



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

# “Years Don’t Wait for Them”

Increased Inequality in Children’s Right to Education  
Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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# “Years Don’t Wait for Them”

## Increased Inequalities in Children’s Right to Education

### Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Summary

Decades of slow but steady progress in educating more children around the world abruptly ended in 2020. By April, an unprecedented 1.4 billion students were shut out of their pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools in more than 190 countries, in an effort to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. As the pandemic persisted, schools in some countries or jurisdictions reopened for in-person teaching, or opened for some students, while elsewhere schools have remained closed ever since with learning to greater or lesser extent taking place online or otherwise remotely. In some places, there have been waves of schools opening only to close again. An estimated 90 percent of the world's school-aged children have had their education disrupted by the pandemic.

Children, who tend to escape the more severe symptoms of Covid-19, nevertheless had to sacrifice the education to which they are entitled, and accept restrictions that often harmed their friendships and mental health, as part of public efforts to help protect the health and save lives of their families, friends, teachers, and those in their communities.

Céleste A., a 15-year-old girl living in the Central African Republic, told Human Rights Watch how the closure of her school affected her: “It doesn’t do me any good to not go to school. I feel like something in me is missing.” In Mexico, 15-year-old Sonia M. said: “At first I thought it was cool! But later I realized that I now want to go back to school.” And Jae-kuk H., a 14-year-old boy in South Korea, put it simply: “I feel like the earth has just stopped.”

As the rollout of Covid-19 vaccines brings hope of an eventual end to pandemic-related school closures, the aspiration that things merely “return to how they were before” is insufficient. As a primary school teacher in an under-resourced neighborhood of Santiago, Chile, said: “The social issue is the real pandemic: inequality.”

This massive disruption to children’s education has highlighted the need for governments to devote serious attention and resources to ameliorate, mitigate, and correct the long-standing inequalities in education systems that have been highlighted and exacerbated during the pandemic. Governments should reverse policies that generate those inequalities, which include persistent under-investment in public education.

Governments' goal should not merely be the return to school of all students whose education the pandemic disrupted. They should also ensure that those who were not able to learn at the same pace as their peers during the pandemic catch-up on what they missed. Moreover, governments should extend education to the children persistently excluded from schooling even before the crisis.

All children have a right to education—a right that so many children have now been unable to fully enjoy. This was often the consequence of legitimate efforts aimed at protecting public health during this pandemic, but Human Rights Watch also identified mismanaged, ill-informed, under-resourced, and even discriminatory government responses, built upon structurally unsound and unequal education systems. In response, all governments should now rise to the challenge and build better education systems that create opportunities for all children.

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This report is based on over 470 interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch between April 2020 and April 2021, with students, parents, and teachers in 60 countries. This report illustrates trends and patterns common across countries, but due to the research methodology does not make generalized findings about how the pandemic affected education and other children's rights in individual countries.

Children told Human Rights Watch of the extraordinary lengths they went to—supported by parents and teachers—in order to continue to study and learn. For example, 17-year-old Mia Sulastri who lives on the island of Borneo in Indonesia, travelled 24 kilometers by motorbike, four times a week, to find a strong enough phone signal to receive WhatsApp messages from her teachers, and email back her assignments.

Some governments organized classes to be delivered over radio and television. Many teachers deployed an array of distance learning techniques to try to further their students' education: work packets distributed by hand, online teaching, and sending assignments by email and online messaging services. In some cases, teachers paid for materials, equipment, and internet to ensure children had what they needed to study. Children "want to learn," a primary school teacher in the United States told Human Rights Watch. "They

truly are these resilient little beings that can do it when they're given the opportunity, tools, and access."

But many children were not given the opportunity, tools, or access needed to keep on learning during the pandemic. As a result, school closures did not affect all children equally. Throughout this pandemic, students, parents, and teachers have been frustrated by the direct impact of governments' long-term lack of commitment to remedying discrimination and inequalities in their education systems, and their failure to ensure basic government services, such as water and toilets at schools, and affordable, reliable electricity in homes. Lack of access to affordable, reliable internet connection was another key problem. In Lebanon, where the government has long failed to reform its dilapidated electricity sector, government provided electricity is rationed and those who cannot afford a private generator are left without power. Fourteen-year-old Sara W. told Human Rights Watch: "My English teacher canceled class almost every time because she didn't have electricity."

The damage that children are experiencing to their education is built on pre-existing issues: almost one in five children were out of school even before Covid-19 began to spread, according to UN data. Governments in most countries already had solid evidence on which groups of their children are most at risk of dropping out of school or being excluded from school. They knew who would be most affected by school closures. Yet children from such groups tended to be the most excluded from quality education during the pandemic as well. "A lot of these problems that we are facing with distance learning are problems that we deal with every day in the classroom: lack of internet at home, lack of resources, lack of parent support at home, chaos at home, lack of a schedule at home, uncertainty around food, uncertainty around housing," a middle school teacher in rural California, in the United States told Human Rights Watch. "These aren't new problems. They just became very, very apparent when all of a sudden, teachers have a front row seat to see it in these children's homes through Zoom or the fact that they were not at school."

For example, in some countries, girls faced multiple forms of discrimination in accessing education before the Covid-19 pandemic, and then faced additional discriminatory barriers to continuing formal education from a distance. Girls were far more likely to be expected to take on greater housework burdens, were less likely to have access to the internet than boys, and due to societal or familial restraints sometimes faced greater constraints on

their interactions with others. Girls who are out of school are also at a greater risk than out-of-school boys of facing abuses such as child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. Taisha S., a 16-year-old student in Garissa, Kenya, said that when her school offered no guidance on how to study during school closures, she tried to get in touch with one teacher. “He said he would not be able to go to anyone’s home, but they could come to his house. As girls we feared going to his house, but I hear the boys have been going.” She said she sometimes watched classes on television, but she was not able to attend all of them because of her chores at home, as she lives with two grandmothers who rely on her care. “It takes up a significant portion of my day attending to them. My chores have increased of course because schools have closed.”

In many countries, the heavy reliance on online learning and connectivity technologies to deliver education exacerbated learning inequalities because many governments did not have the policies, resources, or infrastructure to roll out online learning in a fully inclusive manner. A mother in Armenia said of her grade-7 son, who has a hearing disability and classes on Zoom, which he attends using a smartphone: “It is very hard for him to see sign language via phone... Imagine watching it on the phone...and imagine also the phone screen divided into seven.” In Kazakhstan, 16-year-old Serik R. said his school wanted to hold classes on Zoom, but the internet was not capable of supporting it: “There were connection glitches and internet malfunctions.”

Children from low-income families were more likely to be excluded from online distance learning because of an inability to afford sufficient internet or devices. A mother in Lagos, Nigeria, who lost her income after the university where she cleaned shut down due to the pandemic, said she could not afford online studies for two of her children. “Their teacher called me to tell me to buy a big phone [smartphone] for online teaching... I don’t have money to feed my family and I am struggling to make ends meet, how can I afford a phone and internet?” A father who provides pest control services in Mumbai, India, and has two children said: “We have one computer in the family. Both my wife and I are working from home, so we need it. Now both children have classes, so they need to be on the computer. Two children with classes at the same time, so actually we need two computers. We are taking salary cuts, how can we afford to buy another laptop? So, one child is missing class.”

Historically under-resourced schools particularly struggled to reach their students across digital divides, which in turn risked further undermining student groups that already faced greater obstacles to learning. A second-grade teacher at a school near Potsdam, Germany, described her school: “The announcement came that Skype would be installed on the school computers, so teachers could use Skype to keep in touch with students and parents... It turned out that the school computers did not have a camera, so the topic was closed... The conditions for teachers to work online or computer based are not given, which limits teachers’ ability to provide education to students during school closures.” In contrast, well-resourced schools that had invested in technology and digital literacy for their teachers before the pandemic did far better. For example, a teacher at a private secondary school in São Paulo, Brazil, which he described as “extremely privileged,” said that he had already been teaching using a digital platform for five years: “So I get to teach the same way I was teaching before... In my world, things are pretty easy.”

Although school closures were intended to be temporary, for far too many students, this marked the end of their education. Children began working, got married, assumed new family obligations, became disillusioned with education or felt they could not catch up, or simply aged-out of free or compulsory education as guaranteed under their country’s laws. In Nepal, 14-year-old Amir started working when his school shut and his family ran out of food. “For a while I thought that I would go back when the school reopens, but I don’t think that anymore,” he said. “I enjoy driving and making money so what will I do going back to school now? Even if I do go back to school, it won’t be for long.”

Even for the students who have returned, or who will return, to their classrooms, the evidence suggests that for years to come they will continue to feel the consequences of lost learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Governments need hastily to get back on track with the commitments they made in 2015 through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to guarantee all children receive an inclusive quality primary and secondary education by 2030. To do so, they will have to do intensive outreach to ensure that children most at-risk of dropping out or facing barriers return to school. This should include pregnant girls, and parenting or married children, most of whom are girls; children living in, or near, poverty, whose families cannot afford tuition or indirect expenses; children sent to work as families sank deep into poverty, leaving them unable to pay school costs; children with disabilities or underlying

health conditions; and children who simply fear they have fallen too far behind academically. These children should feature prominently in governments' back-to-school recovery plans and budgets.

Governments and schools should analyze who left school and who came back and ensure back-to-school programs seek out all of those who dropped out, including by disbursing financial and social benefits. Outreach for back-to-school campaigns should be broad, and welcome children and youth who were already out of education when the pandemic closed schools.

Education should be at the core of all governments' recovery plans: governments should both address the impact of the pandemic on children's education and pre-existing problems. In light of profound financial pressures on national economies from the pandemic, governments should protect and prioritize funding for public education in general and reconsider the low priority—and chronic underfunding—so long given to providing education under emergency conditions.

Removing the barriers to children's right to education highlighted during the pandemic will not be easy. But all governments, and the donors and international actors supporting them, should be firm in their commitments that moving forward, their focus will be on investing and adequately distributing greater resources to strengthen public inclusive education systems, swiftly removing discriminatory policies and practices, and adopting plans to redress the right to education for millions of students.

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In the first chapter, this report documents how millions of children's educational paths have been disrupted and devastated during the pandemic. In some countries, schools provided no alternative education during pandemic-related closures. Yet in almost every country, even where alternative education opportunities were theoretically available, too many students were unable to access them or benefit from them.

Barriers to distance learning tended to be particularly high for students from groups already facing discrimination and exclusion from education even before the pandemic, including: children living in or near poverty; children with disabilities; children who are

ethnic and racial minorities in the countries where they live; girls, especially in countries with gender inequalities in school enrollments and achievements; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) children; children living in rural areas; children living in areas affected by armed conflict; and displaced, refugee, migrant, and asylum-seeking children. Children who belong to more than one of these groups face intersecting forms of discrimination which compounds the barriers they face in accessing education.

In countries where free primary and secondary education is not guaranteed for all, but only to children of certain ages, many children aged-out of their entitlements during the pandemic without receiving the full quality education to which they are entitled. Similarly, in countries where only six years or fewer of education are compulsory under the law, children have aged-out of the most basic of educational requirements, without having received the benefits.

This report’s second chapter focuses on what is often referred to as “digital divides.” After schools closed, hundreds of millions of students experienced a dramatic shift to distance learning, with physical classrooms replaced by radios, televisions, cellphones, and computers. This resulted in an overwhelming need for affordable, reliable connectivity; adequate devices and software, accessible for children with different types of disabilities; and digital literacy training to use these technologies safely and confidently. However, the unprecedented demand exacerbated divisions between children with access to these technologies and the opportunities they can provide, and those without. Children who were the least likely to have access—those from low-income families, marginalized communities, living in rural areas, with disabilities, or due to their gender—were more likely to be shut out of learning during this time, further widening the deep educational inequalities they already faced.

Chapter three documents how even students who could access alternative education while their schools were closed frequently experienced a greatly diminished quality of education, such as fewer hours of instruction, and fewer subjects. Students also had fewer, and sometimes no, interactions and informal learning experiences with teachers and peers. Learning options for preschool early learners were also often overlooked.

Chapter four discusses the harms that children and their education faced during pandemic-related school closures. Many children learned and achieved less than they

would in a classroom—indeed, many regressed educationally. Some students dropped out entirely. Many children also experienced psychosocial and emotional issues during the pandemic, and many felt socially isolated, stressed, and depressed. Students also lost ancillary social protections that are often provided through schools, such as free meals, or therapy and specialist services.

Nonetheless, our research found that some children felt they learned more from distance learning than they would have in school—a finding that points to a need for schools to explore whether they are doing what they can to accommodate such students’ needs in a classroom setting.

The fifth chapter examines some of the pressures on teachers and parents from pandemic-related school closures.

Finally, chapter six outlines the international human rights legal standards that guarantee all children a right to education, and how this must be balanced against children’s—and everyone’s—right to life and health during a pandemic. It also explains that international human rights law contains a strong presumption against governments taking retrogressive measures in the field of education, even during times of possible economic recession in the years following the pandemic. If retrogressive measures are introduced, governments need to demonstrate that it is only after the most careful consideration of all alternatives and that they are duly justified in the context of the full use of the maximum available resources.

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The cost of failure is high. Without quality education, children do not gain the skills they need to fully participate in society and exercise their rights. When children are not in school, societies lose the protective benefits that quality education brings: lost education opportunities lower economic prospects later in life and children become more vulnerable to exploitation, including child labor, child marriage, sexual violence, trafficking, and recruitment into armed groups and forces. Governments will also need to divert resources to tackle the consequences of failing to educate all children.

“It does not make me happy that my children are no longer going to school,” a mother in the Democratic Republic of Congo told Human Rights Watch in June 2020. “Years don’t wait for them. They have already lost a lot,” she said, before asking: “What will become of our uneducated children?”

# **Recommendations**

## **Key Recommendations**

- Keep in-person school closures to a minimum, and only consider nationwide school closures as a last resort. Using guidance, such as the UN-led Framework for Reopening Schools, ensure there are clear plans based on objective, evidence driven, indicators of when in-person school closures might be justified by risk of coronavirus transmission, taking into consideration all available measures to mitigate that risk, short of closure.
- When the prevailing public health situation in a community necessitates in-person school closures, prioritize keeping schools open, or reopening schools, for the children most at risk of not returning, dropping out, or being unable to continue learning through remote means, as well as children of essential and other in-person workers, and those who might not have parental or guardian support at home during the school day.
- Prepare and adopt a comprehensive response plan outlining immediate steps to prepare schools for a safe return, equip teachers to teach safely in class or, where necessary, adopt hybrid models, and get all children back in school.
- Where schools are physically kept open, or reopened, provide support for students who may need to switch to or continue remote learning for reasons that include their personal heightened vulnerability to Covid-19, or that they live with other persons who may be at high risk should they contract the virus. Ensure teachers and school staff who are at a heightened risk of contracting Covid-19, or who are unable to teach in person, are supported to continue their duties, including through remote learning.
- Provide schools with sufficient and relevant personal protective equipment for all students and staff, Covid-19 information, testing and contact tracing capacity, and resources to implement enhanced ventilation and cleaning and hygiene protocols. Enable paid time off for staff who contract Covid-19, and support for students who test positive and need to return to remote learning.

- In line with the World Health Organization’s guidelines for vaccine allocation, include teachers and other school staff as a priority group for access to Covid-19 vaccines.
- Adopt strategies to mitigate the impacts of in-person school closures on children’s learning, for example by working with teachers, school officials, and teachers’ unions and associations, and local education and parent committees, to recover teaching or contact hours lost and, where necessary, adjusting school calendars and exam schedules, and ensuring fair compensation for teachers and school personnel working additional hours.
- Prioritize continuing education for all children during and after temporary in-person school closures, and make it available and accessible to all, using all available technology, including radio and television broadcasts, telephones, computers, secure text and voice messaging services, and printed materials. These efforts should include adapted, accessible material, software, and communication strategies for children with different types of disabilities.
- Adopt measures to provide affordable, reliable, quality, and accessible internet, including targeted measures to provide free, equitable access to the internet for educational content, and capable devices for every student. Children most likely to be excluded or have inadequate access, including those from marginalized or vulnerable communities, living in rural areas, with disabilities, or living in families with multiple children, or due to their gender, should receive targeted support.
- Recommit to a revised target date and concrete action plans for achieving the Sustainable Development Goal to provide universal and affordable internet access.
- Ensure that public schools do not charge additional fees or indirect costs, including Covid-related levies, to ensure formal in-person schooling can resume, and inform parents and students of their rights.
- Ensure that all children who aged out of compulsory or free education during the pandemic are able to access, at a minimum, additional free schooling sufficient to allow them to catch up on any backsliding in their education caused by being out of school, plus time equal to school disruptions and closures.
- Protect education budgets and avoid austerity measures that harm the right to education. Audit education spending to assess equitable distribution and spending and provide universal support to all schools. Invest in school infrastructure to ensure safe and healthy work environments for all staff and

students, taking into account the public health lessons of the pandemic such as the importance of ventilation and sanitation.

- Explicitly allocate educational resources strategically to vulnerable and low-income groups, children traditionally at risk of exclusion from education, and those shown to have been particularly affected in their education during the pandemic.

## Recommendations to Ministries of Education During the Pandemic

- Focus on mitigating the disproportionate effects on children and adolescents who already experience barriers accessing education, or who are at higher risk of being excluded, including children with disabilities, migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, students in remote locations, girls, and children from poor households or otherwise vulnerable communities.
- Ensure that distance learning alternatives are accessible for children with disabilities. Provide reasonable accommodations to the individual learning needs of each child with a disability.
- Make students' well-being an element of distance learning. Provide teachers, assistants, and school officials with guidelines and tools to report concerns related to their students' well-being. Ensure students in need of free school meals continue to receive them.
- Ensure that distance-learning alternatives provide a space where girls and LGBT students are encouraged and safe to freely participate. Monitor girls' attendance in areas with high incidence of exclusion and drop-out rates.
- Monitor and follow up students' attendance and participation at school and during distance education. Ensure regular direct contact, such as a phone call or video call, between the teacher, or at least a school official, and a way for students to reach out with questions.
- Provide individual follow-up with students or families if a child is not attending or participating, including through a physical visit. As a last resort, social services, local child protection committees, or local authorities should be involved in an appropriate response.
- Provide supplementary funding for teachers and school officials in historically under-resourced areas and schools and school districts that have indicated the need for additional resources to contact their students, print materials for all, and distribute learning materials in more remote or rural areas,

especially when this is the only medium to ensure children continue to engage in remote education.

- Ensure that schools support teachers to provide students with tailored support to accommodate children’s individual learning needs, as well as students’ personal circumstances, including mental health, family situation, and economic hardship.
- Where synchronous teaching is used—whether via radio, television, or internet—provide recordings, formats, and opportunities for students without access to connectivity, a device or parental support at set times to re-access classes and learning material outside of regular classroom schedules. Ensure that schools or the relevant education authority managing such programs regularly monitor students’ engagement with and use of these materials and ensure that teachers are able to track students’ progress and understanding of the content if they are only following radio or television programs.
- Ensure students can continue to follow core educational content or modified curricula through free, equitable, reliable internet access.
- Where online learning is used: perform due diligence to ensure that online or other digital learning tools used by schools protect children’s privacy rights; and include data privacy clauses in any procurement contracts with educational technology providers to protect children’s data collected during this time.
- Ensure that teachers can, and are supported, to conduct distance learning. Provide ongoing training and support programs for teachers in online education and distance learning, including training in digital literacy skills and children’s data privacy protection.
- Find alternative ways to assess students’ ongoing engagement and learning levels and provide certifications, including alternatives to unique, high-stakes summative assessments, such as single end of year exams.

## Recommendations to Ministries of Education During the Progressive Return to School-Based Teaching

- Launch national “back to school” communications and mass outreach campaigns to persuade communities and children who have been out of school—either due to the pandemic or other reasons—to return to school.

- When children return to schools after periods of mandatory closures, or previous exclusion, enable schools to assess students' level of learning in each subject, and provide needed support to improve levels, including through free extra tutoring and counselling, as necessary.
- Explore expanding the school calendar, for example through summer schools or other opportunities to provide catch-up tutoring where necessary to recover from learning losses, including with support from non-governmental organizations.
- Closely monitor school attendance, and:
  - Identify children who do not return to in-person classes or drop out or do not regularly attend and engage in intensive outreach to them and their caregivers to re-engage them and provide any support they require to continue or resume their studies;
  - Promptly investigate cases of children being denied access to school or being expelled from school due to an inability to pay fees or for school supplies, including uniforms;
  - Ensure that appropriate enforcement authorities sanction schools and school officials that illegally levy school fees or turn away students;
  - Ensure ongoing access to adequate mental health support for students, either within schools or in other accessible, appropriate, and child-friendly venues;
  - Remove any policies or practices that discourage or bar pregnant, parenting or married students from attending school, and provide assistance to ensure these children can study; and
  - Take steps, including through policy and monitoring, to ensure non-discrimination, and guarantee reasonable accommodations for children with disabilities.

## **Recommendations to Governments for Building a Better Education**

### *Policy Action*

- Revise and improve national educational policies to remove barriers that prevent children from accessing quality, inclusive primary and secondary education by adopting specific, well-resourced and equitably funded plans to guarantee access to schools for children who have been traditionally neglected or excluded, such as

children living in or near poverty, children with disabilities, and children from ethnic, religious, or language minorities.

- Assist married, pregnant, and parenting children to continue, resume, or access education including by accommodating students' needs and providing child care.
- Strengthen measures to prevent child marriage in countries where it occurs.
- Increase special protections or financial measures for children who are at risk of dropping out.
- Progressively strengthen the content and availability of technical and vocational training, alternative basic education opportunities, including universal adult basic education programs, and life-long learning opportunities for older children who left school during the pandemic, but in the years to come, may wish to return to studies.
- Ensure that internally displaced, asylum-seeking, and refugee children and young adults are included in national education plans and collect better data to monitor their situation.
- Adopt robust education emergency response plans, in line with best international practices and international standards, and integrate education into national planning for natural hazards and other disasters and ensure that students, teachers and school staff, and schools are embedded in national disaster risk reduction and climate change mitigation plans.
- Provide comprehensive sexuality education to all children, including during remote studies.
- Develop or expand device affordability and availability initiatives for schools and families, with support targeted at the most vulnerable children, and develop and expand initiatives to secure and equitably distribute devices for learning to schools.
- End internet shutdowns and lift restrictions on access to Voice Over IP platforms and other essential platforms immediately and ensure access to an open internet, free from undue government interference. Develop and resource national broadband plans, with specific attention to overcoming inequalities in internet access.
- Regulate the private sector to ensure that public-private partnerships and measures taken to facilitate children's access to the internet and devices do not infringe on children's other rights now or in the future, including their rights to

privacy; to play; to seek, receive, and impart information; to freedom of expression; and to freedom of association.

- Incorporate digital literacy in school curricula. Develop and provide digital literacy training programs and in-service training in digital literacy for teachers.

### *Guarantee and Enforce Free, Compulsory Education*

- In countries where compulsory education lasts only six or fewer years, identify all children who aged out of the compulsory education during the pandemic, and incentivize their return to school and retention, and at a minimum, provide additional free schooling sufficient to allow them to catch up on any backsliding in their education caused by being out of school, plus time equal to school disruptions and closures.
- In countries where children can age out of legally-guaranteed free education before completing primary and secondary school, at a minimum, provide additional free schooling sufficient to allow them to catch up on any backsliding in their education caused by being out of school, plus time equal to school disruptions and closures.
- Ensure that national legislation protects the compulsory nature of primary education, at a minimum. Monitor the enforcement of compulsory education at a local level, including actions by school officials, parents, or community leaders that could jeopardize children's access to education.
- Ensure that all children enjoy their right to free primary education and take immediate measures to ensure that secondary education is available and accessible to all free of charge. Encourage and intensify "fundamental education" for those persons who have not received or completed the whole period of primary (or basic) education. Governments should make secondary education fully free, remove school fees and indirect costs that are a barrier to secondary education.

### *Guarantee Equal Education and End Discrimination*

- Ratify the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

- Develop and invest in policies and programs that acknowledge and address the impact of economic, racial, and social inequalities on students and schools. Utilize rigorous and systematic research from various sources and methodological approaches to develop policies and to evaluate their impact and implementation.
- Enact and enforce national legislation prohibiting discrimination in education against children because of their race, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, disability, social, or other status. Protections from discrimination should include mechanisms for victims and their parents or guardians to lodge complaints and receive prompt redress. Such laws should address direct as well as indirect discrimination (when apparently neutral practices actually have a negative impact on members of a particular group) as well as addressing harassment.
- Remove any policies that discourage or bar students who are married, pregnant, or parenting from studying.
- Adopt legislation or policies and allocate resources to ensure mainstream schools provide inclusive quality education, and reasonable accommodations for children with disabilities, based on their individual requirements, and remove any procedural, physical, or attitudinal barriers which could discriminate against children with disabilities.

### *Financial Action*

- Protect education budgets from austerity measures and fiscal consolidation adopted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and follow international standards set out in the Education 2030 Framework of Action to allocate at least 15 to 20 percent of total national budget, or 4 to 6 percent of Gross Domestic Product, to education.
- Eliminate costs to students and parents for textbooks, education materials, compulsory exam fees, and uniforms, when these act as significant financial barriers and where they affect access for, and retention of, children from low-income households. End practices that require or pressure students to pay for additional tutoring and provide tutoring for free to students in need of extra help.
- Expand financial measures to offset direct and indirect costs related to the pandemic, targeting students from low-income households or students with demonstrated financial needs, including by providing school transportation or free school meals to facilitate children's return to school.

- Ensure that national education budgets provide for inclusive education and funding for all schools on a non-discriminatory basis. Where necessary, governments should allocate additional resources to close existing gaps, including the accessibility and physical condition of school buildings, additional educational facilities, adapted learning materials or equipment, and teacher training.

