



Education Endures:

Room to Read's Award-winning Literacy and Gender Equality Interventions During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Room to Read is a recipient of the 2020 David M. Rubenstein Special Response Award for outstanding work in 2020 addressing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent social unrest.



Education is the solution to the world's biggest problems — poverty, conflict, disease, intolerance, inequality, and exploitation — but a quality education remains out of reach for millions of children. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO reported that 124 million children and adolescents were out of school. At the height of school closures earlier this year, that number skyrocketed to a staggering **1.5 billion children and youth, or 91 percent of all students, being out of school globally.**

An estimated 463 million children have been unable to access remote learning opportunities while schools have been closed. The United Nations estimates that up to 24 million children may not return to school after the pandemic. **COVID-19 has led to the single largest threat to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education in modern times.**

Unfortunately, experts predict this education emergency could also lead to increased drop-out rates among girls. The UN Secretary-General stated in a policy brief that, "Evidence from past epidemics shows that adolescent girls are at particular risk of drop out and not returning to school even after the crisis is over.

Our Response

Room to Read is working toward our mission with more determination than ever. Since the spread of COVID-19, all 16 of the countries where we work have experienced full or partial school closures. We have worked diligently to find new ways to deliver our programs. Our staff members live and work in the countries where Room to Read operates. They are local nationals with a deep understanding of complex community needs and cultures, and strong government relationships that allow us to partner for maximum impact. This enables us to facilitate learning using the most powerful tools and media available locally.

Our educational interventions do not depend on internet connectivity alone as it is largely unavailable in the areas we serve. We offer a range of interventions, from low-tech to high-tech. These include providing instruction and materials via books, worksheets, radio, TV, text messages, telephone calls and our digital learning platform, Literacy Cloud.

- **Taking to the Airwaves** – Without internet connectivity, radio is the most commonly accessed technology globally. UNESCO reports that 75 percent of households have access to radio. In Sri Lanka, we are partnering with regional broadcast services, providing content in both Tamil and Sinhala. The radio programs focus on storytelling for children and literacy tips for parents on how best to support their children's reading development at home.
- **Spreading the Message Via Texts** – Text messaging offers a scalable, inexpensive, and accessible way of communicating in many countries. We are using texting to prompt parents to engage in literacy activities with their children. In Cambodia, we have developed text and video guidance for parents. The content focuses on the most important literacy skills, and providing tips, actionable advice, and encouragement for parents. The messages also support use of our classroom instruction materials.
- **Developing Students' Skills Through Worksheets and Learning Packets** – Traditional resources, like worksheets and books, are also essential components to keep children learning. In India, our team has created offline resources for our Literacy and Girls' Education Programs. An offline literacy package for children in grades one and two includes approximately 60 worksheets per child and provides skill-based and creative writing opportunities. Worksheets for our Girls' Education Program participants provide independent activities and encourage the use of life skills journals and have been made available in three languages – Hindi, Telegu and Marathi.



GLOBAL RESULTS

We are pleased to share results from our distance learning efforts during the period of April 1 - July 31, 2020. This data captures the scope and breadth of our COVID-19 response, as well as the resilience of the students in our programs.

LITERACY

- **130,697,988 households** broadcasted to via TV and radio
- **6,915,883 direct messages** sent via SMS, phone and social media
- **203,180 individuals** received direct messages to support literacy
- **11,549 hours** of virtual training and support delivered
- **1,136 children's book titles** published in **19 languages** uploaded to Literacy Cloud digital library
- **406,379 children** are receiving non-digital materials

GIRLS' EDUCATION

- **107,436 mentoring sessions** delivered remotely to girls
- **31,050 girls** received remote individual mentoring
- **773,778 direct messages** sent via SMS, phone and social media
- **29,113 individuals** receiving direct messages to support girls' education

- **Expanding our Digital Library and Read-Alouds** – For children and families who do not have digital access, Room to Read provides a unique digital learning platform, Literacy Cloud. Based on our award-winning, proven Literacy Program, Literacy Cloud includes hundreds of local language book titles and a library of professional development materials for educators and children's book creators. Additionally, we created read-alouds of Room to Read titles narrated by notable celebrities and business leaders. These provide a sample of our stories that give children insight into cultures outside of their own, helping to build empathy and understanding.
- **Distance Mentoring** – Our Girls' Education Program participants typically live in low-income, isolated and remote areas, making them especially likely to be forced to give up their education permanently as a result of this crisis. We are working around the clock to avoid this outcome. Room to Read staff members use phone mentoring sessions to support girls and provide encouragement for continuing their studies. Social mobilizers also lead virtual group mentoring sessions, over text, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger, ensuring that girls have access to peer support, which we know is crucial in times of stress.
- **Identifying and Supporting Girls Most at Risk** – Our staff are regularly monitoring girls to identify and support girls who are most at risk during this time. Risk is determined using Room to Read's risk and response tool, a powerful early warning system that helps our staff identify and immediately act on factors that are strongly associated with dropouts. We have adapted this tool to reflect the current educational crisis. The risk factors we are tracking include: girls who are not continuing to study at home, girls in homes in which a family member has lost a job or source of income due to COVID-19, and girls who are concerned about being able to return to school once they reopen.
- **Virtual Training and Professional Development** - Capacity building for the international education community is a vital part of Room to Read's work. Without providing support for educators, mentors, authors and illustrators, our programs would not be possible. We have worked to move capacity building trainings and workshops online, ensuring that important work continues. In Laos, the literacy team conducted week-long remote mentoring sessions with writers focused on supporting improving story concept, plot, characters, pacing and dialogue.

The needs of students will continue to evolve as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. As schools reopen in some countries, that does not mean that studies will resume as normal. The educational pivots we developed will serve the children in our programs throughout this uncertain time. We will be there for them, every step of the way, making sure that their education endures.

“What keeps me up at night are the [effects of COVID-19] on vulnerable populations. I cannot imagine being a parent in those circumstances.”

- Melinda Gates in an interview on CNN

Visit roomtoread.org to help us ensure that education endures for children in the most vulnerable communities.