



RESISTIRÉ

Reducing gendered inequalities
caused by COVID-19 policies

Education: Developing Resilient Education Systems

**Recommendations to policymakers to mitigate the
gendered impacts of Covid-19 based on RESISTIRÉ
findings.**

The sudden closure of educational facilities upended the lives of young people, their families, and educators, who were forced to move quickly from traditional onsite teaching to online education. This prolonged suspension of conventional education posed a number of new challenges for students, parents and teaching staff. Students who were already marginalised prior to the pandemic, due to various gender+ vulnerabilities, experienced further detrimental impacts on their educational progress. The experience gained from the global education crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic should be used to develop more resilient education systems that can ensure a balance between the digital and physical space and guarantee that no one is left behind.

The insights provided below are developed on the basis of findings from quantitative and qualitative evidence, participatory workshops, and an analysis of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) and other COVID-19 recovery policies.

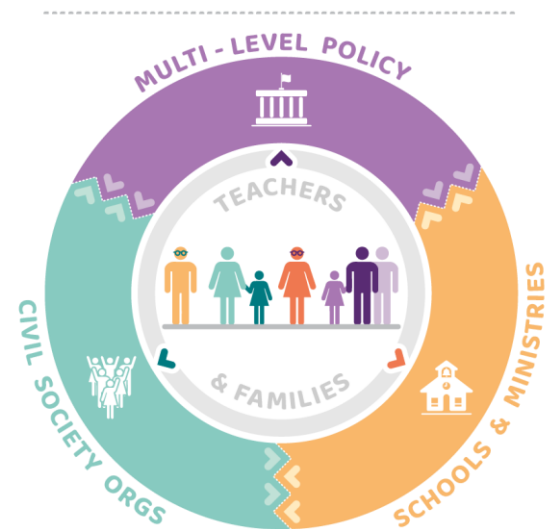


> Recommendations

Ensure educational policies and practices are evidence-based and underpinned by the analysis of intersectional data capturing the needs of heterogeneous populations

- In order to enable proactive policymaking, information must be collected that reflects the needs of **diverse families, parents, and students** from within communities. The data gathered should include **gender+ breakdowns** to allow for targeted policies and support.
- It is important to utilise the **experiences of teachers** to create **evidence-based policies and initiatives** that will further cooperation between national and regional government, teaching staff, families, and students.

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN



COMPREHENSIVE POLICY

Foster multi-actor collaboration and engagement to support vulnerable students, parents, and teachers

- In order to overcome gender+ inequalities, it is essential to **identify vulnerable students** (including students from low-income households and migrant and LGBTQI+ students), as they need extra support to mitigate the risks in educational outcomes (drop out) and mental health.
- **More resources** (via schools), provided by local and national education funds, **should be allocated towards accommodating student needs** so that they can take part in

online/hybrid education – for example, by investing in shared working spaces and equipment.

- To ensure that students receive the best support, the **mental health and wellbeing of both parents and educators must also be taken into consideration**. Teachers must be recognised as an at-risk group in crisis management and it is necessary to ensure that they are not isolated in their role and instead are able to work cooperatively with multiple stakeholders within the educational process. Parents/guardians with lower levels of education or from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds should be supported by local educational trusts to ensure they can support their children to the best of their ability.

Create more inclusive, flexible, and student-centred educational practices and inclusive digital solutions through multi-stakeholder collaboration

- **Advocacy groups** should be created to support parents and educators. Cooperation between school groups and civil society should be furthered to ensure that pressure is placed upon policymakers. This cooperation will enable the **identification of diverse needs** and the development of various programmes to support vulnerable groups in education. It will also **empower stakeholders and foster students to become democratic, altruistic, and active citizens**.
- Teacher training should be reviewed and updated to reflect the demands of the teaching profession, including a focus on **developing digital skills, inclusive pedagogical approaches, and practices for online/hybrid teaching but also teaching in a crisis**.

Introduce equity audits and create opportunities for the early detection and prevention of mental health problems in students

- The potential **risks associated with online/hybrid education should be recognised** and steps taken to mitigate issues such as online violence and cyberbullying. Safe computer and internet usage practices should be encouraged.



- **Safe spaces** should be created for the disclosure of **mental health concerns** and to ensure the continuity of spaces for peer networking and social interaction beyond the classroom to support mental wellbeing.
- **Life skills** should be developed and promoted among young girls and boys in schools, which includes strengthening individuals' **capacity for wellbeing, self-care, equal treatment/rights awareness, and non-oppressive communication and behaviour**. Young people who have had delayed progression or lost independence should be supported in order to prepare them for their future life in education or work.
- The **digital transition** should not be overfunded at the expense of interventions that aim to improve the **human and social dimension of school**. This will help to **reduce feelings of isolation** in both students and teachers and encourage hybrid practices that consider emotional wellbeing.