## **Recommendations to Improve International and Multilateral Action**

- Existing international education donors should continue to allocate adequate bilateral and multilateral funding to advancing equal access to primary and secondary education, in line with their international obligations and the Sustainable Development Goal commitments.
- International education donors, global education partnerships, multilateral bodies, and financial institutions, should ensure that technical and financial development assistance supports public education systems and is provided in accordance with human rights obligations, and ensure that:
  - Recipient countries guarantee non-discrimination in their education systems, and provide free public quality education on an equal basis;
  - All global funding donors conduct adequate assessments of any human rights abuses arising within or through a recipient country's education system, including how technical or financial development assistance could perpetuate such abuses; and
  - National and local civil society actors, including education actors, human rights and child rights advocates, community-based organizations, organizations of people with disabilities, and organizations representing traditionally excluded groups are adequately represented, meaningfully consulted and included in education decision-making and monitoring bodies, including local education or education coordination groups.

## Methodology

The Covid-19 pandemic imposed various limitations on Human Rights Watch's traditional research methodology, which includes face-to-face interviews. To protect the health of interviewees and interviewers, and to respect social distancing guidance and regulations, almost all interviews were conducted using some form of telecommunication, including phone calls and voice calls through various online applications (including Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp), SMS messaging and other online messaging applications (including Facebook and WhatsApp), and videocall applications (including Bluejeans, Line, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Zoom). These methodological constraints introduced numerous limitations, including Human Rights Watch's ability to reach children gravely impacted by the consequences of Covid-19 related school closures, who are least likely to have access to electricity or the internet. Interviews conducted in-person complied with local public health regulations and international public health guidance.

Interviews were conducted between April 2020 and April 2021. Human Rights Watch conducted more than 470 interviews for this report, including 154 with children aged 8 to 17, and 12 with older school students aged 18 to 27. Of all students interviewed 71 were male, including 2 trans boys, 84 were female, including 2 trans girls, and 1 was non-binary. Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 137 parents or other caregivers.

Interviewees included children or caregivers of children who: have various learning, physical, developmental, intellectual and sensory disabilities, autism, and expressive and receptive language disabilities; were adopted; have an autoimmune disease, or have parents or siblings with autoimmune disease; are of ethnic or racial minorities in the community or country in which they live; live in a foster care situation; have grandparents or other relatives acting as primary caregivers; have an incarcerated, or previously incarcerated, parent; are Indigenous; are LGBT; have LGBT parents; live in multigenerational households; speak a language spoken by a minority of the people in the area or country where they live; have married parents, separated parents, divorced parents, or a solo parent; have teenage mothers; are asylum-seekers, migrants, and refugees, both unaccompanied and with families; attend a residential school (boarding school); belong to a minority religion for their community or country; were suspected of

having Covid-19 or whose parents were suspected of having Covid-19; and who work or were engaged in child labor either before or during the pandemic.

Parents interviewed included individuals who were classed as “essential workers” (expected to continue in-person work despite quarantine or lockdown regulations in their respective jurisdictions), employed, fulltime caregivers, self-employed, unemployed before the pandemic, and unemployed at some point during the pandemic.

Human Rights Watch interviewed at least 177 education professionals such as principals, teachers, and school counsellors, from pre-primary schools, primary schools, secondary schools, and vocational secondary schools. In this report, “teacher” is sometimes used to refer to the broad spectrum of educator roles at a school, including assistants and tutors.

Additional interviews were also conducted with experts from non-governmental organizations, education ministry officials, humanitarian workers, and a distance learning television programmer.

Interviewees were based in the following 60 countries: Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Croatia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Madagascar, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Serbia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Thailand, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States, Venezuela, and Zambia.

Interviewees lived in capital cities, other cities, Indigenous communities, rural and remote locations, suburbs, towns, and villages.

Many parents and teachers requested that their names not be used in this report in order to protect their privacy or the privacy of their children or students, so as to feel free to speak about their employer, or for cultural reasons. Children’s names are used only in exceptional instances when the interviewee specifically requested that their name be used. Pseudonyms are reflected in the text with a first name followed by an initial, and are noted in the footnotes.

Interviews were conducted directly, or with interpretation, in Arabic, Armenian, Bangla, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, Ewe, Farsi, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Nepali, Nigerian pidgin, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Thai, Tibetan, Twi, and Urdu.

Interviewees were not paid to participate. Some interviewees were compensated for phone and data costs related to the interview call. Interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, the ways in which the information would be used, and provided oral consent to be interviewed.

Interviews in Ghana were conducted by staff from the non-governmental organization Friends of the Nation, and in Uganda by staff from the Institute for Economic and Social Rights, for an upcoming joint report with Human Rights Watch on the topic of child labor and the Covid-19 pandemic in these countries.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed documents circulated by schools and ministries of education regarding their response to the pandemic, and analyzed global guidance issued by international agencies, including the UN-led Framework for Reopening Schools, and Education International and the Organization for Economic Co-operation Development's Principles for Effective and Equitable Educational Recovery.

## I. Devastation of Millions of Children’s Education

Nothing compares to being present. You can address doubts or questions right away, and there’s also a human connection. School is not just about imparting knowledge, it’s also to teach values like respect, and to socialize students.

— Fabio de Lima, secondary school teacher, São Paulo, Brazil<sup>1</sup>

The first school closures in response to the novel coronavirus were in January 2020 in China, but the vast majority of school lockdowns in other countries began during March 2020. Some parents began keeping children at home even before official school closures,<sup>2</sup> and some schools closed earlier, either on the request of health authorities, or their own risk assessment.<sup>3</sup> At the peak of Covid-19 related school closures in April 2020, these measures disrupted the lives of 1.4 billion pre-primary, primary, and secondary students—or 90 percent of all students in the world—when schools in more than 190 countries were closed.<sup>4</sup>

Frequently, these closures happened without a structured response plan to guide government and school officials and teachers, and to ensure parents and students knew how to adjust to a new modality of teaching and learning. In some countries, school closures also happened without due consideration to schools’ key role in the provision of school meals, and key health and therapeutic services.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Fabio de Lima, teacher, São Paulo, Brazil, July 13, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father of five, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020; mother, Cape Town, South Africa, June 25, 2020; and father, Long Island, New York, United States, June 14, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with teacher, Berlin, Germany, June 9, 2020; and Emma Aggelid, teacher, Östersund, Sweden, June 24, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “UIS.Stat,” April 2020, <http://data UIS.unesco.org>; and UNESCO, “Covid-19 Educational Disruption and Response,” 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, “UK: Children in England Going Hungry with Schools Shut,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 27, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/27/uk-children-england-going-hungry-schools-shut>; Section 27, “National School Nutrition Programme – the campaign for #SchoolMealsNow,” undated, <https://section27.org.za/national-school-nutrition-programme/> (accessed March 2, 2021).

The closing of schools was stressful and uncertain for students, parents, teachers, and school staff. A common description was “chaos.”<sup>6</sup> Most thought lockdown would last only a few weeks, yet for many that turned into months. A mother in Australia said in June: “It’s the first time they’ve done this, and I think they did the best they could especially with the time they had, but of course there’s plenty to learn.”<sup>7</sup>

Once schools closed, some never offered any further education to their students. Others shifted to different forms of distance education. Some did this incredibly quickly. For example, a father in the Netherlands, said his children’s school closed March 12 and “sent a message right away” explaining the tools and procedures for how education would continue,<sup>8</sup> and a mother in Russia said distance learning began in “no time.”<sup>9</sup> Interviewees reported a transition period of around two days at a school in Australia and Switzerland.<sup>10</sup> Yet many schools took longer. At a school in Oregon, United States, a teacher said it took one month—during which time teachers were told not to contact students—and even then, there was no lesson plans until five weeks after school closed.<sup>11</sup> A student in Thailand said it took almost three months for distance learning to begin,<sup>12</sup> and a mother in Cambodia said around four months.<sup>13</sup>

By September, 872 million students, roughly half of all students on the planet, were still locked outside their classrooms. Of these, UNICEF estimated that at least 463 million students had not been reached due to lack of policies supporting alternative learning distance education and a lack of household assets required for distance learning.<sup>14</sup> As of May 2021, schools in 26 countries were closed country-wide, and schools were only partially open—open either just in some locations or only for some grade levels—in 55 countries, with ongoing uncertainty in many places affected by high infection rates caused

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<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Brandenburg, Germany, June 1, 2020; parent, Czechowice-Dziedzice, Poland, June 21, 2020; Nawal L., 16, Marrakesh, Morocco, June 19, 2020; mother, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, June 1, 2020; and mother, Hvidovre, Denmark, June 10, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hayley John, Murwillumbah, New South Wales, Australia, June 12, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mamoun Abunaasser, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 15, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Izhevsk, Russia, June 12, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Fiona Cave, grandparent primary caregiver of 6-year-old, Nendaz, Switzerland; and teacher, Melbourne, Australia, June 14, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Springfield, Oregon, United States, June 16, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ray N., 16, Bangkok, Thailand, July 2, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Krong Serei Saophoan commune, Banteay Meanchey province, July 31, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF, *Covid-19: Are Children Able to Continue Learning during School Closures?*, Factsheet, August 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/remote-learning-reachability-factsheet/> (accessed March 2, 2021), pp. 1, 7.

in part by new Covid-19 variants.<sup>15</sup> Despite more than a year's worth of disruptions, many education systems were still applying haphazard distance learning.

Children from groups typically at risk of being excluded from their right to education have been the most affected and excluded.<sup>16</sup> This chapter outlines how children were excluded from any formal education, or from a full quality education during these times.

### Girls

Covid-19-related lockdowns and the resultant loss of income for many families, including those already living in poverty before the pandemic, have placed millions of girls at immediate risk of labor exploitation, hunger, and child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence, which will force many of them to abandon school.<sup>17</sup> The United Nations Population Fund estimated that the pandemic would delay efforts to end child marriage and female genital mutilation, and these delays, in addition to increased poverty, could lead to 13 million more cases of child marriage and to 2 million more cases of female genital mutilation over a 10-year period.<sup>18</sup>

Over 767 million girls and young women were out of school at the peak of the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> In some countries, girls face unique barriers to continuing formal education from a distance: out-of-school girls face greater housework burdens, social isolation, and less internet access. Pregnant, parenting, and married girls often face

<sup>15</sup> Insights for Education, “Learning Disruption Due to Covid-19,” <https://infographic.education.org/insights/en/> (accessed May 4, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> International Monetary Fund and World Bank Group, *Enhancing Access to Opportunities*, May 2020, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/g20/pdf/2020/06120.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2021), pp. 6 – 12.

<sup>17</sup> Agnes Odhiambo (Human Rights Watch), “How girls’ education and safety will be harmed by the Covid response,” *African Arguments*, April 15, 2020, <https://africanarguments.org/2020/04/how-girls-education-and-safety-will-be-harmed-by-the-covid-response/> (accessed March 2, 2021); Oliver Rowntree et al., “Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020,” GSMA report, May 2020, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2021); World Wide Web Foundation, *Women’s Rights Online: Closing the digital gender gap for a more equal world*, 2020; and UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Girls’ Education Initiative et al, Building back equal – Girls back to school guide, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/media/75471/file/Building-back-equal-Girls-back-to-school-guide-2020.pdf> (accessed March 2, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> UNFPA, “Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage,” Interim Technical Note, April 2020, [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_impact\\_brief\\_for\\_UNFPA\\_24\\_April\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> UNESCO, “Over 11 million girls may not go back to school after the COVID-19 crisis,” undated, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/girlseducation> (accessed March 2, 2021).

particular barriers to returning to school, and in some countries, are barred from studying in public schools.<sup>20</sup>

All sections of this report include the experiences of girls, including ways in which gender norms and inequity limited their access to online learning or remote education. In some contexts, parents worried or faced greater discomfort about girls' private interactions with a male teacher thus limiting their ability to study remotely, as illustrated on page 26. In other contexts, girls were also expected to take on additional childcare and household responsibilities, which may have interfered with their studies, as discussed on page 54.

## Schools that Provided No Education during Early Lockdown

Many children, especially but not exclusively in low and low-middle income countries, received no formal education of any kind during the early months of Covid-19 related school closures. In August 2020, Bolivia, for example, cancelled the rest of the school year, which ended in December 2020, leaving almost three million children without education, and when the new school year began in February 2021, some children restarted studies online, while some returned to in-person teaching in school.<sup>21</sup>

For example, Human Rights Watch interviewed an ethnic Cham woman in Cambodia. Of her two boys enrolled in school, aged 7 and 11, she said in August 2020 they were not receiving any education:

I was not contacted by the school and I received no information about assignments to be completed by my sons... I cannot read or write, and I am very poor. I have always wanted a better life for my children... All I want is

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<sup>20</sup> See, Human Rights Watch, Leave No Girl Behind in Africa, June 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/06/14/leave-no-girl-behind-africa/discrimination-education-against-pregnant-girls-and>.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus Reynaldo Alanoca Paco, "Bolivia iniciará el año escolar este lunes con un primer trimestre de nivelación a distancia," *El Deber*, January 31, 2021; "Bolivia anticipa clausura del año escolar por la pandemia," *Deutsche Welle*, August 3, 2020; "Este lunes 22, volverán a clases semipresenciales en Beni y Sucre," *Página Siete*, March 16, 2021; and Ryan Dube, "Bolivia Decision to Cancel School Because of Covid-19 Upsets Parents," *Washington Post*, August 4, 2020.

that my sons return to school... They always had good grades before the school closed. They deserve an education like all other kids.<sup>22</sup>

“My child is no longer learning, she is just waiting for the reopening to continue her studies,” said a mother of a 9-year-old girl in North Kivu province, in Congo, in June.<sup>23</sup> Also in Congo, 16-year-old Roxone K. said in June she too had not been studying for almost three months: “I do not rejoice about not going to school.” Roxone worried she would not return to school in the coming academic year. “Lockdown is not good for me.”<sup>24</sup>

Taisha S., a 16-year-old student in Garissa, Kenya, said that her school did not offer any materials or guidance on how to study during school closures. “I tried to get in touch with my teacher who was teaching mathematics, chemistry, and physics. He said he would not be able to go to anyone’s home, but they could come to his house. As girls we feared going to his house, but I hear the boys have been going.”<sup>25</sup>

Gamon P., 17, studies at a government vocational school in Thailand. She said her school closed in March, and reopened July 1. In between, there were no online classes or assignments. “Vocational schools don’t teach theory—so it’s all very practical.”<sup>26</sup>

A teacher at a school for girls in Bangui, Central African Republic, told Human Rights Watch in June that he had not been in touch with any of his students since schools closed on March 27, 2020. “Most children will lose knowledge acquired beforehand.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Children Unable to Access Education*

In a survey conducted by UNESCO in the third quarter of 2020, almost all governments self-reported that they had established some form of distance learning if their schools were

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<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Kang Meas district, Kampong Cham Province, Cambodia, August 2, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Beni Oicha, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Roxone K., 16, Butembu, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 12, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Taisha S., 16, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Gamon P., 17, Surin province, Thailand, July 6, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Bangui, Central African Republic, June 20, 2020.

shut.<sup>28</sup> However, where schools offered remote learning, many teachers spoke about students who never participated, or who quickly dropped out.<sup>29</sup>

In the same UNESCO survey, a quarter of low- and lower-income countries self-reported not monitoring student learning during school closures.<sup>30</sup> But even in countries where schools attempted to monitor what was happening to their children, teachers sometimes were unable to make contact with their students, while some made no effort to do so.

### *Missing Children*

Loss of contact with students was often described as the result of a lack of communication with parents, or students' lack of connectivity and equipment. Teachers reported losing contact with students for prolonged periods of time.<sup>31</sup>

"Our goal was to be in contact with every child every day," said a first-grade teacher in Finland. "In one of the parallel first grades, the teacher had really big challenges, three families just disappeared." In these cases, the school notified child protection services.<sup>32</sup>

The principal at a primary school in Sydney, Australia, said in June that some students had had no contact with the school for between 9 and 11 weeks, and parents did not answer the phone when the school tried to contact them. The school tried to engage a "home school liaison officer" but were told they could not help because they were "running over" capacity because it was a "weird time."<sup>33</sup>

The director of an NGO in Madagascar that provides education and alternative care services to children either orphaned or unable to live with their parents, said that they

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<sup>28</sup> UNESCO, "What have we learnt?: Overview of findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to Covid-19," October 2020, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Molly Dobkin, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and writing teacher, New York City, United States, June 7, 2020; teacher, Springfield, Oregon, United States, June 16, 2020; and Laken Cantu, teacher, Houston, Texas, United States, June 12, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank, "What have we learnt?: Overview of findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to Covid-19," October 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34700> (accessed May 9, 2021), p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Lindsey Readman, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, June 2, 2020; and teacher, Bilbao, Spain, June 12, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with first-grade teacher, Espoo, Finland, June 16, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Sydney, Australia, June 7, 2020

were able to provide minimal tutoring to children who lived in their residential institution. But children hosted in foster families “did not have any education during the closure period... There are host families who can afford a phone and connect to Facebook, but that’s just 5 percent of families. For others there is nothing at all.”<sup>34</sup>

Carrie Rebis, a grade 4 elementary school teacher in Rochester, New York, in the United States, said in June that of her class of 24 students, “I have around five students that I haven’t heard anything from and who have not submitted anything, they went off the grid.”<sup>35</sup>

“During the entire confinement, there were four or five families from whom we had absolutely no news and who never responded to any email or phone call, including a child we knew was already at risk,” said the principal of a primary school north-west of Paris, France. “We reported it to the police.” She also said there were 40 to 50 children, out of a school of 260 students, “who no longer respond, who did not return their homework.”<sup>36</sup>

“I have students who have not appeared in these four months because they have no cellphone,” said a teacher in a school in a low-income community in the municipality of Luruaco, Colombia in June. In a class of 35 students, he said, only about half would respond to his messages.<sup>37</sup>

A teacher at a secondary technical institute in Piedmont, Italy, said “I had a boy with intellectual disabilities and the support teacher tried a lot to get him back, by phone, but she didn’t succeed, so he stayed out. Because his family didn’t support him... When you were physically together you could involve him... But with this [distance learning] mode there was no way.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Alex Herivelona, director of Centre Ankanifitahiana, Antananarivo, Madagascar, June 2, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Carrie Rebis, Rochester, New York, United States, June 3, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Val d’Oise, France, June 19, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Ojeda Insignares, teacher, Barranquilla, Colombia, June 26, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Piedmont, Italy, June 15, 2020.

### *Reduced Student Participation*

Many teachers told Human Rights Watch about irregular participation by their students in distance learning during school closures.

A primary school teacher in a village in Guatemala said her efforts to provide mostly offline distance learning were not working for all her students, partly because most parents have very low literacy and could not support their children: “My challenge is that there are children who are waking up late, not doing their assignments, and they’re falling behind... I would say that 40 percent are doing homework and studying.”<sup>39</sup>

Some teachers said this was often evident when students failed to submit assignments—often one of the only milestones to monitor student progress amid all the challenges.<sup>40</sup> In Maryland, in the United States, Emily Beer, who teaches grade 4 at a school for children from predominately low-income families, said: “About half my class...is inconsistently, or not at all, completing assignments. There’s a variety of reasons, whether it’s them sharing a device, older siblings are in high school and have to use a device because it could affect graduation, or their parents are working and need the computer.”<sup>41</sup>

Even in Chile, where more than 82 percent of its population has access to the internet, there are children in the capital city, Santiago, who could not connect.<sup>42</sup> “Among my 27 students, the maximum number of students I have had in my [online] class was 14—that was a good day,” said fifth-grade teacher Daniela Andrea Ribeiro Espinoza, who described 70 percent of her students as being from poor families. “There is no phone, there is no internet, there is no lunch, and therefore there is no desire to connect.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, San Juan Gascon, Antigua, Guatemala, July 7, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Carrie Rebis, Rochester, New York, United States, June 3, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Emily Beer, Glen Burnie, Maryland, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> International Telecommunications Union, “The World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database: Percentage of Individuals using the Internet,” January 2021, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx> (accessed March 30, 2021).

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Daniela Andrea Ribeiro Espinoza, teacher, Santiago, Chile, July 9, 2020.

## **Loss of Entitlement to Free or Compulsory Education Due to Aging Out during Pandemic**

At least 44 countries guarantee fewer than 11 years of tuition-free education in their legal frameworks, according to 2020 data.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile World Policy Analysis Center, a legal and policy research group, found tuition fees were charged before being able to complete secondary education in 40 countries, using 2014 data.<sup>45</sup> Children in such countries may therefore have “aged out” of free education during Covid-related school closures when most of these children likely did not fully benefit from the allotment of free education they were entitled to under law.

Moreover, at least 13 countries make education compulsory for only 6 or fewer years of primary education.<sup>46</sup> Children in these countries will have “aged out” of compulsory primary education during Covid-related school closures and are at risk of leaving school without having received the minimum education they were entitled to under their countries’ domestic laws.

## **Children Already Facing Discrimination and Exclusion from Education**

Pre-existing socioeconomic disparities within countries—and their resulting inequities in barriers to access distance learning opportunities—was evident in all countries where Human Rights Watch conducted interviews. The pandemic not only thrust these inequalities into the spotlight but also exacerbated them.

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<sup>44</sup> According to 2020 data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, available at <http://data.uis.unesco.org>, 64 countries have less than 11 years of free primary and secondary education guaranteed in legal frameworks. However, additional research by Human Rights Watch suggests that this determination may be incorrect for 21 countries, and they have therefore been removed from our analysis; meanwhile research by Human Rights Watch indicates that one more country, Guinea Bissau, for which UIS has no data, also guarantees less than 11 years of education. All UN member states have committed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which include an international commitment to guarantee 12 years of free education, 9 of which should be compulsory, by 2030. See, UNESCO, “Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), undated, <https://sdg4education2030.org/the-goal> (accessed May 6, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> World Policy Analysis Center, “Is education tuition-free and compulsory,” <https://www.worldpolicycenter.org/policies/is-education-tuition-free-and-compulsory/is-completing-secondary-education-tuition-free-and-compulsory> (accessed May 5, 2021).

<sup>46</sup> According to 2019/2020 data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, available at <http://data.uis.unesco.org>, 21 countries have 6 or fewer years of compulsory primary education guaranteed in legal frameworks. However, additional research by Human Rights Watch suggests that this determination may be incorrect for 8 countries, and they have therefore been removed from our analysis.

Such barriers tended to be particularly high for students from groups who are more likely to face discrimination and exclusion from education even before the pandemic, including children with disabilities; children from ethnic and racial minorities in the countries where they live; girls—particularly those in countries with gender inequalities in school enrollments and achievements; LGBT children; children living in rural areas; children living in areas affected by armed conflict; and displaced, refugee, migrant, and asylum-seeking children. Children falling into more than one of these categories often faced compounding barriers.

Children who live in poverty or in low-income households—who often are also a member of a historically discriminated social group, but who sometimes face discrimination purely based on their socioeconomic status—faced particularly high barriers to benefiting from a distance education or online learning than peers from higher income families.

### *Children with Disabilities*

School closures due to the pandemic all too frequently resulted in alternatives that were not accessible for children with disabilities, risking their exclusion from education.<sup>47</sup> In at least half of the 147 countries surveyed by UNICEF in September 2020, governments failed to adopt measures to facilitate learning for children with disabilities, such as providing accessible instruction, devices, and materials.<sup>48</sup> Even before the pandemic, children with a sensory, physical, or intellectual disability were 2.5 times more likely to have never been to school than their peers, according to UNESCO.<sup>49</sup>

The switch to learning using internet-connected devices often created **access issues** for children if the technology was not suited to their disability.<sup>50</sup> For example, in Iran, the

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<sup>47</sup> United Nations, “Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19,” May 2020, <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Policy-Brief-A-Disability-Inclusive-Response-to-COVID-19.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2021) p. 6; United Nations, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children,” April 15, 2020, <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-impact-covid-19-children> (accessed May 9, 2021), p.8; and United Nations, “Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond,” August 2020, <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-education-during-covid-19-and-beyond> (accessed May 9, 2021), p.14.

<sup>48</sup> UNICEF, “Children with Disabilities: Ensuring their inclusion in COVID-19 response strategies and evidence generation,” December 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-with-disabilities-ensuring-inclusion-in-covid-19-response> (accessed May 9, 2021), p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> UNESCO, “Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Exclusion,” 2000, p. 71.

