor of more funding. Other notable suggestions emphasize more opportunities for engagement, coordination, and co-creation with the government. Some respondents also mention policymakers adopting a more gender-responsive approach in their programs and decisions.

**Recommendations**

With issues of lost lives and livelihoods a major concern for many right now, there is a real risk that education will lose primacy for donors and governments, and even families, in the short- and medium-term. As funds get diverted toward COVID-19 health response efforts instead of education service providers, this will affect both girls and boys, but may affect

girls disproportionately. COVID-19's health and economic risks are understandably top of mind, but donors' and policymakers' focus on addressing the health components of the pandemic should not come at the expense of support in other sectors, especially not in low- and middle-income contexts where school closure effects may well outweigh the direct health effects of the disease.

In light of the survey's findings, what can policymakers and donors do to support the critical functions performed by frontline organizations?

### **Listen to and support local frontline organizations tackling gendered risks of COVID-19**

Girls face heightened risks due to COVID-19 school closures, particularly related to gender-based violence, early marriage, and pregnancy, which have lifelong consequences. Education service providers, rooted in local communities, are positioned to provide and support not only schooling but also immediate food assistance, parental support, health services, social support, and oversight against increased violence—all of which are needed more than ever by the most vulnerable children. While the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis have been devastating for many frontline organizations, many are adapting their efforts to mitigate the risks brought on by the pandemic. Donors and policymakers must continue to support these efforts. Donors in particular should exercise “funder humility,” listen to frontline organizations, and allow flexibility with funding decisions.

### **Adopt an evidence-based, gender-responsive approach across programs, policies, and funding decisions**

Policymakers and donors should draw on and support the creation of rigorous evidence identifying which programs and approaches are most effective in supporting girls and boys, in gender-responsive ways. Notably, policymakers, donors, and education service providers cannot rely exclusively on interventions that target girls to mitigate the gendered risks of school closures. Because many of the risks girls face are rooted in economic vulnerability, complementary interventions to ensure food security and basic livelihood protection will be required to ensure girls get to return to school and do not face disproportionate harm in the interim. Finally, while frontline organizations step up to provide vital services, it is critical to support the evaluation of these new interventions so we know what works best for future crises.

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