Enhance EU-level, nationwide, and regional collaboration

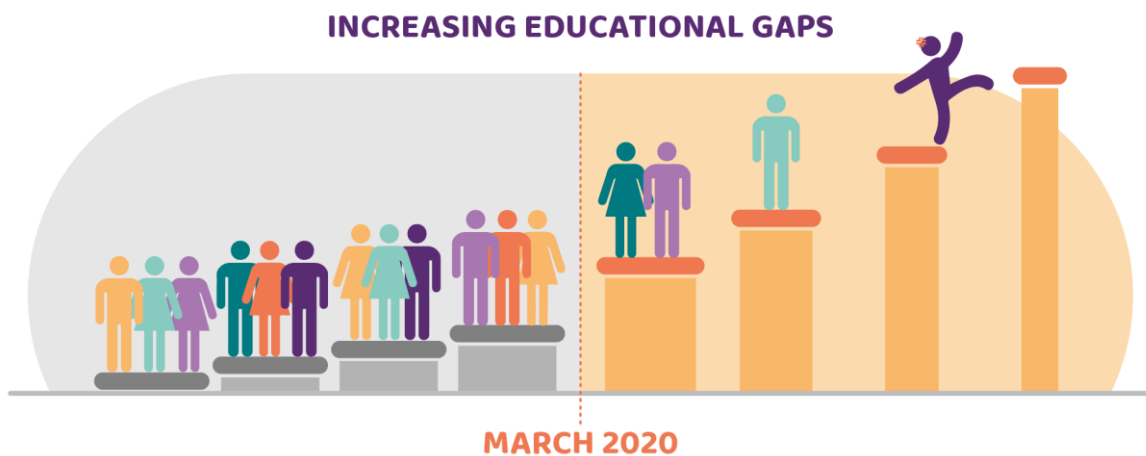
A **Community of Practice** (CoP) should be built among teachers in order to **learn from the existing practices** and solutions that were used during the pandemic. Collaborations can contribute to more comprehensive national policies, and more flexibility to allow for teacher and school autonomy.





> Problem Statement

Starting at the beginning of the pandemic, many countries decided to close schools and universities for various periods of time, which in some cases lasted several months. **Disruptions to education** inevitably have consequences for educational attainment, especially in the case of the most **vulnerable students**.¹ The sudden switch to online education contributed to a **widening of existing gaps** within classrooms, since the role of school as an educational space that levels socioeconomic inequalities was suddenly missing. Forced to take classes at home, students found their educational experience to be strongly conditioned by their housing and family situation (the availability of adequate space, access to digital tools, parental disposition, etc.).^{2 3} Even for those who had access to the necessary tools, remote education was still a challenge because a lack of training and support structures for the new modes of teaching meant that many teachers were ill-prepared for the task.



The impact of the pandemic on overall educational attainment is determined by both the resilience of education systems and the resilience of students. The resilience of an education system means its ability to adapt to a new situation, while continuing to provide quality education to all.

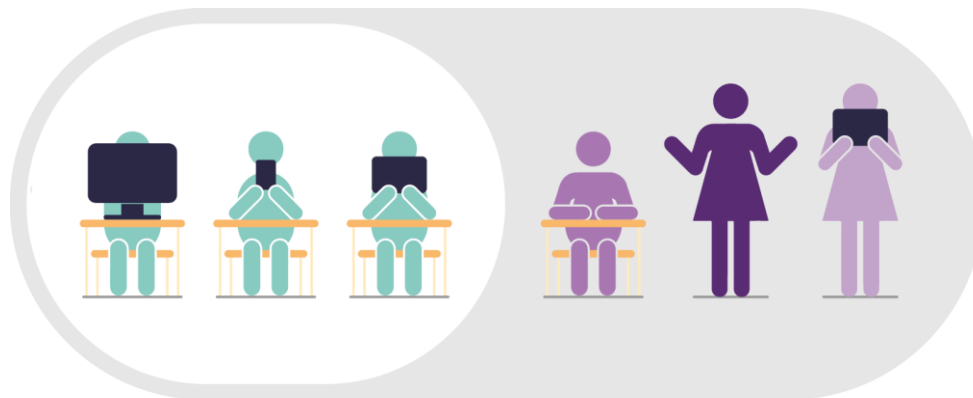
¹ Zancajo, A., 2020. 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education.' School of Education, University of Glasgow, British Academy.