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Karine Grigoryan, Agate Rights Defence Center for Women with Disabilities, Gyumri, Armenia, 28 April 2020; mother, Vaughan, Ontario, Canada, June 12, 2020; two teachers, Serbia, April 23 and 24, 2020; two

government mandated that schools use an online learning application called “Shad.” However, according to Soheil Moeini, who heads an association for people who are blind, when launched the app was not designed to be accessible for people with visual disabilities.<sup>51</sup> Narine Azaryan, a mother in Yerevan, Armenia, said of her grade-7 son, who has a hearing disability and has to follow classes on Zoom, “It is very hard for him to see sign language via phone. He can hear to some extent, but there are some words that he has to also see. Imagine watching it on the phone, it is very hard for his eyes too, and imagine also the phone screen divided into seven.”<sup>52</sup> A children’s rights specialist working for an NGO in northwest Syria predicted in February 2021, that it would take until the end of April 2021 before the online learning portal being used in the area would be accessible to children with sight and hearing disabilities.<sup>53</sup>

A mother in New York, United States, said her 6-year-old son, with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and sensory processing disorder, has a “strong reaction to screens, and remote learning has made his symptoms and experiences worse.” She said: “He has been also very resistant to completing school-work at home for more than 20 minutes per day,” adding this leads to frustration and difficult behaviors, like hitting, punching, and throwing objects.<sup>54</sup> Ruzha Kazandjieva, a therapy and learning support assistant in London, England, said “How do I support a student with severe dyslexia..., students that if they write half a page it would be a great success? Imagine them opening an email and comprehending the whole of the information, [and then] on top of that to then do the work and answer questions.”<sup>55</sup> A mother in Cape Town, South Africa, said her son has attention deficit and does not like to take medication because it makes him depressed. “He is an auditory learner, and his school is not doing Zoom sessions... They send the work and then it’s up to the child to do the work. That’s very, very hard

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mothers, Serbia, April 17 and 28, 2020; mother, Mexico City, Mexico, June 17, 2020; Flavia Bennardo, teacher, Milan, Italy, May 12, 2020; mother, Lewes, United Kingdom, June 12, 2020; and in the United States: Laken Cantu, teacher, Houston, Texas, June 12, 2020; Tony Scott, middle school principal, Colorado; teacher, Waco, Texas, June 11, 2020; Chris Marsh, teacher, Yarmouth, Massachusetts, June 14, 2020; and Josefina C., 15, Baltimore, Maryland, June 20, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> خلا حمایت از نابینایان در دوران کرونا /دانشآموزان نابینا از آموزش‌های شبکه شاد محروم مانندن” (Support for blind students during the Corona age / Blind students deprived of the Shaad education app), *Ikna news*, June 5, 2020, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y9mf4n3k> (accessed May 9, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Narine Azaryan, parent, Yerevan, Armenia, April 29, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with NGO employee, Syria, February 2, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch online survey response from mother, New York, United States, May 28, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ruzha Kazandjieva, learning support assistant, London, United Kingdom, June 16, 2020.

because...sitting down and focusing is very difficult for him... He has to have a snack. And then he has to do this. And then he has to walk the dog, and then he has to go for a run.”<sup>56</sup>

Schools sometimes **curtailed reasonable accommodations** previously provided to support children in their education. For example, in Barcelona, Spain, Eva Miquel’s 11-year-old daughter has an individualized education plan at school to support her dyslexia and attention deficit, that focuses on the methodology of teaching but does not alter her learning objectives. But during the school closure, “There was no different treatment, they simply made her do fewer exercises,” said Eva.<sup>57</sup> A teacher in Italy shared the experience of one student with whom they had no contact during the school’s closure. He has difficulty concentrating, so before the pandemic, teachers used to do short modules in person for a quarter of an hour and then go together for a walk. “This mode of doing things became impossible,” said the teacher. “We are afraid that he may not come back.”<sup>58</sup>

To be able to engage in distance learning alternatives, children with disabilities often **required support from their family members** at home.<sup>59</sup> When such support was unavailable, they were at great disadvantage compared to their classmates. “Many students do not do anything during the pandemic,” said a teacher at a school for children with disabilities and children requiring individualized support in Berlin, Germany:

Most of our students have no access or support from their parents... It will be a great challenge to get these children ready for school again after such a long break. Their attention span is very short, and now, without having the routine and the daily interaction with the teachers as their person of contact it will be even more difficult.<sup>60</sup>

A mother of a 12-year-old boy in Lebanon who used to receive weekly psychomotor therapy and speech therapy, as well as learning support in his Arabic and English classes, said

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<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Cape Town, South Africa, June 25, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Eva Miquel, mother, Barcelona, Spain, June 16, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ale B., philosophy teacher, Italy, July 15, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with educational psychologist, Monterrey, Mexico, July 1, 2020; and teacher, Chicago, Illinois, United States, June 5, 2020. *See also* Heather Barr, “School Closures Particularly Hard on Children with Disabilities,” Human Rights Watch dispatch, June 15, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/15/school-closures-particularly-hard-children-disabilities>.

<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Berlin, Germany, June 8, 2020.

when the school closed down, he first received worksheets to continue this support, and then later one-on-one Zoom calls. This was in addition to regular online classes. The workload, however, was difficult for his mother who ultimately had to choose what would work best for her son: “I took a decision that I either follow the regular classroom assignments that are not modified or I do the special education worksheets with him. So I stuck to the special education assignments. It’s all been so nerve wracking... I thought that I have to choose our mental and physical health and a good immune system rather than stressing the kids and myself to finish up all the assignments.”<sup>61</sup>

In addition, where schools were the delivery point of therapy, many **students lost access to critical therapy services.**<sup>62</sup> Lucina Bravo, the director of a therapy center in Guadalajara, Mexico, which works with children with cerebral palsy and neuromusculoskeletal disabilities, noted that even after the center’s usual one-month summer break, students would return with greater difficulty controlling their muscles. Six weeks after the center’s pandemic-related closure, they began sending videos and directions to parents twice a week. Because some parents had to go to work and leave their children with other caregivers, the center decided to reopen for children’s therapy, training its staff on essential health protocols to do so safely. Of the 106 students, 45 returned.<sup>63</sup> But educational activities did not restart until August.<sup>64</sup> In rural Kansas, in the United States, a special education teacher said in June: “I have a student who can’t walk and so we do physical therapy with him every day... His parents don’t force him to walk in his gate-trainer which is like a walker... So he has not walked since March 6 and his [condition] is one that’s going to get worse and worse. That just breaks my heart.”<sup>65</sup> A mother in Lebanon, whose 15-year-old daughter was receiving therapy at school from a speech and psychomotor specialist, said a month after the school closed, she received a letter from the therapist listing activities she should do with her daughter. “I responded saying that some things were very helpful and thanking them. I also suggested that they conduct online sessions,” she said. “They didn’t accept.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Beirut, Lebanon, June 4, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Seda Sanoyan, Gyumri, Armenia, May 4, 2020; and teacher, Colorado, United States, June 15, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Lucina Bravo, director general, Centro Integral de Rehabilitación Infantil, Guadalajara, Mexico, June 17, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Text message from Lucina Bravo, April 16, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Kansas, United States, June 16, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Lebanon, April 1, 2020.

**Social interaction** is important for all children’s development, and no less so for children with disabilities.<sup>67</sup> A mother in Afrin, Syria, said her 5-year-old son, who has autism, had been attending an informal education program for about only three weeks before Covid-19 related closures meant that lessons were then over WhatsApp. “What I think he needs more than learning letters and numbers is he needs the social impact, to be surrounded by other children.”<sup>68</sup> In Lebanon, a mother of an 11-year-old boy with autism said, “Staying at home harms his case. Going to school, in and of itself, is therapy. This is where the interaction happens, be it with teachers, with other kids, like him and unlike him. School, in and of itself, is socializing, which is what children with autism need.”<sup>69</sup> A school administrator at a Native American tribal program in California, in the United States, said: “My children in speech [therapy] are going to be so far setback for so many reasons. One, they’re missing so much school, and being around peers encourages conversation.”<sup>70</sup>

However, some parents and teachers interviewed by Human Rights Watch in Italy and the United States spoke of how strong legal protections guaranteeing the right to education for children with disabilities provided important protection that ensured the continuation of teaching for some children during school closures.<sup>71</sup>

### *Indigenous Children*

Indigenous children—both those living in and outside of Indigenous communities—frequently faced additional barriers in benefitting from distance learning alternatives than their non-Indigenous peers. Often these barriers are due to systemic discrimination and marginalization that resulted in disparities even before the pandemic, and which can manifest in lower-incomes, lower levels of education within families, failure to adequately accommodate Indigenous languages, and under-investment in necessary infrastructure such as the internet.

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<sup>67</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Italy, June 15.

<sup>68</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Afrin, Syria, November 2, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Lebanon, June 4, 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with school administrator, California, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews in Italy with Flavia Bennardo, teacher, Milan, May 12, 2020 and mother, Milan, May 15, 2020; and in the United States with middle school teacher, South Dakota, June 8, 2020; Ben Johnson, teacher, Chicago, Illinois, June 20, 2020; Jacob Meyer, teacher, Beresford, South Dakota, June 11, 2020; Jason Felix, teacher, New York City, June 17, 2020; teacher, Massachusetts, United States, June 4, 2020; and teacher, Indiana, United States, June 24, 2020.

Many families in the Pueblo of Jemez, a Native American community in New Mexico, United States, do not have internet access, or sufficiently strong internet, to support video or audio. To overcome this, many teachers distributed printed handouts. This created problems for some younger students, because their Towa language is an oral language that the tribal council has decided is not to be written down. The community's preschool is taught entirely in Towa, and at one school the kindergarten is taught 90 percent in Towa, first grade at 80 percent, and second grade at 70 percent. An education official said: "Families who have a strong language background and are fluent, then they can use these instructions and materials to help their students. But for students who aren't fluent and their families aren't fluent, those are the families that are having trouble."<sup>72</sup>

The director of cultural programs in a rural school district with a predominately Alaska Native student body noted that because schoolwork packs were in English rather than Yup'ik, many students' first language, it was "really hard to get them engaged."<sup>73</sup>

The lack of internet access and adequate equipment for online learning was a key obstacle for many Indigenous children. Annie Sneaky, 15, is a member of the Grassy Narrows First Nation, in Ontario, Canada. Some teachers at Annie's school—which is in a town 90 kilometers from where she lives—set up Google Classrooms and Zoom meetings, but, she explained: "Since I live in a reservation with no internet it's been really difficult, I don't have 24-hour access... It's hard for me to even email teachers for help... I think my situation is harder than for 'normal' students, but I'm doing my best." Annie said that being at home on her reserve was a welcome break from encounters at her school where she felt stigmatized or treated differently by school officials or students because she is Indigenous.<sup>74</sup>

A senior administrator in a rural school district with a predominately Alaska Native student body, where most families lived below the poverty line, noted: "Maybe 25 percent of our families have computers, and an even smaller amount have access to Wi-Fi." Teachers therefore contacted students not just by email, but also phone and through letters.<sup>75</sup> A

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<sup>72</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with a student program outreach coordinator, Pueblo of Jemez, New Mexico, United States.

<sup>73</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with director of cultural programs in a rural Alaska school district, United States, June 4, 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Annie Sneaky, 15, Grassy Narrows First Nation, Ontario, Canada, June 11, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with a senior administrator in a rural school district, Alaska, United States, May 29, 2020.

teacher in another predominantly Alaska Native community said: “There’s no technology and the homes are full [of people].” She felt her students were at a disadvantage: “There are so many learning opportunities online, especially now.”<sup>76</sup> A principal at a school with a predominately Yup’ik student body and in a community in Alaska where almost 56 percent of the population live below the poverty line, said: “I have the maximum plan for internet here, with 100 gigabytes of data [equal to about 200 hours of online video], and it is US\$315 per month. I can start loading a web page and go sweep my floors while I wait for the page to load... I don’t believe that going to online learning could ever be an option unless the internet infrastructure is better.”<sup>77</sup>

### Children of Color in the United States of America

As of 2020, Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Native, and other children of color likely now account for the majority of children in the United States.<sup>78</sup> One study found that Black and Hispanic students were twice as likely as white students to have no live interaction with teachers—in person, by phone, or by video—in late 2020.<sup>79</sup>

A teacher at what he described as “the most diverse school” in Chicago said that of his students not participating in distance learning and who the school could not contact, “almost all of them were students of color, many of whom I knew were in transitory living conditions or had pretty profound [individualized special education needs].”<sup>80</sup>

A secondary school teacher at a school in Baltimore, Maryland, said her student body was “99 percent Black.” Her school does not have computers or tablets in every room,

<sup>76</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Alaska, United States, June 4, 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Missy Rivers, Scammon Bay, Alaska, United States, June 3, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Older People Projected to Outnumber Children for the First Time in US History,” March 13, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Emma Dorn et al., “Covid-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help,” McKinsey & Company, December 8 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help> (accessed May 9, 2021), pp. 6-7. Another study in June 2020 found that wealthy districts were more than twice as likely as the districts with the highest concentrations of low-income students to require at least some teachers to provide live, real-time instruction. Betheny Gross and Alice Opalka, “Too Many Students Leave Learning to Chance during Pandemic,” Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2020, [https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/final\\_national\\_sample\\_brief\\_2020.pdf](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/final_national_sample_brief_2020.pdf) (accessed May 9, 2021).

<sup>80</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ben Johnson, teacher, Chicago, Illinois, United States, June 20, 2020.

which contributed to her students' low digital literacy and limited their engagement with distant learning. She also said "a few parents" told her their children were not completing work because the household had only one device and several children."<sup>81</sup>

A grade 6 and 8 teacher in a school with a predominately Black student body, but also with a sizeable Latinx minority, in New York City said, "Many families have not been able to afford to continue to pay their Wi-Fi bill or have struggled to obtain internet capable devices... Having inconsistent access to educational materials that I provide makes it difficult for many of my students to keep up with the work."<sup>82</sup>

One analysis found that people of color are over-represented among those deemed "essential workers" during the pandemic.<sup>83</sup> A teacher at a primary school in Seattle—where the student body is predominately Latinx and Asian—said: "A lot of families of students I teach are essential workers. I think that's been really challenging for kids to be at home and not have a parent there who can help them with their learning." She said another challenge was that some other parents, who were not essential workers but could not work from home, lost income. "In some ways, learning was put on the back burner this spring, and a lot of our work became social work, making sure families can pay rent and pay their bills. I think the people who are struggling the most are the people of color in our community."<sup>84</sup>

For more on the experiences of Indigenous children in the United States, see p.35.

### *LGBT and Gender-Diverse Children*

School shutdowns had different consequences for different lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender-diverse children. For some, being away from school meant they were away from bullying and mistreatment from fellow students and even teachers.

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<sup>81</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Baltimore, United States, June 9, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Julian M. Rachko, public school teacher, New York City, United States, June 18, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Celine McNicholas and Margaret Poydock, "Who are essential workers? A comprehensive look at their wages, demographics, and unionization rates," Economic Policy Institute's *Working Economics Blog*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates> (accessed May 9, 2021).

<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Seattle, Washington, United States, June 22, 2020.

(Globally, 42 percent of LGBTI+ youth say they have been “ridiculed, teased, insulted, or threatened at school” before the pandemic, because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, primarily by their peers.<sup>85</sup>) Whereas for others, it meant removal from a school environment where they felt free to express their identity and receive support from teachers, counsellors, or peers, and confinement at home with parents with whom they felt comparatively constrained.<sup>86</sup>

Ale B., a non-binary trans teacher working in a secondary school in a small town in Italy noted how students’ development of their own autonomy and personality during adolescence often happens outside of the family space. “How do you keep objective the opinion of the family where maybe the child is transgender and the family is particularly Catholic or particularly transphobic?” asked Ale. “The only thing you can do is to talk to the student, but the student is at home, so who hears him talking? Does he have a space of his own? If he doesn’t have it, can he tell you? It’s not difficult, it’s *very* difficult.”<sup>87</sup>

A teacher in a country in Asia where same-sex conduct is illegal told Human Rights Watch that he tries to teach his students to “respect everyone.” He said:

I have a responsibility to teach my students that LGBT people should not be hated. They are born this way. If you cannot love them, you don’t need to hate them. A lot of people think these people should be killed... Sometimes LGBT students think of committing suicide from tremendous pressure. They have no place to share their feelings... In the classroom, I can try to talk about this in an indirect way and safely provide support to students who

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<sup>85</sup> Gabrielle Richard, and MAG Jeunes LGBT, “Global Consultation: Inclusive Education and Access to Health of LGBTI+ Youth Around the World,” summary report, 2018, [https://www.academia.edu/37667575/Summary\\_report\\_of\\_the\\_global\\_consultation\\_on\\_the\\_inclusive\\_education\\_and\\_access\\_to\\_health\\_of\\_LGBTI\\_youth\\_around\\_the\\_world](https://www.academia.edu/37667575/Summary_report_of_the_global_consultation_on_the_inclusive_education_and_access_to_health_of_LGBTI_youth_around_the_world) (accessed May 9, 2021), p. 11.

<sup>86</sup> Jessica N. Fish et al., “‘I’m Kinda Stuck at Home With Unsupportive Parents Right Now’: LGBTQ Youths’ Experiences With COVID-19 and the Importance of Online Support,” Adolescent Health Brief, September 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7309741/> (accessed May 9, 2021), pp. 450-452; John P. Salerno, Natasha D. Williams, and Karina A. Gattamorta, “LGBTQ Populations: Psychologically Vulnerable Communities in the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 2020, vol. 12, issue S1, <https://content.apa.org/record/2020-41743-001> (accessed May 9, 2021) p. S240; and Gilbert Gonzales et al., “Mental Health Needs Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Journal of Adolescent Health, November 2020, pp. 645-648.

<sup>87</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ale B., philosophy teacher, Italy, July 15, 2020.

might be LGBT. But with everything online during Covid, on Facebook, it is very dangerous.<sup>88</sup>

### *Refugee, Asylum-Seeking, Displaced, and Migrant Children*

Refugee, asylum-seeking, displaced, and migrant children often face unequal access to education compared to other children, due to factors including discriminatory barriers, economic inequality, social isolation, and language differences—barriers that were often only exacerbated during school lockdowns. Around half of all school age refugee children, were already excluded from education before the pandemic.<sup>89</sup>

One example of a bureaucratic barrier is that the website used for distance learning lessons and exams in Jordan requires a national identity number to register. Despite having lived in Jordan since 2011, Somali refugee siblings Aya M., 16, and Hamada, 15, did not have such a number. Hamada said: “It took us a lot of effort to obtain a national ID number. I was only able to get my national ID in May, so I missed three ministerial exams.”<sup>90</sup>

In France, Célia L., 14, said some of her classmates come from countries in eastern Europe, such as Albania, Armenia, and Georgia. “Some do not speak French and live in [an emergency shelter] next to the college.” When school reopened, “All the people in the class who do not speak French did not come back... Information on the resumption of lessons was sent by email or by Pronote. Probably they didn’t have the information.”<sup>91</sup>

Farhad K., his wife, and their four children, originally from Afghanistan, had been living in a camp for refugees and asylum seekers in Ritsona, Greece, for a year and three months when Human Rights Watch interviewed him in March 2021. He said that during that time his school-aged children had only been able to go to one month of regular school. Even when the local school reopened for Greek children, Farhad’s children still could not attend because the camp remained in lockdown. “Education is the main reason we came here all this way, to have an opportunity to study and make a future.” There are some classes run

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<sup>88</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, location and date withheld.

<sup>89</sup> UNHCR, “Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis,” August 30, 2019, p. 11; and UNHCR, “Coming Together for Refugee Education,” September 3, 2020, p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Aya M., 16, and Hamada M., 15, Amman, Jordan, June 10, 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Célia L., 14, Ain, France, June 8, 2020.

by refugees inside the camp, but they are irregular and lack a curriculum. “You can’t call that school,” he said.<sup>92</sup>

Language differences impaired the ability of some refugee and migrant children’s parents to support their children during distance learning.<sup>93</sup> A teacher of English as a second language in Ohio, in the United States, whose students were predominately Afghan, Central American, and Iraqi, said, “The children probably speak more English and understand schooling more than the parents. How do you expect our parents to be teaching the English learners?” As a result, she opted for reinforcing previously taught content, rather than teaching new content. Moreover, she said, “Our English learners are gaining exposure to the English language by being at school... and all of that’s been taken away.”<sup>94</sup>

Eritrean refugees Bisrat M. and her husband live in Japan, with their three children, who were born in Japan. Bisrat speaks Japanese, but struggled to understand written instructions from her children’s school on how to access online videos during school closures. Bisrat’s oldest son, 16, helps her by reading, and Bisrat was also able to go to the school and have them explain things orally. She said she feels badly that she falls behind on school emails, such as one asking her to report her children’s temperature for school reopening.<sup>95</sup>

As discussed on page 50, parents with low levels of education attainment were less able to support their children’s learning. This was often an issue in migrant families from low-income and fragile countries. A teacher at a school in New Zealand where most students come from immigrant families—predominately from the Pacific Islands but also resettled refugees—said: “Parents found it really hard to support the students, because many hadn’t been to secondary school, or didn’t go to secondary school in New Zealand.”<sup>96</sup>

Many new immigrants experienced economic barriers, similar to those discussed in greater detail beginning on page 46. Kanfory B., a 17-year-old unaccompanied asylum seeker from

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<sup>92</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Farhad K., father, Ritsona, Greece, March 8, 2021.

<sup>93</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ylva Lindehag, teacher, Stockholm, Sweden, June 10, 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Ohio, June 8, 2020.

<sup>95</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Bisrat M., Saitama prefecture, Japan, May 28, 2020.

<sup>96</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, New Zealand, June, 2020.

Guinea, was living in a squat in Marseille, France, at the time of France's first lockdown in March 2020. He studies auto mechanics at a private vocational school. When his school first closed, a volunteer was visiting the squat, and Kanfory gave his teacher the volunteer's address to send the distance learning packs. But soon the volunteer was unable to visit due to Covid-19 related restrictions, so Kanfory only received the first two work packs. After a fire at the squat, Kanfory moved to a homeless shelter because he was unable to afford housing. He said he was worried about being able to pay upcoming school fees, as well as where he will live. "If I don't eat well, if I don't sleep well, I can't go to school."<sup>97</sup>

In Berlin, Germany, teacher Charlotte Minhoff said she has one student from Aleppo, Syria. "She is the ideal student and despite language barriers she receives the best grades. But I didn't hear anything from her. Nothing. So I started sending her the material via mail instead of email, because I figured that she might have no [email] access."<sup>98</sup>

Most of Abby Rufer's students at a school in Dallas, Texas, are recent immigrants in low-income households, many of whom have never been to school before arriving in the United States or had been out of school for a number of years before arriving. "For those students there's a huge lack of access to technology, and literacy in any language," she said. During her school's closure, rather than teaching, she spent more time trying to contact and support students, especially unaccompanied children. "Them doing the schoolwork wasn't a priority at that point when they didn't have food."<sup>99</sup>

In Nepal, Human Rights Watch interviewed three children who migrated with their families from India searching for jobs during the pandemic. They were previously enrolled in school in India but did not continue to learn remotely and worked instead. These children might only be able to resume education if and once their families return to India.<sup>100</sup> Faiza N., 8, from Uttar Pradesh state in India, now works with her family at a brick kiln. She told Human

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<sup>97</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Kanfory B., 17, Marseilles, France, July 7, 2020; and with education volunteer, Marseilles, France, August 7, 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Charlotte Minhoff, Berlin, Germany, June 9, 2020.

<sup>99</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abby Rufer, Dallas, Texas, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews in Nepal with Faiza N., 8, Nepalgunj, February 3, 2021; Bishal S., 14, Nepalgunj, February 1, 2021; and Sania K., 9, Kathmandu Valley, February 11, 2021.

Rights Watch her school back home opened in February, but she would only be able to return in July. “I miss my books and pink school uniform,” Faiza said.

### *Children Affected by Armed Conflict*

Armed conflict is a major factor driving many children out of school. School drop-outs have been compounded by the double threat of conflict, attacks against students, teachers and schools, and now, pandemic-related school closures.<sup>101</sup>

In northern Iraq, a father told Human Rights Watch in June that none of his five children, aged between 8 and 15, had received any education since schools closed in February:

Let me talk about my oldest son... He is 15 years old, he is supposed to be in 9th grade but he is in 6th grade because we were living under Islamic State [ISIS] territory for three years and schools were closed. And then for one year we were living in a camp for displaced families south of Mosul. He lost four academic years. We returned to our town in 2019 and it took another three months until the school officially opened because there was a lack of teachers and stationery and books. He started school again in December... He only studied for 80 days or less, and then we had this Corona pandemic crisis. We are moving from one crisis to another and the children are paying the cost. He is in 6th grade and he doesn't even know how to write his own name. It is not his fault.<sup>102</sup>

A solo mother living in a displaced persons camp in Salah al-Din governorate in central Iraq, also told Human Rights Watch in June 2020 that her eight-year-old son had had no education since schools closed at the end of February. In addition to the loss of education, she fears the loss of daily structure and routine that school provided her son:

He was traumatized by a bomb attack three years ago and since then his psychological state has not been stable. He was getting better in school... He was happy having friends around, and the teachers were treating him

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<sup>101</sup> Global Education Monitoring Report and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “No more excuses: provide education to all forcibly displaced people,” May 2016, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244847>.

<sup>102</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Sinjar district, Nineveh governorate, Iraq, June 9, 2020.

well. His psychological condition was improving. Unfortunately, now he is bored, and his situation is getting worse. There is nothing in the camp and I can't afford to buy him any toys to play inside our tent.<sup>103</sup>

In Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a teacher at a school for families who fled ISIS in 2014 and have not returned to their areas of origin “due to the mass destruction of infrastructure, including schools,” said many of her students’ families are poor. As a result, even though the Kurdistan Region’s education ministry started online education, “it is hard to cater for all the students, because not all of them are connected to the internet. They cannot afford internet costs.” She feared that unless there was more support to encourage them to return to school when they can, some of her secondary school students were at risk of dropping out of school.<sup>104</sup>

Taisha S., 16, lives in Garissa, Kenya. “We have no access to learning,” she told Human Rights Watch in late June, but added “This situation did not start with Covid-19. Prior to this we had no lessons for three weeks because a lot of teachers were running away from North Eastern Province due to a rise in terrorist incidents.”<sup>105</sup>

Interviewees in North Kivu, Congo, expressed concerns during school closures in June that, as one father put it, “Children feel unoccupied... they are going to look for a job, which could be to join the armed groups in the forest.”<sup>106</sup>

An education NGO worker in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions, which have experienced violence since late 2016, said, “With Covid, the government had to restrict children’s access to schools... But before the coronavirus crisis, few schools were already operating properly... It’s difficult to talk about education here.”<sup>107</sup>

On June 14, 2020, armed paramilitaries took over a girls’ primary school in Kadugli, the capital of Sudan’s Southern Kordofan state. They arrived on vehicles mounted with

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<sup>103</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Karama IDP camp, Salah al-Din governorate, Iraq, June 10, 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, June 10, 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Taisha S., 16, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

<sup>106</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father of two, Beni, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020. Also with official in the bureau of secondary and vocational education inspection, Butembo, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020; and caregiver to four children, Beni, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with education NGO worker, North West, Cameroon, June 30, 2020.

machine guns, dug a trench around the school, and began using it as a training base. The school was not in use at the time, due to the pandemic. However, the school was supposed to reopen for students to sit secondary-school entrance exams. But the paramilitaries would not let residents near the school.<sup>108</sup>

### *Children Living in Rural Areas*

In many countries, children living in rural areas were already participating in education at a lower rate than children living in urban years before the pandemic. These children faced multiple barriers to enjoying their right to education during Covid-19 related school lockdowns. Rural children may enjoy little to no access to reliable, affordable internet, and as a result be unable to take advantage of online distance learning as further described on page 53 and 57. There is also often a high correlation in some countries between rural families and low levels of income and parental education. This combination of low income and traditional acceptance of children participating in agricultural work, also makes the shift from children studying to working early an easy transition, as described on page 52.

For example, a primary school teacher in a village in Guatemala said her school started distance learning by simply putting up posters outside saying: “Please do some reading.” She also assigned tasks to students who wrote on WhatsApp asking what to do. But many students had no access to the internet or could not afford phone credit. “Many call and say, ‘Call me back, I have no credit!’” The education ministry set up distance learning television programs, which students were supposed to watch, then do an exercise and send a photo of their work to their teachers. “The program is on a channel that sometimes you can’t watch in certain areas,” said this teacher. Not all students had textbooks at home due to a shortage at the school, so she photocopied assignments that parents would collect and then return during the school’s monthly food distribution, which she would try and mark on the spot. She observed: “I have colleagues in schools in the center of [the nearby city of] Antigua, who tell me that they do meetings on Zoom or send assignments through [Google] Classroom. Those of us from the villages don’t have access to this technology.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Alex Firth, “Sudanese School Closed by Pandemic, Kept Closed by Armed Forces: Authorities Should Urgently Remove Armed Forces, Reopen Girls’ School,” Human Rights Watch dispatch, July 29, 2020.

<sup>109</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, San Juan Gascon, Antigua, Guatemala, July 7, 2020.

## Children Living in Poverty or Low-Income Households

Having less money limits what a family can purchase, but in addition, low-income communities are often provided less, or lower quality, government and other services, such as education and health. Alexander Ojeda Insignares teaches English to secondary school students in a low-income community in Colombia. The school only had English textbooks for about half his students. “In class, I would collect these books and we would work in pairs or in groups. Now that’s not possible.”<sup>110</sup> Even before the pandemic, growing up in a low-income neighborhood had a strong negative effect on the likelihood of graduating from secondary school or attending college.<sup>111</sup>

During the pandemic, children living in poverty had greater difficulty accessing an education for multiple reasons, many of which occur simultaneously, creating overlaying factors of disadvantage: they were less likely to have the necessary devices for online distance learning (see page 67), more likely to find it difficult to access the internet for online distance learning due to its cost (see page 63), less likely to be able to afford existing or new costs related to education, more likely to live in smaller spaces that made studying at home difficult, and their parents were less likely to have levels of education and digital literacy to equip them to act as substitute educators. Moreover, low-income families were disproportionately affected by the economic fallout of the pandemic, and thus more likely to rely on the labor of their children to help support the family, either through the children beginning paid work, or assuming more responsibilities within the home such as childcare.<sup>112</sup>

A teacher at a primary school in the informal settlement of Mathare in Nairobi, Kenya—who described her students as “promising young boys and girls from extremely poor backgrounds”—illustrated this dynamic of multidimensional poverty during the pandemic: “Our pupils live in slums grappling with sanitization issues like lack of water. They live with siblings and extended family relatives in small houses and lack basic items like food.

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<sup>110</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Ojeda Insignares, teacher, Barranquilla, Colombia, June 26, 2020.

<sup>111</sup> Jaime Saavedra, “A silent and unequal education crisis. And the seeds for its solution,” World Bank, January 5, 2021, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/silent-and-unequal-education-crisis-and-seeds-its-solution> (accessed April 5, 2021); Oxfam, *The Power of Education to Fight Inequality*, Oxfam Briefing Paper, September 2019, [https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/bp-education-inequality-170919-summ-en.pdf](https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-education-inequality-170919-summ-en.pdf) (accessed April 5, 2021).

<sup>112</sup> Lena Simet & Sarah Saadoun, “An Unequal Crisis,” Human Rights Watch commentary, March 4, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/04/unequal-crisis>.

Most of the parents to these children have lost their sources of livelihoods due to the pandemic making their already strained living conditions much worse.”<sup>113</sup>

### *Restricted Resources Turned Previous or New Education Costs into Barriers*

The pandemic has disproportionately affected people with low incomes or living in or near poverty. They were more likely to lose their job or experience interruptions to incomes and remittances, depletion of savings, and diminished employment prospects.<sup>114</sup> As parents lost jobs or incomes, they were less able to cover expenses they had previously afforded for their children’s education and were less able to cover new expenses necessitated by distance learning. In several countries, public schools continue to charge tuition fees and indirect costs – including in countries where education is legally free.<sup>115</sup>

“Primary school is supposed to be free in Cameroon, but it is not. There are always contributions,” said a father of four, in Douala, Cameroon. “Usually when you don’t pay, the child is kicked out... In normal times, there are already difficulties.” In June he said he was concerned about the fact that he had not paid his younger children’s school for the school year’s final quarter, when it was closed. He worried: “Are schools going to blackmail? That if you don’t pay for your year, they won’t re-enroll your child next year?”<sup>116</sup>

A single mother who works as a beautician in Lahore, Pakistan, said in August: “I have been practically unemployed for the past four months and barely manage to pay the essential bills and for food.” Her 15-year-old daughter attended a “low-cost” private school, that transitioned to online learning. “How can I pay for a computer, an internet bill, and a school bill while my income is zero? I have discontinued my daughter’s education.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Nairobi, Kenya, June 3, 2020.

<sup>114</sup> Nishant Yonzan et al., “The Impact of Covid-19 on global poverty under worsening growth and inequality,” *World Bank Blogs*, November 9, 2020; World Bank, “Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune,” 2020; Jonathan D. Ostry et al., “The pandemic will leave the poor further disadvantaged—IMF,” *World Economic Forum Covid Action Forum*, May 18, 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Human Rights Watch, The Education Deficit, Failures to Protect and Fulfill the Right to Education through Global Development Agendas, June 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/09/education-deficit/failures-protect-and-fulfill-right-education-through-global>.

<sup>116</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Douala, Cameroon, June 26, 2020.

<sup>117</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Lahore, Pakistan, August 2, 2020.

A primary teacher in a school in Seattle, in the United States, where most students come from low-income families, said: “The closure disproportionately affects students whose families are essential workers or are working multiple jobs, or don’t have a lot of books at home. I was mailing some students paper and pencils.”<sup>118</sup>

Human Rights Watch also heard again and again, accounts of how parents remain willing to contribute as much as they can to advance their children’s learning.

A mother in a village in Cambodia, who occasionally sells clothes in the market, said that around two months after her 11-year-old son’s school closed, his teacher came to their house. The mother had given her son her old smartphone, and the teacher asked for it. “On my son’s phone, the teacher connected him to a Facebook messenger group with his classmates. On my phone, the teacher added me to a Facebook messenger group with other parents in my son’s class. The teacher asked for 5,000 Cambodian riels [US\$1.25].” She said she also spends about \$12 a month for phone credit, as the family does not have Wi-Fi at home.<sup>119</sup> (By comparison, a parent in Cambodia’s capital said he also pays about \$12 a month, but in the city this price provides unlimited internet access with connections being still very slow.<sup>120</sup>)

Another mother in Cambodia, whose family is part of the ethnic Cham Muslim community, said her sons had received no education since March 2020. The family lives in extreme poverty and sometimes does not have enough to eat. Nevertheless in July, the mother organized a private tutor on Cambodian Islam for her two school-aged sons at a neighbor’s house. The mother, who supports her sons by selling breakfast outside her home, paid 400 riels (10 US cents) for two to three hours per day of religious studies.<sup>121</sup>

An undocumented migrant mother living below the poverty line in New York City, in the United States, said she was unimpressed by the online instruction her 9-year-old son received from his charter school. “The lesson is only 30 minute a day and it’s only 4 days a week... I see some big gaps in the education, so I go and buy books on the streets.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Human Rights Watch interview primary school teacher in Seattle, Washington, United States, June 22, 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Teok Thla commune, Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia, July 29, 2020.

<sup>120</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, August 1, 2020.

<sup>121</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Kang Meas district, Kampong Cham Province, Cambodia, August 2, 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Queens, New York, United States, June 5, 2020.

When education systems failed to provide teaching, or parents perceived the quality of the education offered through distance learning to be insufficient, some parents opted to pay for private tutoring for their children. “If the government is not supporting teachers, and teachers are not supporting my children, I have to do something for my children!” said a father of five children in Iraq in June, as all education had stopped at their school.<sup>123</sup> Families with more financial resources found this easier, thus increasing inequalities in opportunity and outcomes for their children in comparison with those of lower-income families. Before the pandemic, families with more resources could pay for more supplemental or private education for their children, but during the pandemic, when far more children were faced with getting no education, the ability to hire a tutor could make the difference between some education and a complete loss.

Before the pandemic, Sakura K., 14, in Tokyo, Japan, attended a public school and, three times a week, a private “cram school”—a common, but costly practice among Japanese secondary school students who attend these centers to train to pass exams. During the lockdown, her public school only distributed written assignments, whereas her cram school provided three hours of videos a week. She said: “I am glad that I had video lessons offered by my cram school. They explained in the video, so it was easier to understand. I think school should have offered us online video lessons.” Sakura said each day she spent about three hours working on assignments from her public school, and another three hours on assignments from her cram school. She estimated that about half her classmates go to a cram school: “I feel the gaps will widen between those who go to cram school and those who do not.”<sup>124</sup>

### *Space Constraints for Children Living in Smaller Houses or Larger Families*

The amount of quiet space that children have access to for concentrating and studying varies greatly. Although space-per-person at home is primarily linked to a family’s level of income and wealth, other factors, such as levels of urbanization, land access constraints, climate, and culture can also play a role. Students, parents, and teachers indicated that

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<sup>123</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father of five children, Qayrwan sub-district, Sinjar district, Nineveh governorate, Iraq, June 9, 2020.

<sup>124</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sakura K., 14, Tokyo, Japan, June 1, 2020.

smaller spaces at home placed limitations on children's ability to benefit from distance learning.<sup>125</sup>

For example, Human Rights Watch spoke with a mother who lives with her husband and three children in a small one-room apartment in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. "It is really hard... There is not enough working space. Usually, my husband has to work from home and the kids are having classes or doing homework at the same time," she said. "There was no table for two kids to study, therefore, I had to send my daughter to her grandmother."<sup>126</sup>

Simrah A., 19, lives with her two sisters, one brother, and their mother in a small two-room house in Milan, Italy. "Studying was complicated because there was always someone at home and they were always making noise and disturbing me."<sup>127</sup>

A father in Lubumbashi, Congo, expressed concern for his 17-year-old daughter trying to study at home. "It is not easy to study in these conditions because we do not have enough space at home to do so and she is often disturbed by her brothers and family members."<sup>128</sup>

### *Inter-Generational Lower Literacy and Education Levels*

A major factor of success of home-based study and distance learning is parents' literacy or numeracy, or levels of education. Parents with lower levels of education face greater difficulty to support their children's learning.<sup>129</sup>

Living with two grandmothers in Garissa, Kenya, Taisha S., 16, said: "I am the only person in this house that has attended school and therefore there is very little, to no, support."<sup>130</sup>

"If parents are educated, they can teach their children and help with distance learning—as my husband and I do for our children," said a teacher at a school in Dharamsala, India,

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<sup>125</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with mother, Izhevsk, Russia, June 13, 2020; Emmanuel Sepulchre, teacher, Brussels, Belgium, June 25, 2020; and support teacher, Emilia Romagna, Italy, June 18, 2020.

<sup>126</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, June 1, 2020.

<sup>127</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Simrah A., 19, Milan, Italy, July 6, 2020.

<sup>128</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 17, 2020.

<sup>129</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with teacher, Rabat, Morocco, June 14, 2020; grandmother primary caregiver, Siem Reap province, Cambodia, August 3, 2020; mother, Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia, July 29, 2020; and Jordi C., 16, Lleida, Catalonia, Spain, June 11, 2020.

<sup>130</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Taisha S., 16, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

mainly for orphans or children from poor households. “But for many students, their parents are uneducated or illiterate, or just don’t have the time to invest in their student’s academics. These students will suffer a loss and their progress will be slower.”<sup>131</sup>

Khadija F. works as a part-time cook and cleaning lady, and her husband does swimming-pool maintenance, in Casablanca, Morocco. “Neither I nor my husband can read or write, so we can’t help our daughters with school.” Perhaps because he could not read, her husband did not realize that the WhatsApp messages he received on his phone—from an unknown number, which annoyed him, so he deleted them,” said Khadija—were directions from their children’s teachers. When a neighbor alerted Khadija that the teachers were reaching out this way, the children were able to start distance learning. “Sometimes when the girls don’t understand something and the teacher can’t follow-up with them, we ask my sister, who went to school until 5th grade.”<sup>132</sup>

Evidence from past major epidemics suggests people with only a basic education disproportionately lose their jobs or incomes because of the economic impact, rather than people with advanced levels of education, and this disproportionate unemployment lasts for multiple years even after the epidemic.<sup>133</sup>

### *Children Who Work Because of Lack of Schooling, and Child Labor*

Decades of research shows that children who are not in school are more likely to start working; and children in families with pressing economic needs are more likely to drop out of school to work. Predictably then, children are increasingly working, or engaging in child labor—that is, working before the legal age to work, or working in a manner inappropriate for their age—in response to pandemic-related school closures.<sup>134</sup> Some are now

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<sup>131</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Dharamshala, India, June 14, 2020.

<sup>132</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Casablanca, Morocco, June 15, 2020.

<sup>133</sup> Jonathan D. Ostry et al., “The pandemic will leave the poor further disadvantaged—IMF,” *World Economic Forum Covid Action Forum*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/pandemics-poor-rich-economics-coronavirus-covid19/> (accessed May 9, 2021).

<sup>134</sup> International Labour Organization and UNICEF, “Covid-19 and Child Labour: A Time of Crisis, A Time to Act,” 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/ipecl/Informationresources/WCMS\\_747421/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/ipecl/Informationresources/WCMS_747421/lang--en/index.htm) (accessed May 9, 2021), p. 17; Alexandre Jaillon, “The impact of Covid-19 on gold and diamond artisanal mines in Western Central African Republic,” IPIS Insight, July 2020, <https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/200723-insights-The-impact-of-Covid-CAR.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2021); UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP, “Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” February 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/73118.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2021) p. 13; UNICEF Ghana & Social Policy Research Institute, “Primary and Secondary Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children in Ghana,” January

combining very long working hours with whatever schooling they can access.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, once children start working, they are unlikely to return to school if schools and local authorities do not work closely with families to ensure they do.

Amir R., 14, in Nepalgunj, Nepal, started working when his school shut and his family ran out of food. “For a while I thought that I would go back when the school reopens but I don’t think that anymore,” he said in February 2021. “I enjoy driving and making money so what will I do going back to school now? Even if I do go back to school, it won’t be for long. Maybe I will complete my [10th grade exams] but I’m not sure.”<sup>136</sup>

After 12-year-old Jonathan’s school in Uganda closed because of the pandemic, he started selling fish and collecting and selling stones for construction workers. “There was no money at home and my mother was struggling so much,” he said. He worked 7 days a week, from 6 in the morning to 7 in the evening, earning between 3000 shillings (US\$0.83) and 9000 shillings (\$2.49) per day. He said that sometimes his customers refused to pay him and that his meager earnings were not enough for the family. “It is hard being hungry a whole day. Many times, my mum has to borrow food at the shop, but sometimes those people at the shop refuse.”<sup>137</sup>

A resident of a low-income fishing community in Lagos, Nigeria said most young children out of school because of the pandemic, including her three siblings aged 11 to 14, were helping their parents to fish or to sell fish. “The schools did not give any type of assignments or work for them to continue at home, and the government did not follow up with any learning alternatives,” she said. “My siblings are home not doing much. They help out by hawking fish which my father brings home from fishing after my mother has smoked them.”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> 2021, <http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/Impact-Pandemic-Children-Ghana.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2021), p. iv.; and UNHCR, “Lebanon - Monitoring of the Effects of the Economic Deterioration on Syrian Refugee Households,” July 2020, p. 18.

<sup>136</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews in Nepal with Laxmi D., 14, Bhaktapur, Kathmandu Valley, January 23, 2021; Sita S., 14, Chundevi, January 23, 2021; Sarita T., 13, Chundevi, January 24, 2021; and Rupa T., 14, Bhaktapur, February 7, 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Amir R., 14, Nepalgunj, Banke, Nepal, February 2, 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Human Rights Watch and Institute for Economic and Social Rights interview with Jonathan Y., 12, Uganda, January 29, 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Temitope O., Isale Akoka Community Lagos, Nigeria, May 5, 2020.

Ebenezer F., aged 15 in Ghana, said, “I was idle at home after schools closed down, so I decided to work to reduce the burden on my mum.”<sup>139</sup>

“Before Covid-19, my granddaughter went to school every morning and afternoon,” said a grandmother in northwest Cambodia, who is the primary caregiver for her 10-year-old granddaughter. But now, because her school was closed, “early in the morning, my granddaughter helps me collect bottles and other waste which we then sell. She also helps me sell soft drinks.” The grandmother worries that her granddaughter already started her education later than other children, at age 8, and is now falling even further behind in her studies. “She is now 10 and has only finished grade 2.”<sup>140</sup>

The director of an education NGO in Madagascar that incentivizes agricultural families to send their children to school, worried some will not return. “We have done everything ... to make children feel obliged to come to school, and here we are giving them an opportunity not to go... It’s been four months since we lost our relationship with most children.”<sup>141</sup>

A secondary school teacher in rural Kansas, United States, said: “These teenage kids could either sit behind a screen and do some school or they could go work on the farm and actually make some money. A lot chose to do that, and I can’t say I blame them.”<sup>142</sup>

Pete Jones, the principal of one of the largest and most multicultural secondary schools in New Zealand, said that after the first round of school closures—which lasted almost eight weeks—some children, especially final-year students, did not return to school. Those who dropped out often did so to start working, for example at a supermarket or as a courier, to help support their families. “Many of our families are on benefit or in low-paid work,” he said. “About 50 [former students] are still in work of which about two thirds are boys, one third girls.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Human Rights Watch and Friends of the Nation interview with Ebenezer F., 15, Prestea, Ghana, February 22, 2021.

<sup>140</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with grandmother primary caregiver, Siem Reap province, Cambodia, August 3, 2020.

<sup>141</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Alex Herivelona, director of Centre Ankanifitahiana, Antananarivo, Madagascar, June 2, 2020.

<sup>142</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Kansas, United States, June 16, 2020.

<sup>143</sup> Email interview with Pete Jones, principal, Auckland, New Zealand, August 29, 2020.

Several children said they also worked to earn money for their schooling. Paul S., 14, who was selling biscuits on the streets of a suburb of Kampala, Uganda, said: “I started working in order to survive by myself ... My father was drinking a lot of alcohol and he would beat me whenever he returned. I got tired and ran. Then I started working because I needed many things. But I also wanted to save some money such that if schools reopened, I would pay for myself school fees and buy other scholastic requirements like books [and] pens.”<sup>144</sup> In Ghana, Daniel K., aged 17, completed lower secondary school in 2020. He said, “I started work to support my mum and earn enough money to pay for my senior high school education when the time comes.”<sup>145</sup> However, Solomon G., 14, and Thomas S., in Ghana both said in early March 2021 that although their schools had reopened, they had not yet returned, because they still needed money to buy schoolbooks and uniforms.<sup>146</sup>

### *Children Assuming Child Care and Household Responsibilities*

Many children, particularly girls, were unable to fully participate in distance learning, because their parents required them to assume increased responsibilities at home during difficult economic times.<sup>147</sup>

A teacher in a manufacturing town in the United States observed “there was definitely correlation” between children struggling academically during lockdown and family income: “If the parents were working long hours and the kids were left at home all day alone, sometimes in charge of younger siblings, they weren’t very likely to do their work.”<sup>148</sup>

“I wake up every morning and I cook breakfast and clean the house,” said Taisha S., 16, living in Garissa, Kenya. “I live with two grandmothers who often need my help in caring for them and it takes up a significant portion of my day attending to them. My chores have increased of course because schools have closed.” She said she sometimes watched

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<sup>144</sup> Human Rights Watch and Institute for Economic and Social Rights interview with Paul S., 14, Kampala, Uganda, January 27, 2021.

<sup>145</sup> Human Rights Watch and Friends of the Nation interview with Daniel K., 17, Ghana, February 22, 2021.

<sup>146</sup> Human Rights Watch and Friends of the Nation interviews with Solomon G., 14, and Thomas S., 16, Ghana, March 1, 2021.

<sup>147</sup> Plan International, *Halting Lives – The impact of COVID-19 on girls and young women*, September 2020; and Kate Grantham et al., “Evidence Review of the Global Childcare Crisis and the Road for Post-Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience,” International Development Research Centre, March 2021, pp. 10-11.

<sup>148</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Yankton, South Dakota, June 8, 2020.

classes on television that she found “helpful in keeping up with studies,” but she was not able to attend all of them because of her chores at home.<sup>149</sup>

A primary school teacher in rural Mexico shared the story of one of her students, a boy, who was 12: “His mom would leave at 5 in the morning, and he had to take care of his 3-year-old brother. It was clear that he didn’t have time to do [the assignments I sent]. He had to give his brother food, straighten the house, watch him in the street. My student had stopped being a student to become a father to his brother.”<sup>150</sup>

Simrah A., 19, in Milan, Italy said she was expected to do chores, but that her family did not always understand that although she was at home she was studying: “When Mom was at home it was more complicated because she didn’t understand that if I was in front of the computer I was doing something and I couldn’t do anything else.”<sup>151</sup>

“For some kids it is also unfair to ask them to do school, since we know that they are taking care of younger siblings, which is hard for an older kid to do, let alone a ten-year-old,” said grade 5 teacher Jacob Meyer in South Dakota in the United States.<sup>152</sup>

However, a teacher of Palestinian refugee children at a UN school in Jordan told Human Rights Watch about one student whose ability to study improved. This student, “used to miss school on days when her mom goes to work because she needs to stay with her siblings... So, distance learning did help her a lot because she can study at home now comfortably,” she said.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Taisha S., 16, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

<sup>150</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Colima, Mexico, June 26, 2020.

<sup>151</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Simrah A., 19, Milan, Italy, July 6, 2020.

<sup>152</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Jacob Meyer, teacher, Beresford, South Dakota, United States, June 11, 2020.

<sup>153</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Jordan, June 11, 2020.

## II. “Digital Divides”: Inequalities and Dependence Upon Access to Devices and Internet

Students who cannot afford internet are simply deprived of the right to education.

— Uttom Halder, teacher, Dhaka, Bangladesh<sup>154</sup>

After schools closed, hundreds of millions of students experienced a dramatic shift to distance learning, with physical classrooms replaced by radios, televisions, cellphones, tablets, and computers. This resulted in an overwhelming dependence and need for affordable, reliable connectivity, adequate devices that met learning needs, and the capability to use these technologies safely and confidently.

But the unprecedented demand exacerbated digital divides between children with access to these technologies and the opportunities they can provide, and those without. Children who were the least likely to have availability, accessibility, or usability—those from the poorest families or from marginalized communities, living in rural areas, with disabilities or due to their gender—were more likely to be shut out of learning during this time, in turn widening the deep educational inequalities they already faced.

Teachers around the world said that access to the internet was now a prerequisite for education.<sup>155</sup> “We absolutely need universal internet access, and it needs to be considered a utility just like water,” said middle school teacher Laura Kaneko in Oakland, California, in the United States. “Access to the internet is required to receive an education, and so it’s now a question of equity. People need food, people need security, people need healthcare, and in terms of education, students need internet.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Uttom Halder, teacher, Dhaka, Bangladesh, July 30, 2020.

<sup>155</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with teacher, Amman, Jordan, June 11, 2020; Julie Cassell, middle school teacher, Inverness, California, United States, June 19, 2020; Emily Beer, teacher, Glen Burnie, Maryland, United States, June 8, 2020; teacher, Nairobi, Kenya, June 3, 2020; Ragne Maxwell, principal, Porirua, New Zealand, June 16, 2020.

<sup>156</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Laura Kaneko, teacher, Oakland, California, June 21, 2020.

## Children Without Electricity

Many distance learning solutions rely on energy to deliver content, whether through radios, televisions, telephones, or the internet. In places where infrastructure has been destroyed, damaged, or never built, the absence of electricity has prevented most means of remote learning, except for those wealthy enough to afford private generators. In other places, the neglect and disrepair of existing infrastructure generates electricity so unreliable that it effectively obstructs remote learning. The experiences of children living in these places are the same: the absence of reliable, affordable electricity reflects decades of under-investments in other essential public services, including in education.

Burkina Faso is one of the least-electrified countries in the world. In 2018, 86 percent of its population, or 17 million people, had no access to electricity.<sup>157</sup> A teacher in a small town where children have fled to following attacks on schools in their home communities questioned the utility of the government’s radio- and TV-based distance learning classes for his students. He said: “These children... they often don’t have electricity—not even a lamp to study. So the [distance learning] classes benefit only children in...the big cities.”<sup>158</sup>

A teacher in Kananga, in Congo’s conflict-affected Kasai Central province, said the education ministry had organized television courses, but the city where he lives—with a population of more than 1.25 million people—is not fully electrified. “How can students follow these courses?” he asked, adding that teachers did not have the means to connect with students, so he had no contact with his students since his school closed more than three months before the interview.<sup>159</sup> Congo has one of the largest gaps in energy access rates by income group in the world; most of its scant supply of electricity goes to the richest urban households and to the mining sector.<sup>160</sup>

In Venezuela, where recurring political and financial crises have decimated the once-largest energy producer in Latin America, a director of an education NGO said,

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<sup>157</sup> International Renewable Energy Agency et al., “Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report 2020,” <https://www.irena.org/publications/2020/May/Tracking-SDG7-The-Energy-Progress-Report-2020> (accessed May 9, 2021), pp. 29, Figure 1.16.