² Van Lancker, W., Parolin, Z., 2020. 'COVID-19, School Closures, and Child Poverty: A Social Crisis in the Making.' *The Lancet Public Health* 5, e243-e244. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30084-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30084-0)

³ <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-is-the-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-immigrants-and-their-children-e7cbb7de/>

There was generally little preparedness for the crisis - an example of this being that no EU country had a disaster mitigation strategy in place for education.⁴ This highlighted the need for personal prerequisites to mitigate the negative impact on education for various groups. Already vulnerable groups had a more difficult time coping with the pandemic. This underscores the need to address the root causes of inequalities during the recovery efforts.

In line with the above, a quantitative analysis of European data conducted as part of RESISTIRÉ⁵ showed that **students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to have the necessary means to engage with online education.** In particular, children of migrants with financial difficulties had less access to a computer at home, were more likely to live in overcrowded houses without enough space for them to carry out online education, and faced additional challenges due to language issues.



✓ **GENERAL POPULATION** | **VULNERABLE GROUPS** ✗

An analysis of the Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS) demonstrated also that **school closures and the move to new educational structures and online learning had a negative impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of educators and students.** For instance, in Lithuania and Sweden, girls struggled more with the move to online education formats than boys and suffered from reduced physical and emotional wellbeing.

There has been an increased incidence of medical concerns such as **sleep problems, increased headaches and deteriorating mental health among girls.** Studies also indicate that educational outcomes have worsened, with, for example, an **increase in dropout rates,** a risk that UNESCO identified as very high during the pandemic because of barriers in access and unequal opportunities to transition to online learning.⁶

⁴ Van der Graaf, L., Dunajeva, J., Siarova, H., Bankauskaite, R. 2021. 'Research for CULT Committee - Education and Youth in Post-COVID-19 Europe - Crisis Effects and Policy Recommendations.' European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels.

⁵ Stovell et al. 2022 (<https://zenodo.org/record/6506408#.YqtxnHZBxPa>).

⁶ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373992>


> Insights from RESISTIRÉ

Digital skills and vulnerable groups

Many pupils and students struggled to manage digital and/or hybrid education in terms of **having the equipment and materials required and the necessary skills and competences**, and as a result of the **reduced presence of peer and teacher support networks**.

According to the RESISTIRÉ narratives, technical issues were commonly reported by students, parents, and educators. **In cases where access to the internet or necessary devices was absent, young people's fundamental right to education was not upheld.** Many students also questioned the assumption that the skills to use these tools were already in place. This was often reflected in their educational progress and outcomes.

This is particularly illustrated in the experience of a 23-year-old student from Turkey. She had to move back to her parents' house during the lockdown and while living there she was expected to take on a large share of the household chores, leaving her with less time for studying. She also had limited access to both digital tools and the skills needed to use them:



"I had to use my phone and its data to follow online classes, write my papers and exams. Even so, I could not get stable internet access at home; the moment I moved the phone, I lost the internet ... in June 2020, I bought a laptop using my scholarship money. So I went into a lot of debt to pay the monthly instalments for the laptop and the extra charges on my phone bill. However, since I did not have any keyboard literacy, I was so slow in typing that I failed some of my exams because I could not finish typing the answers on time. Before the pandemic, I never failed a course."

Student aged 23, Turkey

These issues were exacerbated by the **lack of training on online education delivery** provided to teachers, including those who were not given sufficient time to undergo such training. In many cases teachers were forced to use their own initiative, creativity, and solutions to fill the gaps in the provision of education. Experts in the RESISTIRÉ workshop emphasised the **importance of developing communities of practice, where existing initiatives and practices can be systematised and shared to inform and enrich teaching methods.**

A teacher from Turkey who participated in the workshop said that when the pandemic started only 18 out of 47 pupils in her class had internet access and several of the children dropped out of school. For girls, staying at home often meant increased housework, and this was an incentive for them to stay in school; in the teacher's experience, it was mostly boys who dropped out. For those who stayed in school but could not join classes, this teacher started WhatsApp groups to keep them engaged. She also arranged peer learning classes in the garden for students who lived close to each other: those who could attend via Zoom taught those who could not. According to the interviewee, teaching during the pandemic required 'a lot of flexibility, experience, and endurance on the side of the teacher... But it also enhanced solidarity between teachers.'

Policy mapping in RESISTIRÉ showed that education actions in NRRPs across the EU27 countries focused on **digital skills, devices, and infrastructures**. However, in this area, the NRRPs often tend to target the general population and/or specific vulnerable groups without explicitly considering gender issues (e.g., Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Denmark). Pedagogical support, additional tutoring, and guidance were detailed in the provisions in various national contexts (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Finland) to address the challenges of online education.