<sup>158</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Tougan, Sourou province, Boucle du Mouhoun region, Burkina Faso, April 29, 2020.

<sup>159</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Kananga, Kasai, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 24, 2020.

<sup>160</sup> World Bank, “Increasing Access to Electricity in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33593> (accessed May 9, 2021), pp. 21-22.

“Connectivity is so poor in rural areas. Many schools don’t have electricity for several days in a row, so teachers can’t connect, and they don’t have the money to pay for data themselves.”<sup>161</sup> A parent in the rural outskirts of Caracas, the capital, said, “When we don’t have electricity, cell towers can’t transmit...and there’s no communications.”<sup>162</sup>

Emina Bužinkić, a volunteer with an education initiative in Croatia, said, “[While the] Ministry of Education guaranteed tablets for every kid, some Roma kids have no access to electricity, spare room to study, money to buy chargers.”<sup>163</sup>

Tasfin A., a 16-year-old from Mymensingh, Bangladesh, said, “Nothing is happening from school. Everything is happening on TV. ... I am attending the classes on TV as much as possible, but when there is no electricity it is not possible... I’ve missed a lot of classes because the electricity was out.”<sup>164</sup>

In Lebanon, public electricity is rationed. Sara W., 14, in the south of the country, said that “My English teacher canceled class almost every time because she didn’t have electricity.”<sup>165</sup>

## Children Without Radios or Televisions

Where governments turned to low-tech solutions such as radio and television to deliver learning, some children were unable to access these solutions because their families could not afford these devices, or because they lived in places too remote for a signal.

No single delivery channel for remote learning is sufficient to reach all children. TV and radio ownership rates vary considerably within and across countries, particularly between urban and rural households. For example, the majority of countries used television to

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<sup>161</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with NGO director, Venezuela, June 12, 2020.

<sup>162</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with caregiver, Venezuela, June 12, 2020.

<sup>163</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Emina Bužinkić, education initiative volunteer, Croatia, July 7, 2020.

<sup>164</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Taskin A., 16, Mymensingh, Bangladesh, August 6, 2020.

<sup>165</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sara W., 14, Saida, Lebanon, June 18, 2020.

deliver remote learning during the pandemic, but in many countries children living in urban households are more than twice as likely to have a TV than children in rural households.<sup>166</sup>

Marie V., a 16-year-old student in Goma, Congo said, “I tell myself that I have to be ready if we are asked to resume [school] and take exams. [But I don’t have] internet access, nor can I access lessons through radio or television.”<sup>167</sup> Before the pandemic, only 9 percent of Congolese children from the poorest households had radios at home, and none had television.<sup>168</sup>

Governments relied heavily on providing these programs, but their roll-out did not ensure children accessed those learning programs on an equal basis.<sup>169</sup> “I hear there were lessons being offered on Warsan Radio,” said 16-year-old Taisha S. in Garissa, Kenya. “But I never tuned in because we do not have radio.”<sup>170</sup>

## Inequalities in Internet Access

### *Children Without Internet*

In April 2020, UNESCO calculated that lack of internet at home excluded 706 million students—43 percent of the global student population—from online learning. Fifty-six

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<sup>166</sup> According to nationally representative household survey data from the Unicef-assisted Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey and from the Demographic Health Survey funded by the United States Agency for International Development, in 40 out of 88 countries with data, television ownership rates among urban households were more than double that of rural households, with the largest disparities appearing in sub-Saharan Africa. Analysis in Thomas Dreesen et al., “Promising practices for equitable remote learning: Emerging lessons from COVID-19 education responses in 127 countries,” Innocenti Research Brief, October 2020, p. 3. The same briefing paper identified 95 countries that were using television to deliver distance education. Ibid., p. 5. Another survey identified 117 countries using television. UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, “What Have We Learnt? Overview of Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education on National Responses to COVID-19,” October 2020, p. 21.

<sup>167</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Marie V., 16, Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 20, 2020.

<sup>168</sup> Sheena Bell et al., “Can broadcast media foster equitable learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic?,” post to “UNICEF Evidence for Action” (blog), May 7, 2020, <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/can-broadcast-media-foster-equitable-learning-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic/> (accessed November 16, 2020).

<sup>169</sup> See, for example, EdTech Hub and Blavatnik School of Government, “Education during the COVID-19 crisis – Opportunities and constraints using EdTech in low-income countries,” Policy brief, April 2020, <https://edtechhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/education-during-covid-19-crisis.pdf> (accessed February 22, 2021); Enrique Valencia López, *COVID-19 pandemic and indigenous and non-indigenous students in Mexico*, World Education Blog, June 12, 2020, <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/06/12/covid-19-pandemic-and-indigenous-and-non-indigenous-students-in-mexico/#more-13076> (accessed February 22, 2021); and UWEZO, *Are Our Children Learning? The Status of Remote-learning among School-going Children in Kenya during the Covid-19 Crisis, 2020*, <https://palnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Usawa-Agenda-2020-Report.pdf> (accessed February 22, 2021).

<sup>170</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Taisha S., 16, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

million students could not use mobile phones to access information because they do not live in places that are covered by mobile networks.<sup>171</sup>

The pandemic also exacerbated the gap between girls' and boys' ability to access essential services, including remote education, due to lack of internet access. A report by GSMA—an industry organization that represents the interest of mobile network operators worldwide—documented that in low- and middle-income countries, 300 million fewer females than males have mobile internet access.<sup>172</sup>

A secondary school teacher in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq said, “Because [some students] do not have internet, they do not attend lessons. They are at risk of leaving school.”<sup>173</sup>

A mathematics teacher at a boarding school in Dharamsala, India, which predominately educates children from poor households in under-resourced communities along the border with Tibet, said, “Many of the students come from extremely rural villages, and they don't have access to internet, or a phone, or computer.” Out of her class of 32 fifth graders, she had been able to reach 7 through WhatsApp.<sup>174</sup>

A teacher in a predominately African-American community in Illinois, United States, said the hardest part of teaching during school closures was connecting to her students. “Not all of them have access to the internet... We have no way to contact them sometimes... Others don't have a telephone.”<sup>175</sup>

“In my program, over 50 percent [of students] don't have internet,” said middle school science teacher Tiauna Washington, in Richmond, Indiana, in the United States. She said several of her students sat in the public library parking lot to connect to the free Wi-Fi and complete their work assignments. “Especially the kids in the rural areas. Those are the

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<sup>171</sup> “Startling Digital Divides in Distance Learning Emerge,” UNESCO press release, April 21, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/startling-digital-divides-distance-learning-emerge> (accessed November 2, 2020).

<sup>172</sup> Oliver Rowntree et al., “Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020,” GSMA report, May 2020, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2021). See also: World Wide Web Foundation, “Women’s Rights Online: Closing the digital gender gap for a more equal world,” 2020, <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2020/10/Womens-Rights-Online-Report-1.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2020).

<sup>173</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Samira Q., secondary school teacher, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, June 10, 2020.

<sup>174</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Dharamshala, India, June 14, 2020.

<sup>175</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Chicago, Illinois, United States, June 5, 2020.

kids that get left behind because they just don't have [the internet] ... They'd have to spend a lot of money to get satellite just to get spotty internet, if that.”<sup>176</sup>

A teacher in Guayaquil, Ecuador, explained that the government had launched an online learning platform. “The platform works well, but not everyone has access! A lot of kids have smartphones that they bought themselves, but what good is a phone if they don't have internet? Some teachers can't access the internet either.”<sup>177</sup>

Lindsey Readman, a teacher in Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, said, “Every child needs broadband at home and a computer, to be able to participate in the world... Then they could join in, they could keep up, they would be in with a chance.”<sup>178</sup>

Some schools provided devices for students in need, only to find that children did not have internet access to fully benefit from them.<sup>179</sup> In the heart of Silicon Valley, California, United States, home of the world's largest technology companies, one middle school special education teacher said, “We handed out a lot of laptops.” But her students' families did not have internet. “We helped some families get internet, but there's certain parts of the city where even like the internet providers' internet doesn't work.”<sup>180</sup>

Children living in rural areas were disproportionately shut out of online learning.<sup>181</sup> In a rural, low-income area of New York state, in the United States, a school counselor said her school distributed laptops to children who needed them but did not facilitate their access to the internet. “Some children are having to sit outside of libraries, in the car” in order to connect to the internet, she said.<sup>182</sup> Similarly, a teacher in a rural town in Alaska said, “The

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<sup>176</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Tiauna Washington, teacher, Richmond, Indiana, June 21, 2020.

<sup>177</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Jose Miller Morena Moreiro, teacher, Guayaquil, Ecuador, June 26, 2020.

<sup>178</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Lindsey Readman, secondary school teacher, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, June 2, 2020.

<sup>179</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with kindergarten teacher, Providence, Rhode Island, United States, June 17, 2020; Human Rights Watch interview with Abby Rufer, Dallas, Texas, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>180</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with middle school special education teacher, San Francisco, California, United States, June 19, 2020.

<sup>181</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with teacher, Kansas, United States, June 16, 2020; Annie Sneaky, 15, Grassi Narrows First Nation, Ontario, Canada, June 11, 2020; teacher, Springfield, Oregon, United States, June 16, 2020; teacher, Marivan, Iran, May 4, 2020; and UNICEF and International Telecommunications Union, “How many children and young people have internet access at home? Estimating global connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic,” December 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-and-young-people-internet-access-at-home-during-covid19/> (accessed March 31, 2021), pp. 7- 10.

<sup>182</sup> Human Right Watch interview with school counselor, New York, United States, June 4, 2020.

kids in grades 8 to 12 all have Google Chromebooks, but we didn't send them home with the students. Most of them don't have Wi-Fi or internet access.”<sup>183</sup>

In contrast, some schools recognized that their students lacked internet access at home, and so preloaded devices with learning material. A school administrator in a Native American reservation in the United States said the school purchased and gave children tablets “loaded with a ton of curriculum so they don't have to have the internet.”<sup>184</sup>

### *Children Denied Internet: Government-Imposed Internet Shutdowns*

Access to the internet and to phone services has been vitally important for keeping people connected, accessing life-saving information, and continuing work or school during the pandemic. Governments that intentionally shut down or restricted access to the internet have not only violated multiple rights, but also risked people’s health and access to education.<sup>185</sup>

In Jammu and Kashmir, for example, the Indian government’s 18-month shutdown on high-speed mobile internet services severely obstructed the Covid-19 response, leaving doctors unable to access scientific developments when treating patients with the virus. The government’s Covid-19-related lockdown also meant that students, who had barely returned to classes following the lifting of previous movement restrictions, were shut out of school again, and unable to access distance learning on the internet. The Human Rights Forum for Jammu and Kashmir has noted that “the impact on education has been particularly severe,” describing the “limiting of networks to 2G” as a “willful harm” that has “made it impossible for online classes to function adequately.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Alaska, United States, June 4, 2020.

<sup>184</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with school administrator, California, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>185</sup> See “End Internet Shutdowns to Manage COVID-19,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 31, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/end-internet-shutdowns-manage-covid-19>; “Bangladesh: Internet Ban Risks Rohingya Lives,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 26, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/26/bangladesh-internet-ban-risks-rohingya-lives>; Laetitia Bader, “Millions of Ethiopians Can’t Get COVID-19 News,” Human Rights Watch dispatch, March 20, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/20/millions-ethiopians-cant-get-covid-19-news>; “COVID-19: Unblock Voice Over IP Platforms in Gulf,” Human Rights Watch news release, April 7, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/07/covid-19-unblock-voice-over-ip-platforms-gulf>; and Access Now, “Shattered Dreams and Lost Opportunities: A Year in the Fight to #KeepItOn,” March 3, 2021, <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-report-a-year-in-the-fight/> (accessed March 31, 2021).

<sup>186</sup> “India: Abuses Persist in Jammu and Kashmir,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 4, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/04/india-abuses-persist-jammu-and-kashmir>, Human Rights Forum for Jammu and

### *Unaffordable Internet Shut Children Out Of Learning*

For the half of the world’s population unable to connect to the internet, the pandemic reinforced the greatest barrier to access: affordability. Before the pandemic, at least 63 countries had not met the UN’s threshold for internet affordability, defined as less than 2 percent of monthly gross income per capita.<sup>187</sup> In some countries like Congo, the Central African Republic, and Chad, 1GB of data costs more than 20 percent of the average monthly income, rendering internet access unaffordable for all but the wealthy.<sup>188</sup>

Children missed classes when their parents could not afford to pay for internet access. A mother of five children in Nigeria said, in describing her oldest daughter’s classmates, “Many of the students are from poor homes themselves and cannot always afford the cost of data... I had to upgrade [my daughter] to a smartphone so she can access online materials, but I am also sometimes unable to pay for data from [my] civil servant salary.”<sup>189</sup>

Some children have become keenly attuned to internet costs, carefully budgeting out their internet consumption and choosing what they can study within their means. Prastri Agung Kamurahang, 17, who lives in a small village in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, accesses the internet by juggling three SIM cards and accounting for his use on each of them. “Every time I have a real time class, I use 1 gigabyte. Every day, on average, I have maximum three real time meetings. My provider eats IDR 20,000 [US\$1.40] per gigabyte. My internet budget is uncertain. Now it is IDR 150,000 [US\$10.25] a month. Previously, it was IDR 75,000 [US\$5.12] per month. It is doubling during the pandemic... If you do not try to get

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Kashmir, “Jammu and Kashmir: The Impact of Lockdowns on Human Rights, August 2019-July 2020,” July 23 2020, <https://kashmirscholars.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/jammu-and-kashmir-impact-of-lockdown-on-human-rights-report-july-23-2020.pdf> (accessed November 17, 2020), p. 9.

<sup>187</sup> International Telecommunications Union, “UN Broadband Commission Sets Global Broadband Targets to Bring Online the World’s 3.8 Billion Not Connected to the Internet,” January 23, 2018, <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/2018-PR01.aspx> (accessed March 31, 2021); and Alliance for Affordable Internet, “UN Broadband Commission Adopts A4AI “1 for 2” Affordability Target,” January 23, 2018, <https://a4ai.org/un-broadband-commission-adopts-a4ai-1-for-2-affordability-target/> (accessed March 31, 2021).

<sup>188</sup> Alliance for Affordable Internet, “2019 Affordability Report,” <https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/report/2019/> (accessed November 4, 2020); Alliance for Affordable Internet, “Mobile Broadband Pricing, Data for Q2 2019,” [https://a4ai.org/extra/mobile\\_broadband\\_pricing\\_gnicm-2019Q2](https://a4ai.org/extra/mobile_broadband_pricing_gnicm-2019Q2) (accessed November 4, 2020); and Broadband Commission, “Target 2: Affordability,” <https://www.broadbandcommission.org/Pages/targets/Target-2.aspx> (accessed November 20, 2020).

<sup>189</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with parent, Nigeria, June 26, 2020.

the internet data, you will be left behind.”<sup>190</sup> Another 17-year-old student, living in West Papua’s highlands, also reported her data expenditure doubling.<sup>191</sup>

Hind M. lives with her mother, three siblings, and an aunt in their lower income neighborhood of Casablanca, Morocco. Hind’s mother provides for the family by working as a cleaner. Hind takes good care of her computer, which is seven years old. “We pay 150 dirhams [US\$15] per month for Wi-Fi... Sometimes the internet is very slow... I have a hard time downloading or streaming videos. There is a better plan for faster Wi-Fi. I discussed it with my mom, but she said we can’t afford it. Since the connection is not great, I have to prioritize some lessons over others... I missed some economy, philosophy, and English classes, because I had to make choices.”<sup>192</sup>

Makena M., a 17-year-old from Nairobi, Kenya, said she prioritizes her limited internet data to download learning material for mathematics and science. “Subjects like Christian religious education, English, or Kiswahili language, I read from the textbooks.”<sup>193</sup>

Students were shut out of online classes that required more bandwidth than they could afford. Hassan Mahfoud, a teacher in Rabat, Morocco said, “During a Zoom class, I observed that some students who attended the class in the beginning dropped mid-session and didn’t come back. I learned later that it was because they had insufficient internet credit. Video eats up credit fast. Some students would turn off the video to save credit, but then, that would limit my interaction with them, which is not good.”<sup>194</sup>

Mohammad A., 19, is a refugee from Sudan living in Amman, Jordan. Most of his teachers upload lessons onto YouTube. “I only have a phone, no laptop. My phone line has internet on it, about 20 gigabytes, costs 10 Jordanian dinars [US\$14]. It’s not enough now with using YouTube all the time... Sometimes I don’t top up my line or top it up after disconnecting for a week or so. When I don’t have internet on my phone, I use the book, I try to understand the lesson just from the book, but I don’t really understand.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Prastri Agung Kamurahang, Tondano, Minahasa regency, North Sulawesi, Indonesia, July 14, 2020.

<sup>191</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with student, 17, Wamena, Papua, Indonesia, July 15, 2020.

<sup>192</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hind M., 18, Casablanca, Morocco, June 18, 2020.

<sup>193</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Makena M., 17, Nairobi, Kenya, June 2020.

<sup>194</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hassan Mahfoud, Rabat, Morocco, June 17, 2020.

<sup>195</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammad A., 19, Amman, Jordan.

All of Abby Rufer’s students in Dallas, Texas, are recent immigrants to the United States. The algebra teacher explained when several mobile network operators offered free Wi-Fi at the beginning of the pandemic that “Some kids tried to get these offers, were on the phone for hours, and then ended up getting huge charges for installation. Some, because they didn’t know the language well, were getting taken advantage of.”<sup>196</sup>

### *Children Without Reliable Internet*

The speed and quality of internet is as important to overcoming digital divides as providing affordable access. For children living in areas with poor connectivity, unreliable internet services significantly impacted their ability to learn online. Further, in what constitutes a double barrier to meaningful internet access, students living in the least connected places contend with the slowest internet in the world, at the least affordable prices.<sup>197</sup>

In Kazakhstan, 16-year-old Serik R. said his school in Almaty wanted to hold classes on Zoom, but his internet connection was not capable of supporting it. “There were connection glitches and internet malfunctions,” Serik R said.<sup>198</sup> In April 2020, the Ministry of Education acknowledged that the internet in Kazakhstan is not reliable or strong enough to support live online lessons for 2.5 million children.<sup>199</sup>

As noted on page 44, interviewees in rural areas reported that they faced unreliable or no internet at all, obstructing students’ ability to learn.<sup>200</sup> Lawan P., 17, lives with her grandmother in a small village in rural Thailand. “We had online classes through the phone... There were a lot of internet connectivity problems. I would miss what the teacher was saying, it was hard to understand the information that the teacher was trying to share. There was a direct impact on my grades—I didn’t do as well. We all find it hard to focus.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abby Rufer, teacher, Dallas, Texas, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>197</sup> Alliance for Affordable Internet, “2019 Affordability Report,” 2019, <https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/report/2019/> (accessed November 4, 2020).

<sup>198</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Serik R. and his mother, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 5, 2020.

<sup>199</sup> Almaty TV, “Online Classes are Cancelled, Only Distance Learning Remains – Head of the Ministry of Education and Science (04/03/20)”, (“Отменяются онлайн-занятия, остается только дистанционное обучение – глава МОН (03.04.20)”) video report, April 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9N53o8TDOU&feature=youtu.be> (accessed December 16, 2020).

<sup>200</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Laura Chupin, partnerships office, Chemins d’Avenir, France, June 5, 2020; and Tony Scott, middle school principal, Colorado, United States.

<sup>201</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with student, Surin, Thailand, July 6, 2020.

Andranik M., 14, in Armenia said, “We had internet problems in our village, the internet provider could not resolve the issue of overload. It would not work properly.”<sup>202</sup>

A parent in Chon-Tash, Kyrgyzstan, said, “I have internet on my phone, but it is extremely poor because we live in a mountainous area... Teachers share videos, send links, but as I have poor internet connection on my phone, I cannot show them to my son.”<sup>203</sup>

In Lebanon, one father of two children with disabilities said “a lot of emails, a lot of videos are arriving [from school] ... At home we don’t have good internet to pull all the material out. There is material on YouTube and on social media and we can’t access it.”<sup>204</sup>

Some children went to extraordinary lengths to try and access the internet for learning. A 16-year-old girl in Papua, Indonesia, said, “The Ministry of Education provides the ‘Rumah Belajar’ [Home Learning] application, but what could students do with any application without internet signal? ... The phone and internet network are very inadequate. I have to get up at two in the morning to get an internet signal. It is impossible to study online.”<sup>205</sup> Mia Sulastri, 17, is Indigenous Dayak, in Borneo, Indonesia. Her teachers send assignments by WhatsApp, which she returns via email, working on just her mobile phone. Phone signal is slow in her village. “I have to take my motorcycle and to go to [another village] about 12 kilometers from home. I usually went there four times a week to get phone signal.”<sup>206</sup>

Prastri Agung Kamurahang, 17, in a small village in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, explained that around 30 percent of his classmates live in remote areas with internet so unreliable that “these classmates cannot participate in online class because there is no signal when it rains.”<sup>207</sup> Similarly, a teacher in Norwich, the United Kingdom, said her connection cuts out whenever it rains, making it difficult to teach.<sup>208</sup> Statistics published in 2020 by the UK’s Office of National Statistics reflect that most households only have access to

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<sup>202</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Andranik M., 14, Armenia, June 16, 2020.

<sup>203</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Chon-Tash, Kyrgyzstan, May 31, 2020.

<sup>204</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with parent, Lebanon, April 7, 2020.

<sup>205</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with student, 16, Wamena, Papua, Indonesia, July 16, 2020. 1

<sup>206</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mia Sulastri, 17, Sampit, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, July 11, 2020.

<sup>207</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Prastri Agung Kamurahang, 17, Tondano, Minahasa regency, North Sulawesi, Indonesia, July 14, 2020.

<sup>208</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Norwich, United Kingdom, June 9, 2020.

broadband internet that would struggle to handle the internet needed to receive live synchronous teaching over video—the kind of teaching that was adopted or attempted by many schools in the United Kingdom.<sup>209</sup>

A teacher in a blue collar manufacturing town in South Dakota, United States, estimated that 10 percent of her school's students live out of town, without internet. "The issue isn't that kids and teachers can't afford it, it's that the service is completely unreliable, and cell service is really spotty, so a cell phone hotspot usually doesn't work either."<sup>210</sup>

## Inequalities in Access to Devices

### *Children Without Access to Devices*

Some children, almost exclusively from poorer families, had no access to any kind of device that would enable learning or allow them to stay in touch with their teachers. Girls are also less likely than boys to have access to devices; smartphone ownership is 20 percent lower among women than men.<sup>211</sup> A man in Afghanistan who was continuing his own undergraduate studies online said the girls in his household were struggling more than the boys because they did not have access to phones.<sup>212</sup>

A 16-year old girl with nine siblings who lives with her grandmother in Garissa, Kenya, said, "I do not have access to a computer, internet, or a smartphone. Because of this, I am very behind in physics which, as it is, is already difficult."<sup>213</sup>

A mother in Lagos, Nigeria, who lost her source of income after the university where she cleaned shut down due to the pandemic, said she could not afford online studies for two of her children who had this option. "Their teacher called me to tell me to buy a big phone

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<sup>209</sup> Office for National Statistics, "Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2020," August 7, 2020, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2020> (accessed May 3, 2021).

<sup>210</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with middle school teacher, South Dakota, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>211</sup> Oliver Rowntree et al., "Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020," GSMA report, May 2020, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2021).

<sup>212</sup> Human Rights Watch online survey response from 20-year-old university student, Afghanistan, May 28, 2020.

<sup>213</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with student, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

[smartphone] for online teaching... I don't have money to feed my family and I am struggling to make ends meet, how can I afford a phone and internet?"<sup>214</sup>

A headteacher at a public school in a rural farming community in Zambia, said teachers sent lessons through social media and WhatsApp. However, "not every child is linked on a social platform," he said, noting that in particular rural children have less access to mobile phones than children in urban areas.<sup>215</sup>

Ruzha Kazandjieva, a teaching support assistant in London, United Kingdom, speaking about the students she works with—85 percent of whom are Black, Asian, or another ethnic minority—said, "There is massive poverty. I must say, it's heartbreaking. Kids don't have much to eat—forget about computers, stuff like that, technology."<sup>216</sup>

A 16-year-old in Papua, Indonesia, said he returned assignments by phone. But, "in my class, all students who do not have an [Android] phone are Indigenous Papuan students, plus three new settler children [predominately from Java]. How could you learn without an [Android] phone?"<sup>217</sup>

Marie-Therese Exler, a grade 6 teacher in Kiel, Germany, said 20 of her class of 24 students come from families receiving government support. "Many children don't have laptops." She noted, "There were options to apply for some funds... but they are usually not sufficient to cater to everyone. And there is lots of bureaucracy involved, so teachers sometimes refrain."<sup>218</sup>

Santiago M., 17, lives in Caracas, Venezuela. "Half of the grade doesn't have a laptop, or Wi-Fi, or a smartphone for WhatsApp. They haven't been following classes at all.... There's been no communication with these kids whatsoever. No one's heard from them."<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Bariga, Lagos, Nigeria, August 20, 2020.

<sup>215</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with headteacher, Zambia, June 5, 2020.

<sup>216</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ruzha Kazandjieva, learning support assistant, London, United Kingdom, June 16, 2020.

<sup>217</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with student, 16, Wamena, Papua, Indonesia, July 16, 2020.

<sup>218</sup> Human Rights Watch with Marie-Therese Exler, teacher, Kiel, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, June 3, 2020.

<sup>219</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Santiago M., 17, Caracas, Venezuela, June 10, 2020.

### *Children Without Adequate Devices*

Fifty percent of students worldwide, or 826 million learners, do not have access to a computer at home, preventing them from meaningfully engaging in online learning. This disparity is acute in low-income countries; in sub-Saharan Africa, 89 percent of students do not have access to a household computer.<sup>220</sup>

In Lalitpur, in Nepal's Kathmandu valley, Meena G., 12, could not attend online classes because her family did not own a mobile phone capable of accessing the internet: "I was so desperate, but we didn't have money to buy a phone."<sup>221</sup>

While it is possible for students to engage in distance learning via an internet-enabled mobile phone, or smartphone, these are frequently inadequate as distance learning devices. Most education platforms and learning content are incompatible with mobile operating systems, and small screens are difficult to read and absorb information on, as well as to type and complete student assignments.<sup>222</sup>

A representative from a civil society organization that mentors teenagers in rural France, said, "Many [students] did not have access to a computer, and received their lessons on smartphones... Many felt ashamed and humiliated that they did not have access to the internet or a computer and did not dare talk about it, when asked."<sup>223</sup>

A parent of two in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, said, "To see teachers and their presentations my kids need a tablet or a computer, as their phones are too small to see the text... My children missed classes a few times, because we didn't have enough equipment."<sup>224</sup>

Hassan Mahfoud, a teacher in Rabat, Morocco said, "One day, someone was attending a class with an alias I didn't know, and video and sound turned off... so I blocked him. Later, a student told me it was one of his fellow students, that she has a problem with her

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<sup>220</sup> "Startling Digital Divides in Distance Learning Emerge," UNESCO press release, April 21, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/startling-digital-divides-distance-learning-emerge> (accessed November 2, 2020).

<sup>221</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Meena G., 12, Lalitpur, Nepal, February 11, 2021.

<sup>222</sup> Common Sense Media, *Connect All Students: How States and School Districts Can Close the Digital Divide*, 2020, [https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common\\_sense\\_media\\_report\\_final\\_7\\_1\\_3pm\\_web.pdf](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_final_7_1_3pm_web.pdf) (accessed November 2, 2020), p. 6.

<sup>223</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Laura Chupin, partnerships office, Chemins d'Avenir, France, June, 2020.

<sup>224</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, May 31, 2020.

connection and couldn't activate video and sound. I spoke to her on the phone, she said the device she had was old and didn't work well.”<sup>225</sup>

Célia L., 14, in France said, of accessing homework or classes on a mobile phone, “I couldn't access everything. Attached pages and links did not always work. No one could access the school's website from a smartphone.”<sup>226</sup>

### *Children Without Sufficient Access to Devices*

In low-income households where parents and children share the same device, the amount of time that a child could spend with the device for learning was often constrained.<sup>227</sup>

Fifteen-year-old Somali refugee Hamada M., living in Jordan, shares one phone with two siblings and mother. “One of us has to wake up early before the others to catch up with homework and exams.”<sup>228</sup> His younger sister, Aya added, “It's my mother's phone. We don't always have internet on it. But we had to top it up with internet now because we have final exams, it's very important.”<sup>229</sup> The siblings also watched televised classes, but “Every day, two of us watch these TV lessons and take turns on it, and the other one has to sacrifice that day.”<sup>230</sup> Their mother told Human Rights Watch that they can barely afford food and were behind on rent and utility bills.<sup>231</sup>

“Me and my brother were using the same mobile phone,” said Gayane C., a 16-year-old student from Armavir, Armenia. “His classes would start later than mine, but there were times when they would coincide, and I would miss classes.”<sup>232</sup>

Vishwa Das, provides pest control services in Mumbai, India. He and his wife have two children. “We have one computer in the family. Both my wife and I are working from home, so we need it. Now both children have classes, so they need to be on the computer. Two

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<sup>225</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hassan Mahfoud, teacher, Rabat, Morocco, June 17, 2020.

<sup>226</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Célia L., 14, Ain, France, June 8, 2020.

<sup>227</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, London, United Kingdom, June 12, 2020.

<sup>228</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hamada M., 15, Amman, Jordan, June 10, 2020.

<sup>229</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Aya M., 15, Amman, Jordan, June 10, 2020.

<sup>230</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hamada M., 15, Amman, Jordan, June 10, 2020.

<sup>231</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother of three school-aged children, Amman, Jordan, June 10, 2020.

<sup>232</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Gayane C., student, Armavir, Armenia, June 16, 2020.

children with classes at the same time, so actually we need two computers. We are taking salary cuts, how can we afford to buy another laptop? So, one child is missing class.”<sup>233</sup>

Khaliq M., 14, and his six siblings fled the war in Aleppo, Syria, and now live in New York, in the United States. Five of the children are of school age. “We have two Chromebooks and five of us share,” said Khaliq. “Each of us has one hour or two hours,” he said, adding, “When I went to school, I used to understand more.”<sup>234</sup>

Parent of three, Malik Waqar works for a trading company in Lahore, Pakistan. The family has one tablet and Malik’s work laptop. “I am a lower middle-class person and want to give my children the best education that I can afford, however I can’t afford multiple devices,” he said. “My youngest daughter had to do classes on my wife’s phone and lost all interest in online classes... This is not fair. Anyone who can afford faster internet connections and multiple devices will have a significant advantage over my children.”<sup>235</sup>

A primary school teacher in Santiago, Chile, described 70 percent of her students as being from poor families. Because most of her students only have access to their parents’ phones, “they have to wait for them to arrive home at nine at night to connect. Therefore, they miss out on the virtual classes.”<sup>236</sup>

Kioko Y., 15, in Kenya, uses his mother’s phone to access the internet. His school does not offer online classes, so he uses YouTube and Google to self-study and WhatsApp to access a student forum. “I tend to pick and choose which subjects to research because I cannot stay with my mother’s phone for too long because she runs a business.”<sup>237</sup>

A caregiver in the outskirts of Caracas, Venezuela, explained he has one smartphone that he shares with three primary-school-aged boys in his family. “In the mornings, I use the smartphone and write out, by hand, the homework for the two small ones. Then I give my phone to my oldest, who writes out his homework on paper.”<sup>238</sup> Similarly, a university

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<sup>233</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Vishwa Das, parent of two children, Mumbai, India, July 4, 2020.

<sup>234</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Khaliq M., 14, Albany, New York, United States, July 1, 2020.

<sup>235</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Malik Waqar, Lahore, Pakistan, July 31, 2020.

<sup>236</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Daniela Andrea Ribeiro Espinoza, teacher, Santiago, Chile, July 9, 2020.

<sup>237</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Kioko Y., 15, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

<sup>238</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with caregiver, Venezuela, June 12, 2020.

teacher and mother of two school-aged children in Karabalta, Kyrgyzstan, said, “Three of us are using my phone to do homework and my work... I ask my children to copy... assignments from my phone and when they are done, I do my work.”<sup>239</sup>

A mother of a third-grader and a seventh-grader in Moscow, Russia, said that even though their school organized online learning very quickly her children could not benefit from them properly because they only had one computer at home, and the lessons were happening at the same time and the school did not provide devices.<sup>240</sup>

### *Children With Access to Devices: Under-Utilization of Existing Resources*

Some students had access to capable devices and internet, but their school did not provide distance learning online.

A father of five in Kinshasa, Congo, said that his children have access to the internet at home, which they use to play video games, not for learning. Speaking of his 15-year-old daughter, he said that her school did not offer any distance education, and there was no communication with their teachers. “The government needs to put in place a good online education program that is captivating for children,” he said.<sup>241</sup> Elsewhere in Congo, in North Kivu, Roxone K., 16, also said she had a computer and internet at home but was not using them to do distance learning. “We should return to school to feel like students and take things seriously... The teachers are no longer in contact with us.”<sup>242</sup>

In Japan, nearly all schools were shut starting March 2, 2020.<sup>243</sup> By April, only five percent of public schools in the country provided live online teaching.<sup>244</sup> Most children were expected to self-study at home, using textbooks and other paper-based materials. Himari

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<sup>239</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Karabalta, Chuy region, Kyrgyzstan, June 1, 2020.

<sup>240</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Moscow, Russia, March 29, 2021.

<sup>241</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father of five, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020.

<sup>242</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Roxone K., 16, Butembo, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 12, 2020.

<sup>243</sup> “Nearly all prefectures in Japan shut schools amid coronavirus outbreak,” *The Japan Times*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/03/02/national/japan-prefectures-shut-schools-covid-19/#.XtILoDr7Qzw> (accessed November 30, 2020).

<sup>244</sup> Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, “About the status of efforts such as learning guidance at public schools related to temporary school closures for measures against new coronavirus infection,” (“新型コロナウイルス感染症対策のための学校の臨時休業に関する公立学校における学習指導等の取組状況について”), April 16, 2020, [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20200421-mxt\\_kouhou01-000006590\\_1.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20200421-mxt_kouhou01-000006590_1.pdf) (accessed November 18, 2020), p. 1.

S., 15, lives in Shibuya, a district of Tokyo, where schools provided every elementary and lower-secondary school student with a tablet. But her school did not offer online classes, and only offered five minutes of an online homeroom session each day for a single week in May. “Since Shibuya distributed tablets I was thinking they might provide Zoom class or something similar, but they did not use it effectively—only for the homeroom activities. I wish they did online classes and used the tablets more effectively.” She added, “I did not want an empty assignment such as copy a textbook into a Word document, because it is useless. I want the school to conduct online class.”<sup>245</sup>

Similarly, Monir M., a 13-year-old son of Rohingya refugees living in Japan, said his family has Wi-Fi at home, but his school did not provide any online teaching, just paper-based homework assignments. “If there were an online class, I think I would feel less reluctant to study because then it would not only be me.”<sup>246</sup>

Ray N., 16, in Bangkok, Thailand, said she was not lonely during school closures as she was able to keep in touch with her friends through social media, which was important to her as her friends are her “support system.” Despite her access to connectivity, it was not until early June—almost three months following the closure of schools—that her school began to offer online classes through Google Classroom.<sup>247</sup>

## Teachers Not Provided with Devices or Internet

Many teachers were expected to continue teaching during school closures, but their own access to adequate devices and connectivity varied. Many were not provided with financial assistance or the necessary equipment to deliver remote learning, and instead were expected to pay for these out of pocket.

“We were on our own,” said a high school teacher in a small city in Serbia. “Kids and teachers from villages don’t have internet all the time. Technical equipment... is needed. Serbia is a poor country, parents and students can’t afford gadgets, this can’t be an individual responsibility.”<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Himari S., 15, Tokyo, Japan, June 1, 2020.

<sup>246</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Monir M., 13, Hokkaido, Japan, May 29, 2020.

<sup>247</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ray N., 16, Bangkok, Thailand, July 2, 2020.

<sup>248</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Požarevac, Serbia, July 1, 2020.

A teacher in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq said her school told her to teach online, but did not provide her equipment or financial assistance to do so. “I did not have internet prior to the school shutdown, and I was forced to adapt and try to get internet using 3G data on my phone... The connection is not reliable. I do not have unlimited access and I have to pay for the data that I use.”<sup>249</sup>

A teacher in a lower-income neighborhood of Rabat, Morocco’s capital, who was expected to teach online, said: “The government didn’t give us any computers, or tablets, or material of any kind. I pay the internet with my own money, they don’t pay us back.”<sup>250</sup>

“I was struggling at first,” a teacher at a secondary school for girls in Karak, southern Jordan, said. “My four children need the internet for their classes, and my husband and I also need it for our work as both of us are teachers.” She continued, “I share my phone and laptop with my children who need it. Sometimes I have to delay some of my classes, or it takes me time to get back to a student who needs an explanation, because my daughter needs the device.” She said she had to purchase a new device and internet router “at my own expense” in order to teach and to ensure learning for her children.<sup>251</sup>

Sian Hinton, a preschool teacher in London, United Kingdom, had to borrow a laptop from a family member. She said her biggest problem was unreliable internet: “I’d be in the middle of teaching, and then my Wi-Fi would go... That would always really stress me out—if the Wi-Fi would go, because I’d be like, ‘Oh my god, I don’t know what [my students are] doing, there’s no adult overseeing the call.’”<sup>252</sup>

## Prior Government Underinvestment in Schools Deepened the Digital Divide

Historically under-resourced public schools struggled with reaching their students across the digital divide, which in turn risked further entrenching inequalities to learning across socio-economic groups.

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<sup>249</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, June 10, 2020.

<sup>250</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Rabat, Morocco, June 14, 2020.

<sup>251</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Karak, Jordan, June 6, 2020.

<sup>252</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sian Hinton, London, United Kingdom, June 8, 2020.

A second-grade teacher at a school near Potsdam, Germany, described her school: “The projectors we have often don’t work because the electricity infrastructure of the building is so old that if someone plugs in an electric kettle, the fuse will blow. Often the Wi-Fi doesn’t work. Every request, like a laptop for teachers, will spark the discussion if it is really needed.” Tying these under-investments to the situation during the pandemic, she said:

The announcement came that Skype would be installed on the school computers, so teachers could use Skype to keep in touch with students and parents... It turned out that the school computers did not have a camera, so the topic was closed... Schools need standards for minimum of digital equipment, and most importantly, functioning Wi-Fi. Right now, the conditions for teachers to work online or computer based are not given, which limits teachers’ ability to provide education to students during school closures.<sup>253</sup>

On March 25, Poland’s education ministry required schools to provide distance learning and made school principals responsible for deciding which distance learning platforms to use.<sup>254</sup> A primary school teacher in Buczkowice, Poland, felt that with the government’s decree, “They didn’t provide any tools for that... It was a bit as though they said, ‘You just need to cope.’” He continued, “Strangely enough, there is nothing in [the government’s Covid-19 response] about education, no money, for example for the local authorities so that they could upgrade the IT equipment in schools. Over the years, the local authorities all over Poland have done a lot, they renovated schools, built playgrounds, but the IT tools are still largely missing.” He noted that although he uses online tools to continue teaching—including preparing materials and videos—he had not done live online classes. His wife, however, who teaches in a larger school that was using Microsoft Teams before the pandemic, holds regular live online classes. “That’s why they had this option,” he said. “My school wanted to use Teams, but then they saw the cost, how much they’d need to pay for access and then it would be 400 złoty [US\$100] to train one teacher... The local government couldn’t afford it.”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Potsdam, Germany, June 1, 2020.

<sup>254</sup> Rozporządzenie, Ministra Edukacji Narodowej, “w sprawie szczególnych rozwiązań w okresie czasowego ograniczenia funkcjonowania jednostek systemu oświaty w związku z zapobieganiem, przeciwdziałaniem i zwalczaniem COVID-19, Poz. 493,” March 20, 2020, <https://www.dziennikustaw.gov.pl/D2020000049301.pdf> (accessed December 17, 2020).

<sup>255</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Buczkowice, Poland, June 24, 2020.

Abby Rufer teaches algebra to over 100 students in Dallas, Texas, most of whom are recent immigrants to the United States. “We always had a problem with providing those students in particular with access to appropriate technology and resources.” She said students could not be sent home with a graphing calculator to do work as she only had 30, of which only 20 worked. “I had kids who had pencils, but couldn’t sharpen them.”<sup>256</sup>

In contrast, well-resourced public and private schools that had invested in technology and digital literacy for their teachers before the pandemic did well:

“We were in great shape,” said middle school principal Tony Scott, in an affluent area in Colorado, in the United States. For a number of years, his school had emphasized digital literacy and provides each student with a capable device. The school has a digital learning coach, to help “teachers develop lessons and utilize technology,” a digital technology technician “who does the troubleshooting so, anything a teacher can’t figure out on their own they ask her,” and a technology paraprofessional.<sup>257</sup>

A science teacher at a *concertado* school—a private school which receives both government and private funding from parents—in Madrid, Spain, explained that her school lent laptops to any student who needed them, and she was not aware of any student without internet access. “This is a *concertado* school, so the families don’t usually have money problems.” As a result, she was able to offer two online classes a week, upload videos onto YouTube explaining concepts, and organize Zoom calls for students to ask questions. “The students almost all attended the classes regularly,” she said.<sup>258</sup>

At a public secondary school in Melbourne, Australia, students were expected to have an Apple MacBook, and the school had already moved lesson plans, subject outlines, and resources online in recent years. A teacher said they were ready for remote learning within two days of school closing, offering five classes a day as per the same school timetable.<sup>259</sup>

Claudio Patto, a teacher at a private secondary school in São Paulo, Brazil, which he described as “extremely privileged,” said that he had already been teaching with Doceri—a

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<sup>256</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abby Rufer, teacher, Dallas, Texas, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>257</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Tony Scott, middle school principal, Colorado, United States, June 12, 2020.

<sup>258</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Madrid, Spain, June 9, 2020.

<sup>259</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Melbourne, Australia, June 14, 2020.

digital platform—for five years: “My classes are already in an electronic platform, so I get to teach the same way I was teaching before... In my world, things are pretty easy.”<sup>260</sup>

## Digital Literacy—Critical to Online Learning—Often Lacking

Meaningful use of the internet requires digital literacy: the skills to use and access the internet and capable devices, as well as the capacity to engage with the online environment critically, confidently, and safely.

The abrupt, mass shift to online learning exposed wide gaps in digital literacy among students, parents, and teachers. Those unfamiliar with using technology, or with creating content with it, found the transition challenging. Other children with some digital literacy and access struggled with the risks of spending extended, unstructured time online.

### *Students Without Digital Literacy Struggled*

Students whose schools had not previously taught them digital literacy or exposed them to technology, struggled to transition to digital learning and access online education. Mairam J., 17, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, said, “I find it complicated to deal with the Classroom app. The first few weeks I had difficulties with installing and understanding how to use it... No one explained us how to use Classroom. Due to the challenges in working with the Classroom application, I am very stressed, and I don’t feel well.”<sup>261</sup>

“For students who are brand new to the country or had interrupted schooling, one big issue is that they weren’t proficient in using the technology before the pandemic,” a secondary school teacher in central Iowa in the United States said. “A student...was telling me that the video his teacher sent didn’t have any sound. I asked him if he turned up the volume and he said ‘Yes,’ but what he was actually doing was just pushing ‘mute’ and ‘unmute’ on the video over and over.” She continued, “Just getting a computer—that’s step one in equity. Having access to the content is the way bigger issue.”<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Claudio Patto, high school teacher, São Paulo, Brazil, June 5, 2020.

<sup>261</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mairam J., 17, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, May 31, 2020.

<sup>262</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, central Iowa, United States, June 18, 2020.

A non-governmental organization helped Laura Kaneko's school in Oakland, California, get tablets and internet hotspots to students who needed them. But, she said, "Kids were getting tablets or hotspots, and there were no instructions on how to get them set up, or how to get the Wi-Fi going," she said, adding that she once spent an hour-and-a-half on the phone on a three-way conversation translating between a student and tech support.<sup>263</sup>

Although many children were fluent in consuming content in the mobile digital ecosystem, many had not been taught basic digital skills such as using computers or creating content.<sup>264</sup> Julian Rachko, a teacher in a school primarily serving students from low-income communities in New York City, said, "Many students know how to use their Xbox to play Fortnite or [their] phone to use Snapchat, but struggle to send emails or use educational resources."<sup>265</sup>

A science teacher in Italy said of many of her students, who are 14 to 15 years old: "When I sent them the first assignments, I was expecting them to send me back Word documents, files. But I received photos of pages of their notebooks instead... I had students with poor equipment, and also with poor digital skills. They couldn't rely on a good digital expertise, as nobody had provided them with that resource."<sup>266</sup>

Fabio de Lima, a secondary school teacher in São Paulo, Brazil, said, "We thought it would be easy for students, but it wasn't. They have cell phones, but had difficulties accessing Google Classroom. I had to give personalized assistance to students. The state Education Ministry did tutorials for students, but students didn't always understand. Students use phone for music or social media, but can't always use specific apps."<sup>267</sup>

### *Students Struggled to Navigate the Digital Environment*

For children who were able to connect online for virtual learning, their sharply increased exposure to the internet and the digital environment underscored the need to develop

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<sup>263</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Laura Kaneko, teacher, Oakland, California, June 21, 2020.

<sup>264</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Auvergne-Rhônes-Alpes, France, June 10, 2020.

<sup>265</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Julian M. Rachko, public school teacher, New York City, United States, June 18, 2020.

<sup>266</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with support teacher, Emilia Romagna, Italy, June 18, 2020.

<sup>267</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Fabio de Lima, teacher, São Paulo, Brazil, July 13, 2020.

their confidence in navigating their devices and online spaces for play, participation, and learning, as well as to be safe from heightened risks online.

### *Heightened Risks Online*

As children spent extended periods of unstructured time online in gaming, social media, and other platforms as a substitute for learning, socialization, and play, they were increasingly exposed to online bullying and harassment.<sup>268</sup> Girls, children with disabilities, and those perceived to be different were at increased risk; many reported that, as a result of being harassed or abused online, they were forced to change the way they express themselves, felt physically unsafe, anxious, or depressed, or driven offline and cut off from the opportunities that the internet can offer.<sup>269</sup>

A teacher in the United States, said, “School provides more than schooling—socialization and human contact happens. If you take that away, you’re only left with cyber bullying... At least if a kid gets bullied in school, they have a place to report it and we can do something about it. At home? Online? It’s not the same.”<sup>270</sup>

One mother of two from Ontario, Canada, said this about her 14-year old daughter: “When she did interact back with her classmates... she was being cyber-bullied. The school was great in responding to the pandemic, but there were other aspects of it that really affected the learning, like cyber bullying... There were a lot of problems there because the guidelines were missing, or [kids] didn’t know how to interact, or didn’t know the school policy still applied.”<sup>271</sup>

A teacher of 9 to 11-year-olds in Chicago, in the United States, noted that many of her students’ parents were not at home because they were essential workers, and her students

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<sup>268</sup> End Violence Against Children, International Telecommunications Union, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNODC, World Childhood Foundation, World Health Organization, WeProtect Global Alliance, “Covid-19 and its implications for protecting children online” April 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/media/67396/file/COVID-19%20and%20its%20implications%20for%20Protecting%20Children%20Online.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2020); and UNICEF, “Growing concern for well-being of children and young people amid soaring screen time,” February 9, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/growing-concern-well-being-children-and-young-people-amid-soaring-screen-time-unicef> (accessed February 12, 2021).

<sup>269</sup> Plan International, “Free To Be Online?” October 5, 2020, <https://plan-international.org/news/2020-10-05-abuse-and-harassment-driving-girls-facebook-instagram-and-twitter> (accessed December 24, 2020).

<sup>270</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Baltimore, Maryland, United States, June 20, 2020.

<sup>271</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Vaughan, Ontario, Canada, June 12, 2020.

were unfamiliar with using the internet. She worried what they might encounter online, unsupervised.<sup>272</sup>

### *With Insufficient Support, Parents Struggled to Facilitate Online Learning*

Parents with little to no digital literacy struggled to help their children access the online education provided by their schools. Teachers told Human Rights Watch that they found themselves providing significant tech support for parents, taking up valuable time in the early days of transition. One preschool teacher in London, the United Kingdom, said, “I’ve had to work out what the hell Google Classroom was, how it worked, then call all the parents, get them all to sign up, and explain to them how to use it.” It took almost two months to teach her students’ parents how to use video conferencing software. “It was literally me calling up parents... who don’t speak English as a first language and trying—over a phone—to talk about how to access it.”<sup>273</sup>

A grade 9 English teacher in Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States said, “I ended up spending a lot of time on the phone with parents who weren’t as computer literate. My school gave out laptops to students who didn’t have laptops at home, and they and their families didn’t know how to use them. The first two months... I felt like I was IT support.”<sup>274</sup>

A teacher of Palestinian refugee children at a UN school in Jordan said of the Ministry of Education-provided online learning platform: “Accessing Darsak was difficult... some parents had problems accessing the website because they need a national ID, email, and password. Parents don’t really know how to do that, so... they didn’t really use it.”<sup>275</sup>

### *Teachers Not Trained to Teach Online*

Teachers who had to quickly choose from a bewildering array of digital platforms, often without guidance, were faced with the practical difficulties of providing tech support for themselves, and their students and their parents, all at once. A joint survey by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank on responses to the Covid-19 pandemic found that only half of all countries surveyed reported that they offered additional training on distance education

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<sup>272</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Chicago, Illinois, United States, June 5, 2020.

<sup>273</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sian Hinton, London, United Kingdom, June 8, 2020.

<sup>274</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Baltimore, United States, June 9, 2020.

<sup>275</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Amman, Jordan, June 11, 2020.

for teachers—and cautioned that this did not measure the take-up of such programs by teachers, nor the effectiveness or relevance of the material provided.<sup>276</sup>

The ability of teachers to adapt to the sudden transition to distance teaching mirrored investments in teacher training and in digital literacy before the pandemic. One teacher in Russia noted that, prior to the pandemic, his school was already well-versed in using digital platforms to run virtual staff meetings, publish class schedules, and share homework. “Nobody was confused or disorganized when the quarantine was announced, both students and teachers already knew how to use this system,” he said.<sup>277</sup> But a mother of a child at a school elsewhere in Russia said, “The faculty at our school were not prepared on the technological side. The platform used was fraught with glitches they did not seem capable of over-coming. Also, the teachers had received no methodological training and their lessons were ineffective and hard for the kids to digest.”<sup>278</sup>

A director of an education NGO in Venezuela, who works with rural public schools, said, “We can’t even reach 20 percent of the teachers that we usually work with, over email. So, the majority were not ready for distance teaching. They weren’t prepared to use technology, let alone to teach with it.”<sup>279</sup>

“In Italy, school digitalization has been postponed for years,” a support teacher for students with disabilities in Emilia Romagna, said. “The average Italian teacher was not ready for remote education... Overnight, we had to learn new programs as well as a new way to organize our teaching.”<sup>280</sup>

A teacher in Papua New Guinea expressed disappointment that teachers were not better trained before the pandemic. “We should have [had] more training on online learning and using online platforms because we also live in a high-risk area, we have a volcano here. Last year we had about three eruptions, and the kids had to stay away from school... We

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<sup>276</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, “What Have We Learnt?,” 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/national-education-responses-to-covid19/> (accessed November 12, 2020), p. 22.