The provision of adequate digital tools and skills for both students and educators, while important for educational delivery, must be undertaken in combination with **holistic approaches to addressing learning gaps**.

There must be recognition that physical attendance in school should always be the priority as schools are vital places for social interaction, care, and play; schools provide free school meals and access to the internet and other facilities that particularly benefit disadvantaged pupils.

In addition, children who experience forms of violence at home are provided a safe space at school away from their turbulent family lives. Therefore, **moving to online education has a considerable impact on the wellbeing and mental health of both students and educators**, and meeting individual skills gaps, such as digital competencies, is not a panacea for addressing structural educational inequalities.



A gender perspective in digital skills and STEM

A gender perspective was particularly evident in pandemic measures that aimed to get girls and women to develop their digital skills and enter the fields of **science, technology, engineering, and mathematics** (Romania, Spain, Greece, Latvia, Portugal, Cyprus, Poland, Belgium, Sweden). These measures targeted women from school age to adulthood through professional, vocational, and higher education programmes. While measures to get women involved in STEM are not new, the pandemic underscored the need for digital upscaling for girls and women.

Educational outcomes

Three of the national recovery plans included measures aimed at preventing girls and vulnerable people from dropping out of school:



SLOVAKIA

The Slovak plan aims to develop a '**system for the prevention of early school drop-out** that includes specific measures aimed at girls relating to early pregnancy and domestic and sexual violence'.



SPAIN

In the Spanish plan, '[c]omponent 21 is dedicated to the **modernisation and digitisation of the education system**. It targets the improvement of educational services, with reference to the gendered and nationality-based dimension of school failure and early drop-out. First, early and free schooling for children 0-3 years old, which is a measure to extend education but also to address the gender care gap. Second, funds are directed to centres with a special educational complexity that implement

personalised learning, in order to reduce school failure and early drop-out, and particularly to centres situated in rural areas and areas of social disadvantage where families with low socioeconomic and educational levels live. The plan foresees the creation of Support Unities for those students and their families that live in vulnerable situations.



In Romania, the plan contains measures aimed at strengthening ‘... distance learning and the implementation of the Early Warning System in Education to **improve the schooling rate and prevent children from vulnerable backgrounds from dropping out of school**’.

Many students we interviewed felt they would have learnt more, got better grades, or finished earlier if it had not been for the pandemic, leaving them **ill-prepared for further studies or a working-life**. The shift of universities to online learning led many students to move back home to their parents, sometimes resulting in experiences of **regression and a loss of independence**. Measures to reduce the risk of drop-out must therefore be implemented on a broad scale in alignment with knowledge gained from student consultation.

Mental health and wellbeing for students, parents, and teachers

Learners, parents, and educators frequently reported that schools, universities, and governments offered **scant support and showed little understanding of the negative effects of online education**, both in terms of educational outcomes and mental health.

Students participating in the Open Studio (RESISTIRÉ project participatory workshop) highlighted **psychological problems, mental illness, and other health issues resulting from isolation** and the general difficulties of coping with life beyond their studies after the pandemic. This was also manifested as difficulties in (re)adjusting to life in schools and coping with individual problems. Thus, participants emphasised **the need for early detection and prevention of mental health problems in students**.

Similarly, many student narrators described how social isolation during the pandemic had affected their mental health negatively. Given limited contact with peers, **many struggled to stay motivated** and, as a result, the pandemic severely **disrupted their learning process**. The pandemic also appears to have had a **negative effect on social skills**, and when schools reopened some students struggled to reconnect with their peers.

A 19-year-old student from Slovenia described his first lockdown as ‘the golden age of quarantine’. No one expected it to last very long, the teachers gave them a small amount of coursework to do, and he had a lot of spare time for his hobbies. During the second lockdown, everything was different. They had normal classes but on Zoom, which meant spending seven hours a day in front of the computer screen, leaving him completely exhausted:

“I had one of my most severe depressions of all time. I lost all interest in everything. I just managed to finish my schoolwork for the day, and I went to bed. On top of that, I do not live in close proximity to my school and none of my friends live close to me, so there was also a feeling of isolation. My friends, who live close to each other, they could at least hang out, socialise outdoors, meet, but I was not even able to do that, and it was really stressful.”

Student aged 19, Slovenia

COVID-19 also highlighted the **need for parents to be supported** in order to provide the best possible assistance for their children, and this especially applies to **single parents and people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds**. While the difficulties involved in combining work and homeschooling have been widely discussed, there were also effects on the mental wellbeing of parents due to the loss of the parental community on which many of them relied. The degree to which parents were able to support their children in their education was often linked to socioeconomic status and whether they felt competent to provide academic support.