<sup>277</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Izhevsk, Russia, June 6, 2020.

<sup>278</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Moscow, March 30, 2021.

<sup>279</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with NGO director, Venezuela, June 12, 2020.

<sup>280</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with support teacher, Emilia Romagna, Italy, June 18, 2020.

really don't have any excuse... By now, we should have a proper system for how we can deal with this.”<sup>281</sup>

Hassan Mahfoud, a teacher in Rabat, Morocco, said he learned from a televised interview with the education minister a few weeks into the lockdown that teachers were expected to create accounts on Microsoft Teams, where the Ministry had uploaded curricula. “I had no idea how that Teams thing worked, I never received instructions on how to make it work... I tried four times to access it, I didn’t succeed, I finally dropped it. At no time did the ministry do anything to facilitate access to that platform for me or my colleagues.” Instead, Hassan started having classes on Zoom, “on my own initiative.”<sup>282</sup>

Pressures on teachers’ individual resilience and adaptability to new technologies were immense, and many struggled.

A mother of a primary school girl in Tokyo, Japan, asked, “Why can’t teachers edit videos even though kids on YouTube can?... I would like teachers to provide video materials as much as possible.”<sup>283</sup>

Unfamiliar and uncomfortable with technology, some teachers did not make the transition to distance learning platforms. As a result, their students missed out on learning.<sup>284</sup>

Artur D., an 18-year old student in Tavush, Armenia, said, “We did not study all the subjects. The whole school did not do physics, because that teacher had difficulties with his computer... and he had nobody at home next to him to help him.” He continued, “We also did not do English classes. The teacher did not have a computer in the beginning, and after a month the school gave her a computer, but she still did not conduct classes properly.”<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with primary school teacher, Papua New Guinea, June 15, 2020.

<sup>282</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hassan Mahfoud, Rabat, Morocco, June 17, 2020.

<sup>283</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Tokyo, Japan, May 30, 2020.

<sup>284</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mikel S., 14, Bilbao, Spain, June 25, 2020.

<sup>285</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Artur D., 18, Tavush, Armenia, June 11, 2020.

A mother in Karabalta, Kyrgyzstan, said most of her four children’s teachers had not been trained on how to do a video call. “Some don’t know how to use their phones or WhatsApp. I know they are great teachers, but I know that this period is extremely hard for them.”<sup>286</sup>

A mother in Helsinki, Finland, said that the teacher of her older child was quick to transition to using technology, “using WhatsApp to shepherd the kids, sending messages reminding them to come to online meetings.” Meanwhile, the teacher of her younger child took “two to three weeks to set up a new prepaid account and phone.”<sup>287</sup>

A mother in Ontario, Canada, described her older daughter’s teacher as “not technologically savvy at all... I don’t blame him, but it is really tragic for my child to have such little interaction with the teacher. And he may be a good teacher in person... but his discomfort of communicating with the kids through videoconferencing inhibits how the children are learning.”<sup>288</sup>

A teacher in Požarevac, Serbia, said that there is a lack of knowledge on digital teaching and security at her secondary school. Teachers were not given guidance on what platforms or tools to use: “Nothing official was provided how to do online teaching.”<sup>289</sup>

For teachers unused to teaching online, it took a lot of hard work and time to upskill.<sup>290</sup> One primary school teacher in rural New South Wales, Australia said, on time spent on online teaching: “You were always trying to keep one step ahead of the students—creating content and then learning how to use the platforms and upskill ourselves. We were teaching ourselves to then teach the kids. It was double the workload and stress.”<sup>291</sup>

Despite the challenges, some teachers welcomed the opportunity for upskilling. A 57-year-old primary school teacher in southern Poland said:

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<sup>286</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with parent, Karabalta, Chuy region, Kyrgyzstan, June 1, 2020.

<sup>287</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Helsinki, Finland, June 12, 2020.

<sup>288</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Ontario, Canada, June 13, 2020.

<sup>289</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Požarevac, Serbia, July 1, 2020.

<sup>290</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Bilbao, Spain, June 12, 2020.

<sup>291</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Murwillumbah, Australia, June 11, 2020.

When you have two or three years until your retirement, honestly you don't necessarily want to grow anymore. But I had to grow as young teachers do, I had to learn new things and I must say I learned quite a lot now, after 38 years of work. And this is positive. Now some schools and local authorities are thinking more about these tools, because they saw it was so much easier for schools that already had those tools implemented.<sup>292</sup>

Some teachers received training.<sup>293</sup> A teacher in Atlanta, in the United States took a class on teaching preschool online. "My director told me I could take it if I wanted to, and they paid for it. It was a five to six hour course... It taught me how to do Zoom calls with 4-year-olds. The first one was a disaster, but we worked through it... I learned how to make the videos more engaging."<sup>294</sup>

However, some teachers felt that the training they received was too narrowly focused on how to use a single piece of software, instead of guiding them more broadly how to teach online. A teacher in Copenhagen, Denmark, said that her municipality offered webinars for teachers on how to use Microsoft Teams, but not on how to modify the curriculum to distance learning.<sup>295</sup> Another secondary school teacher in greater Tokyo, Japan, said that teachers at his school were trained on how to use the software platform that his school adopted, "but not about how to think or plan about distant education in general."<sup>296</sup>

Frequently, children trained teachers on how to use necessary technology.<sup>297</sup> Max B., 13, in Frankfurt, Germany, said that he faced few problems in using online tools, "It was rather that the students had to assist the teachers."<sup>298</sup>

After Nawal L.'s school in Marrakesh, Morocco, closed down in mid-March, her mathematics teacher was the first, and only, teacher to reach out to students. She sent

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<sup>292</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Silesia, Poland, June 24, 2020.

<sup>293</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Bellinda van den Helm, teacher, Oss, Brabant, Netherlands, June 10, 2020; and Fabio de Lima, teacher, São Paulo, Brazil, July 13, 2020.

<sup>294</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Anne Moore, preschool teacher, Atlanta, Georgia, United States, June 5, 2020.

<sup>295</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with primary school teacher, Copenhagen, Denmark, June 15, 2020.

<sup>296</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Tokyo, Japan, May 29, 2020.

<sup>297</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Lindsey Readman, secondary school teacher, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, June 2, 2020; Andranik M., 14, Armenia, June 16, 2020; and Lusine Vardumyan, school psychologist, Yerevan, Armenia, June 15, 2020.

<sup>298</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Max B., 13, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, June 12, 2020.

them login details for Microsoft Teams. However, “I tried them many times, but it didn’t work,” said Nawal. “All other students were in the same situation... One of my classmates is a geek, she’s very high tech. She did her thing... [and] finally sent us new passwords. This time, it worked.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Nawal L., 16, Marrakesh, Morocco, June 19, 2020.

### **III. Greatly Diminished Quality of Education**

The quality of distance learning, both online and in “low tech” formats, varied substantially. Students described being simply left to teach themselves from printed materials, or classes that resumed but without teaching students any new content. Others said the number of subjects was cut drastically, leaving out core subjects.

#### **Students Left to Study on their Own**

As a teacher at a primary school for Palestinian refugees in Jordan explained, “it’s way better” when a teacher can make videos of lessons and send homework, rather than students reading their books on their own. “[It] helps with sticking all the information in their heads.”<sup>300</sup> However, many children received no such teaching help. Moreover, there is an important pedagogical difference between a child learning new topics and skills and just revising or doing what one principal in New Zealand derided as “busy work.”<sup>301</sup> Yet far too often, no new content was even attempted by teachers or schools.

When 15-year-old Joyce L.’s school in Kabwe, Zambia, closed, “the headmistress came through the classes and told us to study on our own.” For this, Joyce used the books she already had. This was challenging as “most topics are difficult to understand without the help of a teacher.” She said, “It’s been a little bit nerve-racking. Next year I have my [school leaver] examination and I am thinking I will have to work harder.”<sup>302</sup>

“I received less knowledge, much less,” said Miras N., 13, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in describing the daily instructions and links sent by his teachers sending via WhatsApp, but no recorded video or audio lessons.<sup>303</sup>

“Children are not taught during this period,” said an education official in North Kivu, Congo. Although some students received printed assignments, she said “We cannot say

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<sup>300</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Amman, Jordan, June 11, 2020.

<sup>301</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, Ragne Maxwell, principal, New Zealand, June 16, 2020.

<sup>302</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Joyce L., 15, Kabwe, Zambia, June 4, 2020.

<sup>303</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Miras N., 13, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 4, 2020.

that this is normal education.”<sup>304</sup> One student in Congo told us in late June, for example, that she had received no direction from her school since it closed on March 19. “We were just told to regularly re-read our notes while waiting for new instructions from the authorities. So, I read my notes, not every day, but three days a week... At first, I thought school would start again soon so I didn't read my notes and then when I saw that it was going to go on, I started to read them. I'd forgotten a lot.”<sup>305</sup>

Parents and teachers in the Central African Republic told Human Rights Watch in June 2020 that there had been no teaching since school closed at the end of March.<sup>306</sup> A mother of a 6-year-old girl in Bangui said she tries to get her daughter to do revision exercises, and three times a week they listen to programming on the radio. “But it is a program which is not specific for each level of class. It's too complex... Our children have not had any support during this time of pandemic. I fear a drop in children's education level after all this time lost at home.”<sup>307</sup>

Aiperi K., 17, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, said her teachers just send assignments via WhatsApp and the Classroom app. “I don't study every day... I know this is not enough, this is not real distance learning. Basically, what teachers want is for us to copy texts... My grades are getting worse... I don't understand subjects, assignments... I hardly can call this an ‘education.’”<sup>308</sup>

The father of a 17-year-old girl in Lubumbashi, Congo, where the government does not provide free secondary education, said that her school sold them a syllabus to help her study at home for 15,000 CDF (US\$8). His daughter works on the exercises, and he sends them back to school, and her evaluation is based on this work.<sup>309</sup>

A mother of a first-grader in Moscow, Russia, said that the school's administration informed the parents of elementary school students that they did not think children that

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<sup>304</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with official in the bureau of secondary and vocational education inspection, Butembo, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020.

<sup>305</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Iapipa K., 16, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 20, 2020.

<sup>306</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews in Bangui, Central African Republic with Guy Blaise Sanzé, father, June 16, 2020; secondary school teacher, June 20, 2020; and with mathematics teacher, June 23, 2020.

<sup>307</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Bangui, Central African Republic, June 30, 2020.

<sup>308</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Aiperi K., 17, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, May 31, 2020.

<sup>309</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 17, 2020.

young could benefit from online learning, and therefore the teachers would simply send assignments to the parents and it was up to the parents to oversee their children completing those assignments and to return the completed assignments via WhatsApp.<sup>310</sup>

Some students who received assignments as part of their distance learning complained that they never received corrections or feedback from teachers on the work they submitted.<sup>311</sup> Some mothers said they were expected to correct their children's work.<sup>312</sup>

## Fewer Hours of Instruction and Fewer Subjects

A middle school teacher in Israel said, “Both I and other teachers I speak with feel that we have all managed to cover the material we wanted to... It was really fine... For some of the subjects, it was even better than usual.”<sup>313</sup> However, most students and teachers interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported that teaching hours were considerably decreased, resulting in reduced curriculum.<sup>314</sup> Certain subjects regularly emerged in interviews as being considered by some students or teachers as difficult to do through distance learning education, including mathematics, languages, and vocational training.<sup>315</sup> Frequently, entire subjects or activities were removed from students’ studies, most consistently cultural, artistic, and physical education.<sup>316</sup>

“At school my son had five subjects,” said a mother in rural Cambodia. But during distance learning her son’s teacher provided instruction only for mathematics and Khmer. “My son does not have enough classes to receive a proper education.”<sup>317</sup> Elsewhere in Cambodia, a

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<sup>310</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Moscow, Russia, March 30, 2021.

<sup>311</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Santiago M., 17, Venezuela, June 10, 2020; Diann H., 16, Solok, West Sumatra, Indonesia, July 10, 2020; and Sara W., 14, Lebanon, June 18, 2020.

<sup>312</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with mother, Tokyo, Japan, May 30, 2020; and mother, London, United Kingdom, June 28, 2020.

<sup>313</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Maayan Bar TsurHaifa, Israel, June 6, 2020.

<sup>314</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with mother, Stamford, Lincolnshire, United Kingdom, June 4, 2020; teacher, Tokyo, Japan, May 29, 2020; Shaina O., 18, Hodaya, Israel, June 6, 2020; Ben Johnson, teacher, Chicago, Illinois, USA, June 20, 2020; teacher, Guayaquil, Ecuador, June 26, 2020; Bellinda van den Helm, teacher, Oss, Brabant, Netherlands, June 11, 2020; and Marie-Therese Exler, teacher, Kiel, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, June 3, 2020.

<sup>315</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Emma Aggelid, secondary school teacher, Östersund, Sweden, June 24, 2020; Pere Nieto, teacher, Barcelona, Spain, June 12, 2020; mother, Ontario, Canada, June 13, 2020; and Jacob Meyer, teacher, Beresford, South Dakota, United States, June 11, 2020.

<sup>316</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with mother, Sidon, Lebanon, June 22, 2020; Jack N., 13, Brisbane, Australia, June 21, 2020; student, 13, Czechowice-Dziedzice, Poland, June 21, 2020; and mother, Roxbury, Massachusetts, United States, June 3, 2020.

<sup>317</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Keap, Teok Thla, Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia, July 29, 2020.

father said that his 10-year-old son only received directions to continue his Khmer studies. “He does not learn any other subjects,” he said.<sup>318</sup>

A mother in Berlin, said about her second-grade son, “In the beginning, we got tasks for all subjects which were all mandatory, but with the time they reduced them and now only the core subjects like mathematics, German, and social studies remain mandatory. So, we gave up the other subjects, because it was just too much and every day was a fight.”<sup>319</sup>

A student in Israel, Shaina O., 18, said, “We just missed a whole bunch of material. The classes on Zoom really didn’t work... They were about 30 minutes long instead of 1.5 hours... Only three of my subjects offered Zoom classes.”<sup>320</sup>

A teacher in the Kurdistan region of Iraq said, “We are teaching fewer hours compared with the normal school days, which lasted about five hours. During lockdown it’s one hour per day.”<sup>321</sup>

A primary school teacher in Mexico said, “We normally work six hours—we teach six subjects—but now, it was reduced, because I knew the time studying with parents was hard or they were working and couldn’t be there. We covered a third as much. We always covered mathematics and Spanish, every day. The rest, we reduced.”<sup>322</sup>

In the United States, a principal from Alaska said, “It is hard to do certain subjects via a packet. Two to two-and-a-half hours of schoolwork per day was the goal.”<sup>323</sup> A middle school South Dakota teacher said: “We were told to significantly drop the number of topics we covered and essentially have them do the bare minimum. The teachers were told to aim for one to two hours of work for the kids each day... Normally we struggle to get through everything in the year anyway.”<sup>324</sup> A teacher in Maryland said: “We can only accomplish 50 percent of a normal curriculum... It’ll be a longer-term problem... It will roll on for years.”<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Koh Snay village, Battambang province, Cambodia, August 2, 2020.

<sup>319</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Berlin, Germany, June 19, 2020.

<sup>320</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Shaina O., 18, Hodaya, Israel, June 6, 2020.

<sup>321</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, June 10, 2020.

<sup>322</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Colima, Mexico, June 26, 2020.

<sup>323</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Missy Rivers, Scammon Bay, Alaska, United States, June 3, 2020.

<sup>324</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with middle school teacher, South Dakota, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>325</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Baltimore, Maryland, United States, June 20, 2020.

A 16-year-old natural science student, in Papua, Indonesia, said although her school distributed some schoolbooks, they did not give out physics, biology, and chemistry books “because those books were expensive.”<sup>326</sup>

Paul Barry, a teacher at Boston’s only vocational school, said that because some vocational programs are “so hands-on” it was difficult to teach them remotely.<sup>327</sup> In Lebanon, a mother said her 16-year-old daughter with a developmental disability “isn’t getting any internet lessons because she’s in a vocational program, the focus isn’t on the academic, but rather on things like soap making and sewing.”<sup>328</sup>

“Online classes are very informal,” a mathematics teacher in India said. “Before, I taught four to five classes a day, each 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. Now, I spend about 20 minutes a day trying to get everyone on a call, and then going through homework assignments.”<sup>329</sup>

Learning a foreign language is much more difficult if not spoken, said a French teacher in Germany.<sup>330</sup> “I can’t teach her German!” said a mother in London, citing it as a subject her daughter missed out on during lockdown.<sup>331</sup> “It’s much more complicated to teach English from a distance,” said a teacher in Colombia, noting he could no longer evaluate listening, writing, or speaking skills.<sup>332</sup> An English language teacher in Russia said her students’ performance was declining due to lack of in-class practice, and that she had to drop pedagogical elements such as dictation.<sup>333</sup> A mother in Canada said of her daughter, “she has a class once a week with the French teacher... That is just not enough.”<sup>334</sup>

A philosophy teacher in Italy said this subject “requires a great level of abstraction,” which takes more engagement with students than just lecturing, and so was more difficult to teach through remote learning. “It’s not just a set of formulas to learn by heart.”<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with student, 16, Wamena, Papua, Indonesia, July 16, 2020.

<sup>327</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Paul Barry, Boston, Massachusetts, United States, June 9, 2020.

<sup>328</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Lebanon, June 4, 2020.

<sup>329</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Dharamshala, India, June 14, 2020.

<sup>330</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with secondary school teacher, Berlin, Germany, June 7, 2020.

<sup>331</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, London, United Kingdom, June 28, 2020.

<sup>332</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Ojeda Insignares, teacher, Barranquilla, Colombia, June 26, 2020.

<sup>333</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Izhevsk, Russia, June 3, 2020.

<sup>334</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Ontario, Canada, June 13, 2020.

<sup>335</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ale B., Italy, July 15, 2020.

“They did not have music and drawing classes,” said a mother of two in Kazakhstan.<sup>336</sup> Layla M., 12, said that since her school in the United States closed and switched to online studying, she had not been able to study art, gym, or music. “My favorite subject is art,” she said.<sup>337</sup> A middle school teacher in South Dakota said, “Our school also basically stopped any exploratory classes—band, chorus, art, gym—which is often the only classes that kids are actually excited about, so it was harder for us to convince them that they should do the parts of school that they don’t like.”<sup>338</sup>

Sports or physical education proved particularly difficult. Hayley John described her 13-year-old as “very sporty.” During the lockdown of his school in Australia he missed out on group sport activities. “He lost a part of his identity.”<sup>339</sup>

## Preschool and Early Learner Education Also Hit

Children’s right to education includes education during early childhood, which is closely linked to children’s right to maximum development.<sup>340</sup> While parents, wider family, and community play a key role in such early childhood education, quality government provided early childhood education programs are shown to positively impact children’s successful transition to primary school, their educational progress, and their long-term social adjustment.<sup>341</sup> Pre-primary education includes all forms of structured instruction including kindergarten and preschool programs from approximately 3 years old.

Sian Hinton, a preschool teacher in London, United Kingdom, explained: “It’s like all of their building blocks for learning come in this year and we teach them to read and write...get it cemented—and it’s just gone! And the parents can’t do it at home because it’s quite tricky what we do... Now they’re just further and further behind.”<sup>342</sup> The principal of a kindergarten in Sydney, Australia, expressed special concern for the early learners. “With

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<sup>336</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 12, 2020.

<sup>337</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Layla M., 12, Albany, New York, United States, July 1, 2020.

<sup>338</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, South Dakota, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>339</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hayley John, Murwillumbah, New South Wales, Australia, June 12, 2020.

<sup>340</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, “General comment No. 7: Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood,” CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, September 20, 2005, sec. 28 and 30.

<sup>341</sup> UNESCO, “Right to Pre-Primary Education: A Global Study,” January 2021, pp. 32-39.

<sup>342</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sian Hinton, London, United Kingdom, June 8, 2020.

kindergarten being the foundation year, is this going to have an ongoing effect through their schooling and learning as they go along, not just this year?”<sup>343</sup>

Speaking about his 5-year-old daughter, Angel Gonzalez in Long Island, New York, said, “She would benefit greatly from being in school more because she had trouble learning how to read and the reason why is because she speaks Spanish as well. I felt like when she was in school and had the additional support and reading assignments from her teacher, it definitely helps accelerate that process.”<sup>344</sup>

Because of these benefits, governments have an important role in making pre-primary education accessible, including for families living in poverty, and also in raising awareness among parents about the benefits of preschool.<sup>345</sup>

Human Rights Watch encountered examples of thoughtful attempts to continue early childhood education during school closures.<sup>346</sup> However often, young children’s education was de-prioritized during school closures, as either unnecessary or unfeasible to provide.

“People tend to discount preschool because the kids are so young that they’ll bounce back, they’ll learn quickly, they’ll be fine,” said a preschool teacher on a Native American reservation in the United States. “But I think that age is so telling and so vital for the interactions that you have and the social structures you’re learning, and culture and behavior.”<sup>347</sup>

For example, a father in Belgrade, Serbia, when the preschool of his 7-year-old daughter shut down, said he was not worried as, in his view, “the content taught in preschool is not that essential.”<sup>348</sup> A mother in San Jose, Costa Rica, whose 3-year-old son attends a private

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<sup>343</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Sydney, Australia, June 7, 2020.

<sup>344</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Angel Gonzalez, father, Long Island, New York, United States, June 14, 2020.

<sup>345</sup> See e.g. Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations: Algeria, CRC/C/15/Add.269, October 12, 2005, para. 67(c).

<sup>346</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Gaetana Pacella, Balvano, Italy, June 12, 2020; kindergarten teacher, Massachusetts, United States, June 6, 2020; Sian Hinton, teacher, London, United Kingdom, June 8, 2020; mother, Castilla la Mancha, Spain, June 11, 2020; and father, Xinxiang, Henan, China, July 27, 2020. See also Dita Nugroho, “Covid-19: Trends, Promising Practices and Gaps in Remote Learning for Pre-Primary Education,” Unicef Office of Research—Innocenti Working Paper, December 2020.

<sup>347</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Miranda Edwards, Redding Rancheria, California, United States, June 1, 2020.

<sup>348</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Belgrade, Serbia, July 3, 2020.

preschool, said she noticed a significant drop-off in attendance by his classmates by June “because his level is more something that parents use as childcare while they work outside the home, so the vast majority have chosen to take their kids out of school instead of paying the fee for a class that is not compulsory in the eyes of the government.”<sup>349</sup>

Early childhood interventions can be particularly valuable for children with disabilities, strengthening their capacity to benefit from education and promoting their enrolment and attendance.<sup>350</sup> A mother of twin girls in Serbia, one of whom has autism and is in preschool and the other who is in grade 1, said of the child in grade 1, “She accesses the classroom using Google classroom, teachers work with her, she gets homework that we then send back to the teachers.” However, speaking in late April 2020 of the twin in preschool, she said, “Since the school closed [in mid-March] there was no one-on-one work with her and her teachers... My biggest fear is that she is losing a lot and she is supposed to enter first grade [in September]... And, now I am thinking of sending a request to delay her school for one year.”<sup>351</sup>

Some parents also expressed concern about the lack of social interaction for their early learners. For example, Lena Moskal, a mother in Bielsko-Biała, Poland, said she was concerned about her 4-year-old’s lack of contact with her peers. “She has made some steps backwards from a social point of view. When she goes to the kindergarten, she’s more independent. Now, for example, she asks me to feed her soup, and before she was doing it by herself. I think all this might have some bigger consequences because when children spend time together, they have more stimuli... All this is gone, and I think my child’s general development has been blocked.”<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, San Jose, Costa Rica, June 18, 2020.

<sup>350</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “General comment No. 4: Right to inclusive education,” CRPD/C/GC/4, September 2, 2016, sec. 65.

<sup>351</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Serbia, April 28, 2020.

<sup>352</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Lena Moskal, Bielsko-Biała, Poland, June 20, 2020.

## IV. Harm to Children and their Education

The predictable consequence of children being excluded from their schools and studies is that their learning slowed and regressed. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of students were not acquiring basic literacy and numeracy at the right age and grade. The United Nations has stated the “learning crisis could turn into a generational catastrophe,” as a result of school closures.<sup>353</sup> For many children, the pandemic brought an end to their education. However, the negative consequences for children were not just limited to the academic aspect of their lives, many children also felt social isolation, anxiety, stress, sadness, and depression. Others felt the loss of their autonomy. Where governments previously used schools to deliver nutrition and health support, access to these wellbeing services by children was also often hampered by school closures.

### Poor School Performance, and Academic Regression

When children break from studying, or study less, their skills and knowledge acquisition not only halt, but tend to regress. For example, one study in the United States found that Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous children returning to studies after the summer break on average started about three to five months behind where they would be expected to be in mathematics, and white students were about one to three months behind.<sup>354</sup> Students, parents, and teachers interviewed by Human Rights Watch described such regression happening in real time, and their concerns for its long-term repercussions.

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<sup>353</sup> United Nations, “Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond,” August 2020, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf) (accessed May 9, 2021), p.10.

<sup>354</sup> Emma Dorn et al., “Covid-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help,” McKinsey & Company, December 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help> (accessed May 9, 2021). *See also* Megan Kuhfeld et al., “Learning during Covid-19: Initial findings on students’ reading and math achievement and growth,” Collaboration for Student Growth, November 2020, <https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/11/Collaborative-brief-Learning-during-COVID-19.NOV2020.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2021); Per Engzell et al., “Learning Inequality During the Covid-19 Pandemic,” Proceedings for the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, April 27, 2021, [https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/boletim/engzellfreyverhagen\\_research\\_nov\\_2020.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/boletim/engzellfreyverhagen_research_nov_2020.pdf) (accessed May 9, 2021); and Center for Research on Education Outcomes Stanford University, “Estimates of Learning Loss in the 2019-2020 School Year,” October 2020, [https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiyb6481/f/short\\_brief\\_on\\_learning\\_loss\\_final\\_v.3.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiyb6481/f/short_brief_on_learning_loss_final_v.3.pdf) (accessed May 9, 2021).