Similarly, **teachers required additional emotional and care support** beyond professional assistance to help them provide the best possible teaching, something which was notably absent.

New and old manifestations of inequalities

Sexism, harassment, and bullying took new forms during the pandemic including **digital violence** (see [factsheet no. 10](#)). But COVID-19 also meant that other forms of inequalities such as psychological, physical, and verbal abuse in the classroom and in school facilities were temporarily put on hold and going back to school was not always experienced as positive in this respect. One example is how the pandemic fostered new communication patterns, with distancing and wearing face masks becoming the norm, and some students remarked on how ‘being back’ at school and **having to adjust to post-pandemic social patterns left them uncomfortable and more exposed to being sexualised and bullied**.



Lack of communication and consultation on policy development and implementation

Experts pointed out that **government measures were not communicated effectively** and that **consultation with CSOs** (active in supporting vulnerable groups in education) **and students/parents** (including students and parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants, and people with disabilities) **was limited in NRRPs** (see [factsheet no. 8](#)).



Experts and participants in the Open Studio specifically mentioned the issue of how, during the pandemic, the **experiences, needs, and perspectives of students, teachers, and parents in response to the crisis were largely ignored and resulted in poorly designed policies and disengaged students.**

Similarly, participants in the expert workshops described the lack of student involvement in crisis management as concerning. The experts described how in the existing teacher-student hierarchies and standard school procedures students are viewed as passive recipients of education, instead of them being seen as co-producers or partners in joint knowledge-building.

Student engagement is key not only to understanding individual student needs but also to organising students collectively, so that they can contribute to co-designing inclusive responses and solutions to the crisis and the inequalities it has exacerbated. There is therefore a need to ensure that **policy is informed by data** so that recovery policies can be built on the lessons learnt during the pandemic. While a wealth of data on equality have already been collected by both CSOs and public authorities, these **data must be used in consultation with marginalised groups** to enable the co-creation of inclusive responses to crises.

> Better Stories

Within RESISTIRÉ, we identify 'Better Stories', a term borrowed from Dina Georgis to refer to promising practices that identify how a given societal situation can be ameliorated to improve existing practices.

Support For the Roma Community



PORTUGAL

In Portugal during the second lockdown (late 2020 - early 2021) Portuguese charity **Cáritas de Coimbra worked with Roma students of various levels in a community centre**, both those who had access to virtual learning platforms and those who did not. Students attending the centre generally had little support from their parents, who lacked the resources to help them. Young people were looking for support and strategies to **prevent them from falling behind at school**, as many of them found online classes difficult to follow. The organisation worked closely with the students' teachers to make sure no students were left behind.

A Voice for Disadvantaged Youth



UNITED KINGDOM

In Scotland, the government, in response to growing inequities created and exacerbated by school closures, announced the **implementation of an Equity Audit** to get a **deeper understanding of the pandemic's impacts on young people** and to propose distinct areas of focus for a fair and inclusive recovery. To compile this Equity Audit, Education Scotland (the government's education agency) cooperated closely with teachers' unions and got extensive input from them on the new or worsening issues that disadvantaged children and young people faced during the pandemic. Education Scotland released their Equity Audit near the end of 2020, and it contained findings and support recommendations that were thoroughly informed by the experiences and input of teachers and teachers' unions.

Enabling Internet Access



TURKEY

In Turkey, the local authorities of the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality **provided internet infrastructure and free Wi-Fi to 928 villages** that lacked internet within the boundaries of the municipality. This enabled the people living there to receive education (and work) remotely, since the pandemic temporarily stopped face-to-face education. In addition, **common-use digital devices were provided to people who did not have such a device**, so that everyone would be able to benefit from the new infrastructure.



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> About RESISTIRÉ

This factsheet is based on data collected within RESISTIRÉ's second research cycle, which ran from 1 December 2021 to 28 February 2022. In this research 31 national researchers worked with the consortium to map policies, societal responses, and qualitative and quantitative indicators relating to the pandemic in EU-27 countries, along with Iceland, the UK, Serbia, and Turkey.⁴ This research activity was accompanied by workshops and interviews with gender equality experts whose input informed the main findings from expert consultations.⁵

RESISTIRÉ is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project, the aim of which is to 1) understand the impact of COVID-19 policy responses on behavioural, social, and economic inequalities in the EU-27, Serbia, Turkey, Iceland, and the UK on the basis of a conceptual gender+ framework, and 2) design, devise, and pilot policy solutions and social innovations to be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders, and actors in different policy domains.

Find out more about the project at <https://resistire-project.eu>.



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