“About a third of my seventh graders and a quarter of my eighth graders made it to the end of the semester’s work,” said a mathematics teacher in Oakland, California. “Math is very difficult, especially when you don’t have in-class support.”<sup>355</sup>

“Before confinement, [my five-year-old] knew how to write her first name,” said a mother living in a village in France’s Lille region. “After a few weeks of confinement, she was writing letters and numbers backwards, no longer wanting to work.”<sup>356</sup>

A reading intervention teacher in Oregon in the United States explained that for elementary school students it is important to have a regular reading repertoire, because it becomes progressively difficult to catch up by middle school on basics like phonics and grammar.<sup>357</sup>

A teacher at a technical school in Kananga, Congo said “We will have a hard time organizing remedial lessons because of this lost time from our students doing nothing. The level of our students is going down significantly. I wonder how we are going to recover.”<sup>358</sup>

## Students Dropping Out of Education

When schools closed down, students dropped out, some permanently, even after schools reopened. Research finds that the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. In July 2020, UNESCO estimated that close to 16 million students who were enrolled in schools before school closures, from pre-primary to upper secondary education, were at risk of not returning to formal education, with the largest share of school drop-outs in south and west Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, and children affected by conflict and migration.<sup>359</sup> In September 2020, UNICEF estimated that 24 million children who have missed out on schooling during the pandemic will drop out for good.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Laura Kaneko, Oakland, California, United States, June 21, 2020.

<sup>356</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Lille region, France, June 18, 2020.

<sup>357</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Springfield, Oregon, United States, June 16, 2020.

<sup>358</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Kanaga, Kasai, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 24, 2020.

<sup>359</sup> UNESCO, “How many students are at risk of not returning to school?” Advocacy paper – UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response, July 30, 2020, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373992> (accessed May 9, 2021) p. 10.

<sup>360</sup> UNICEF, “UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore’s remarks at a press conference on new updated guidance on school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19,” September 15, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-executive-director-henrietta-fores-remarks-press-conference-new-updated> (accessed May 9, 2021).

As discussed earlier on page 51, children from low-income families who began to work following school closures, were at particular risk of not returning to studies. Human Rights Watch research shows that many governments lack adequate mechanisms to monitor enrolment in compulsory education and ensure children who drop-out throughout the school year return to schools.<sup>361</sup> In countries with enforcement of compulsory education, students who are close to the minimum age limits of 14 or 16 are also at great risk of not completing secondary education.

A teacher at a school in Bangui, Central African Republic, said: “It’s certain that students will drop out of school. One of my students is already selling fish. She gave me two for free. She told me clearly that she cannot resume her studies next academic year.”<sup>362</sup>

“My biggest fear,” said a secondary school teacher in Italy, “is early school leaving. There are people who will not go back to school.” The teacher cited concerns from students who “have been humiliated by the distance learning,” feel that they will be penalized for not participating during distance learning, or who are daunted by the work required to catch-up with material lost during lockdown.<sup>363</sup>

A teacher in Yaoundé, Cameroon, said that before his school closed, he had 50 to 55 students per class, but after school reopened in June, there were only 15 to 20 students per class. In one final year class with 18 students, only 4 or 5 students came back, he said. “After two and a half months at home, I don’t think they had any more enthusiasm.”<sup>364</sup>

A grade 9 teacher in Texas, in the United States, who predominately teaches recently arrived migrant children from Central America, said: “A bunch of kids have already told me they’re dropping out because of everything going on, or they’re going back to their home countries.”<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> “The Education Deficit, Failures to Protect and Fulfill the Right to Education through Global Development Agendas,” Human Rights Watch report, June 2016.

<sup>362</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Bangui, Central African Republic, June 23, 2020.

<sup>363</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ale B., Italy, July 15, 2020.

<sup>364</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Yaoundé, Cameroon, June 26, 2020.

<sup>365</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abby Rufer, Dallas, Texas, United States, June 8, 2020.

A secondary school principal in France said: “We had about 30 out of 800 [students] dropout... but most...were already having great difficulty before the lockdown... They are the ones who have the most difficulty having a computer, digital autonomy, and work organization, especially since they are alone... These elements add up.”<sup>366</sup>

Ylva Lindehag teaches grades 7 and 8 in Sweden. Her school only closed for one week, although for a while parents who were at higher risk of severe complications from Covid-19 were allowed to keep their children home. But even after all students were expected to return to school, not all did. Human Rights Watch spoke to her in June before the end of the school semester and she said: “Still today, two kids have not returned to school and there is no recommendation or rules that we must support them anymore. Because I care, I send them messages on what we are doing and reading, so that they can try to keep up.”<sup>367</sup> The two students started attending school again when the new term began in August 2020.<sup>368</sup>

A primary school principal in Val d’Oise, France, explained that when her school reopened on May 18, 2020, only 73 out of 260 students returned. By June 15, “We had 94 students, or one third of the school’s students,” she said. “Some have gone on vacation, or some are afraid to return to school for health reasons, and some have dropped out, do not answer phone calls, do not get up, etcetera.” Yet she expressed confidence all students would eventually return: “Because it is obligatory.”<sup>369</sup>

“Not everyone will be able to return,” said a teacher at a boarding school for Tibetan children in India. “Many don’t have access to the internet or to a phone, and they simply won’t know when or if school has restarted. Some parents won’t send their children back to boarding school out of fear of Covid-19 if we reopen anytime this term.”<sup>370</sup>

In schools in Israel and Australia, teachers said that when schools reopened, they stopped offering distance learning for children who could not return in person for Covid-19 related reasons. “I have two students who have not returned,” said middle school teacher Maayan Bar Tsur in June in Haifa, Israel, where education is compulsory through grade 12. “Their

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<sup>366</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Auvergne-Rhônes-Alpes, France, June 10, 2020.

<sup>367</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ylva Lindehag, Stockholm, Sweden, June 10, 2020.

<sup>368</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ylva Lindehag, Stockholm, Sweden, April 7, 2021.

<sup>369</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Val d’Oise, France, June 19, 2020.

<sup>370</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Dharamshala, India, June 14, 2020.

parents are in a high-risk group, and they have not sent them back to school... I would say that in every class there are three to four students missing... There is no option for them to learn online, because all the teachers have to return.”<sup>371</sup> At a primary school in Sydney, Australia, the principal said that after the first school closure, four of the school’s roughly 300 students had not returned because they were living with vulnerable family members. She said these students were “really out there by themselves now because classes have gone back to normal, we don’t Zoom. We’re losing that connection with kids who aren’t back.”<sup>372</sup>

## Psychosocial and Emotional Harm

School shutdowns had negative psychosocial consequences for many children, in part caused by the interruption of the daily routine of school, and the support of seeing friends there.<sup>373</sup> Although the pandemic brought a range of stresses for children—being confined indoors, the illness or death of family members, fears of or actual sickness, financial pressures on families, and missing other social activities—students and teachers spoke of problems directly related to school closures.

### *Social Isolation*

Many students missed the interaction with peers afforded by school,<sup>374</sup> and their connections to school staff.<sup>375</sup> Parents and teachers worried about children’s loss of social connections.<sup>376</sup> Some teachers lamented the loss of group work.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Maayan Bar Tsur, teacher, Haifa, Israel, June 6, 2020.

<sup>372</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Sydney, Australia, June 7, 2020.

<sup>373</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Lena Moskal, mother, Bielsko-Biała, Poland, June 20, 2020; principal, Caracas, Venezuela, June 10, 2020; mother, Roxbury, Massachusetts, United States, June 3, 2020; school counselor, New York, United States, June 4, 2020; caregiver to four children, Beni, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 10, 2020; teacher, Karak, Jordan, June 6, 2020; mother of two, Hvidovre, Denmark, June 10, 2020; Bellinda van den Helm, teacher, Oss, Brabant, Netherlands, June 11, 2020; Teresa Rodoreda, teacher, Barcelona, Spain, June 11, 2020; Laura Kaneko, teacher, Oakland, California, June 21, 2020; teacher, Berlin, Germany, June 9, 2020; and Sarah Lodder, teacher, Berlin, Germany, June 9, 2020.

<sup>374</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Samantha Strömqvist, 19, Sundsvall, Sweden; Freja J., 17, Møgeltønder, Denmark, June 6, 2020; and Roxane K., 16, Butembu, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 12, 2020.

<sup>375</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Zaid M., 9, Albany, New York United States, July 1, 2020.

<sup>376</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with secondary school teacher, Berlin, Germany, June 7, 2020; middle school teacher, South Dakota, United States, June 8, 2020; mother, Roxbury, Massachusetts, United States, June 3, 2020; teacher, Baltimore, Maryland, United States, June 20, 2020; parent, Atlanta, Georgia, United States, June 8, 2020; Pete Jones, principal, Auckland, New Zealand, August 29, 2020.

<sup>377</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Lindsey Readman, secondary school teacher, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, June 2, 2020; Emily Beer, grade 4 teacher, Glen Burnie, Maryland, United States, June 8, 2020.

In Tokyo, Japan, 14-year-old Sakura K. had been hoping to make new friends in the new semester that started in April in Japan and wished her school would find ways for students to communicate. But her school offered no online learning, only written assignments.<sup>378</sup>

Discussing the aspects she missed with school closed, Taisha S., 16, in Kenya said: “We had mentoring activities in the evening by the girls ahead of us who would push us to succeed and work hard.”<sup>379</sup>

“Social life has always provided an escape from my worries and troubles, so it was scary to be just stuck with my own thoughts,” said Tsering W., 16, in Brussels, Belgium. “At school, you’re with people that encourage a shared mindset of studying.”<sup>380</sup>

Josefina C., 15, in Maryland, in the United States, has a disability, experiences social anxiety and challenges forming peer relationships. “It’s a little lonely,” she said of being unable to go to school. “I’ve seen some of my classmates outside of school but this year I don’t have any of their [phone] numbers so it’s hard. I only follow two of my classmates on Instagram.”<sup>381</sup>

“The lockdown has been isolating with no friends and school structure,” said Kioko Y., 15, in Kenya. “The group discussions that helped me learn and being able to go to the labs and conduct different experiments are other things I miss.”<sup>382</sup>

For preschool children in particular, social interaction is developmentally important. As Miranda Edwards, a preschool teacher on sovereign Native American land explained, “The purpose of preschool is social cognitive development and it’s hard to foster that at home without other kids around.”<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sakura K., 14, Tokyo, Japan, June 1, 2020.

<sup>379</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Taisha S., 16, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

<sup>380</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Tsering W., 16, Brussels, Belgium, June 20, 2020.

<sup>381</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Josefina C., 15, Baltimore, Maryland, United States, June 20, 2020.

<sup>382</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Kioko Y., 15, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020.

<sup>383</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Miranda Edwards, preschool teacher, Redding Rancheria, California, United States, June 1, 2020.

### *Anxiety, Stress, Sadness, and Depression*

The most common words interviewed teenagers used to describe their feelings during school closures was “boring” or “bored,”<sup>384</sup> but others opened up about stronger negative feelings. “Children don’t have the developmental capabilities to process those emotions and that stress,” said a grade 9 teacher in Texas, in the United States.<sup>385</sup> She and other teachers spoke of the importance of counsellors and resources to support students’ emotional well-being and mental health,<sup>386</sup> and some students said that school shutdowns prevented them from getting counselling services, or that their schools did not provide them at all.

Joseph S., 16, in South Africa, said, “I was completely struggling for a whole two weeks, like crying every day. That was a big thing for me, starting to think life was meaningless.”<sup>387</sup>

“I am feeling a lot of stress,” said Palki B., 14, in Bangladesh. “I have not been going to school for a long time now, so it feels like maybe I won’t ever go to school again.”<sup>388</sup>

“There’s a lot of pressure,” said Nicki T., 14, in New York state, in the United States. “It’s hard to have motivation and self-drive. It’s difficult to figure out when to start and stop work... It is hard to stay positive and motivated... In the beginning I was sad about not seeing my friends, there was a toll on my mental health.”<sup>389</sup>

Monir M., 13 lives with his parents, who are Rohingya refugees, and four siblings, in a small town in Japan. “My motivation for study changed depending on the day... I usually go to school and go home and get tired, but I felt a different type of fatigue when staying home for a long time. I felt like I was trapped.”<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Aiperia K., 17, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, May 31, 2020; Dekha Mohamed A., 14, Garissa, Kenya, June 20, 2020; Mohammad A., 19, Amman, Jordan; Sara W., 14, Lebanon, June 18, 2020; student, 19, Thailand, July 1, 2020; and Ray N., 16, Bangkok, Thailand, July 2, 2020.

<sup>385</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Laken Cantu, Houston, Texas, United States, June 12, 2020.

<sup>386</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abby Rufer, Dallas, Texas, United States, June 8, 2020; and Emily Beer, Glen Burnie, Maryland, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>387</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Joseph S., 16, Cape Town, South Africa, June 25, 2020.

<sup>388</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Palki B., 14, Savar, Bangladesh, August 6, 2020.

<sup>389</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Nicki T., 14, Rochester, New York, United States, June 3, 2020.

<sup>390</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Monir M., 13, Hokkaido, Japan, May 29, 2020.

Shaina O., in Israel, said “I have a friend who told me she was really suffering from a deep depression at home. Her father previously had cancer, and he has a low immune system, so he was in a high-risk group, and she really couldn’t leave. She...told me that she really had suicidal thoughts. It was really hard for her that she couldn’t meet people.”<sup>391</sup>

“I feel really sad,” said 14-year-old Estelle D., in Ontario, Canada. “Kids spend five days a week in school for seven hours, so school was basically my entire life.”<sup>392</sup> Her older sister Mia said: “I’ve been very depressed. My mood was just not good, I was feeling overall just restless. I feel like a kid that’s getting cranky and has too much energy. I feel trapped.”<sup>393</sup>

Teachers too were under a lot of stress.<sup>394</sup> “Some teachers were really aggressive,” said Sara W., 14, in Lebanon, which, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, was undergoing a severe political and economic crisis. “They weren’t happy and they took it out on us. They just wanted to finish. That’s not nice at all. We are all going through the same things.”<sup>395</sup>

### *Loss of Autonomy and Privacy*

A quality education enables children to develop their own identities and emerging autonomy, including exploring and learning about topics that they may be otherwise unable to do with ease at home in proximity to their parents. Certain topics crucial for a teenager’s development and health, such as comprehensive sexuality education, can be hard to deliver remotely, with children at home.

Narek G., a 13-year-old boy in Yerevan, Armenia, who is blind said with a grin, “I was a little bit freer,” when at school. Before adding, with his mother nearby, “But I am not like behaving badly when mom is not around.”<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Shaina O., 18, Hodaya, Israel, June 6, 2020.

<sup>392</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Estelle D., 14, Ontario, Canada, June 12, 2020.

<sup>393</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mia D., 17, Ontario, Canada, June 12, 2020.

<sup>394</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Karak, Jordan, June 6, 2020.

<sup>395</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sara W., 14, Lebanon, June 18, 2020.

<sup>396</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Narek G., 13, Yerevan, Armenia, June 30, 2020.

A 16-year-old girl in Australia said, “I do not want to learn about alcohol and drugs in front of my parents.”<sup>397</sup>

Silvia Salami, a mother of two in Italy, said her 8-year-old daughter had two live online sessions a week. During the livestreams, Silvia said her daughter would tell her “‘Mom, please, leave the room now, I want to be on my own here’... Sometimes I could not even cross the room, because she wanted to be alone with her school friends.”<sup>398</sup>

A primary school teacher in the Netherlands who spoke individually with each of her students once a week observed: “Some children found it a bit difficult to call when the parents were sitting next to them because they felt less freedom to speak.”<sup>399</sup>

## Loss of Wellbeing Support Provided at Schools

In many communities, school buildings are used to provide services that support children’s general wellbeing, including through the provision of meals, counselling, and basic health checks. Moreover, teachers often serve as important independent, non-family, individuals who are often trained to monitor whether children are comfortable, healthy, safe, and happy.

### *Reduced Supervision of Abusive Home Environments*

One of the most disturbing consequences of school closures was that of pandemic-produced pressures combined with more time confined inside, which increased the risk of children experiencing or witnessing abusive behavior at home. Removing children from school also minimized an opportunity for adults outside the home to monitor the health and safety of children.<sup>400</sup>

A principal in Caracas, Venezuela, shared one story from her school:

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<sup>397</sup> Human Rights Watch online survey response from 16-year-old girl, Australia, August 1, 2020.

<sup>398</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Silvia Salami, Macherio, Lombardy, Italy, June 9, 2020.

<sup>399</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, the Netherlands, June 11, 2020.

<sup>400</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Laura Chupin, partnerships office, Chemins d’Avenir, France, June 2020; teacher, Indiana, United States, June 24, 2020; Marie-Therese Exler, teacher, Kiel, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, June 3, 2020; and Jacob Meyer, teacher, Beresford, South Dakota, United States, June 11, 2020.

A child...between 7 or 8 years old. The teacher sent him an activity to solve, a [mathematics] problem... His mother, who was very stressed out and emotional, recorded a video for the [parents'] WhatsApp group, where she's hitting her child... And she says it's the teacher's fault, she doesn't know how to teach, it's the school's problem, not her problem, that her child has to learn... We talked and put her in contact with a psychologist.<sup>401</sup>

A teacher in the United States overheard the screams of an argument between family members while she was on a distance learning call with students. "I had to ask the student to mute their microphone so other kids didn't overhear."<sup>402</sup>

A primary school teacher in Santiago, Chile, said: "I cannot demand much from these children... They live the daily violence within their home... School is a place where children go to protect themselves from their reality."<sup>403</sup>

"We are one of the largest groups of mandated reporters," said a secondary teacher in the United States, referring to the legal obligation in her state for teachers to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect to the relevant authorities. "In addition to having gaps in learning, I also think when we go back to school, students will be experiencing a lot of trauma. Either directly from Covid-19 and an illness, or indirectly from being in situations where they may not be safe, or they may have had to rely on unhealthy coping mechanisms, like substance abuse."<sup>404</sup> Similarly a teacher in Indiana worried: "We're seeing low reports of child abuse cases. It's very, very low. It's low because people are just staying home and kids just don't have a way to get those things reported. I'm really afraid that when we come back, how are my kids going to be?"<sup>405</sup>

A primary school teacher in Nairobi, Kenya, said: "With the lockdown, all family members are staying in the house morning to evening. I have had some girls call to inform me that they are harassed by their fathers or uncles. What I do... is to call the social worker

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<sup>401</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with principal, Caracas, Venezuela, June 10, 2020.

<sup>402</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with kindergarten teacher, Providence, Rhode Island, United States, June 17, 2020.

<sup>403</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Daniela Andrea Ribeiro Espinoza, Santiago, Chile, July 9, 2020.

<sup>404</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Massachusetts, United States, June 4, 2020.

<sup>405</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Indiana, June 21, 2020.

attached to that pupil or neighborhood and have them take the girls to a different relative.”<sup>406</sup>

A primary school teacher in England noted that it was a “very stressful time for everyone,” and that among families facing financial hardship at her school this stress had seen a rise in anti-social behavior and domestic violence. She cited a couple of incidents where the police had been called to students’ homes during school closures.<sup>407</sup>

### *Children in Need of Food and Nutrition Support*

Schools often provide free or subsidized meals to students. “If kids don’t have food at home, they aren’t going to learn,” said a teacher at a school with a lower-income student body in New Zealand.<sup>408</sup> The World Food Program estimated that in April 2020, at the height of global school closures, 369 million school children were missing out on school meals, and that in January 2021, 264 million children were missing out.<sup>409</sup>

Fourteen-year old Patience K., in Ghana, said her parents’ fishing business lost customers during the lockdown, and that once schools shut down, she and her eight siblings no longer had access to free school meals. She said she felt she had no choice but to go to work. “If I don’t do it, life will be tough for all of us.”<sup>410</sup>

Principal Missy Rivers at a school in Alaska, United States, where most students are Indigenous Yup’ik, and all qualify for free breakfast and lunch, said her first concern when her school closed was food:

First, we had the students come in by last name with three students per table for about a week and a half. Then, we started packing up “to-go” meals, but the kids themselves had to pick up the food at the door. After a couple of weeks, we got an exception from the grant that paid for the food

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<sup>406</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Nairobi, Kenya, June 3, 2020.

<sup>407</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Norwich, United Kingdom, June 9, 2020.

<sup>408</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, teacher, New Zealand, June 2020. Her school’s social worker was classed as an essential worker so was able to get food parcels to families who needed it.

<sup>409</sup> World Food Program, “Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures,” data set available at: <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map>.

<sup>410</sup> Human Rights Watch and Friends of the Nation interview with Patience K., 14, Ghana, February 27, 2021

to let us give the food out to the parents of the students. The last four weeks, we gave out the raw ingredients for the meals to families and they could cook the food themselves.<sup>411</sup>

A teacher in Dallas, Texas, United States, said her school switched to offering one day a week for food pick-up. Many of her students walked to school because there was no school transportation and stood in line for two to three hours: “These ‘meals’ consisted of an apple sometimes, so it wasn’t sustainable food for a whole day.”<sup>412</sup>

Often teachers and school staff, found alternative ways to ensure access to food for their students, including options for pick-up of meals or food, and food and meal delivery, even sometimes in the absence of guidance by national government institutions.<sup>413</sup>

### **Delays in Providing Dignified Alternatives to School Meals in the United Kingdom**

After schools closed in March 2020 across the United Kingdom, the central government adopted a supermarket voucher system offering £15 (US\$20) of vouchers per week per child to replace free school meals in England.<sup>414</sup> The voucher system, administered by a private multinational company, was criticized for technical glitches, inadequate preparation, understaffing, difficulties and delays for school administrators using the online portal, delays in families receiving them, inability to redeem them at supermarkets preferred by low-income families, and some supermarkets being unable to process them.<sup>415</sup> The voucher provider’s website was improved in mid-April, yet Alex Rawlings, a primary school principal in the West Midlands said in late April: “The system doesn’t work... I’ve ordered 300 vouchers successfully, but only about 50 have been received by families so far. The links the families get by email don’t work. Or worse, they get the vouchers and can’t use them at the supermarket.”<sup>416</sup> Primary school head teacher Maya Wittleton explained her

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<sup>411</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Missy Rivers, Scammon Bay, Alaska, United States, June 3, 2020.

<sup>412</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abby Rufer, Dallas, Texas, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>414</sup> “UK: Children in England Going Hungry with Schools Shut,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 27, 2020.

<sup>415</sup> John Dickens, “How the government’s free school meals voucher scheme is leaving children without food,” April 24, *Schools Week*, 2020; Naomi Rovnick, “Headteachers urge government to fix UK free school meals website,” *Financial Times*, April 21, 2020; Rob Davis, “Government awarded school meal voucher contract without tender,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2020; Emily Ashton, “The Free School Meal Voucher Scheme Still Isn’t Working Properly, 7 Weeks After Schools Closed Due To Coronavirus,” *BuzzFeed News*, May 7, 2020; Sally Weale & Jessica Murray, “UK’s poorest families suffering as free school

concerns for a community in London in which 65 percent of the children come from families where English is not the main language, “A lot of parents couldn’t work out the voucher system because of limited English or computer access... These families are struggling anyway, some have traveled from conflict situations or lived through Ebola outbreaks. Asking for food like this is revisiting their trauma.”<sup>417</sup> The delay by education authorities to confirm that they would provide free school meal replacements during a week-long break in the term in late May, once again left some schools unable to provide vouchers on time to families that needed them.<sup>418</sup>

## Benefits of Distance Learning for Some Students

Some students, parents, and teachers told Human Rights Watch of students who had access to their own devices and reliable internet, and who performed better academically during distance learning—in particular, children who were easily distracted by disruptions in the classroom, had social anxiety, who suffered bullying at school, or who simply thrived with independent learning. Many older children, whose sleep rhythms typically have them stay awake later, valued sleeping in and the ability to manage their school days flexibly.<sup>419</sup> Although this is positive for these children, it also suggests that schools could consider exploring options to accommodate the many ways different children learn and

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meals vouchers delayed,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2020; and Judith Burns, “Coronavirus: ‘Humiliation’ as school meal vouchers fail at till,” *BBC News*, May 7, 2020.

<sup>415</sup> John Dickens, “How the government’s free school meals voucher scheme is leaving children without food,” April 24, *Schools Week*, 2020; Naomi Rovnick, “Headteachers urge government to fix UK free school meals website,” *Financial Times*, April 21, 2020; Rob Davis, “Government awarded school meal voucher contract without tender,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2020; Emily Ashton, “The Free School Meal Voucher Scheme Still Isn’t Working Properly, 7 Weeks After Schools Closed Due To Coronavirus,” *BuzzFeed News*, May 7, 2020; Sally Weale & Jessica Murray, “UK’s poorest families suffering as free school meals vouchers delayed,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2020; and Judith Burns, “Coronavirus: ‘Humiliation’ as school meal vouchers fail at till,” *BBC News*, May 7, 2020.

<sup>416</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Alex Rawlings, Head Teacher, Quarry Bank Primary School, Brierley Hill, West Midlands, United Kingdom, April 30, 2020.

<sup>417</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Maya Wittleton, Head Teacher, Avonmore Primary School, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, United Kingdom, May 11, 2020.

<sup>418</sup> Anoosh Chakelian, “How a botched government food voucher scheme left English pupils hungry in a pandemic,” *New Statesman*, June 2, 2020; and Human Rights Watch Submission to the UK Parliament Education Committee’s inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children’s services, July 23, 2020.

<sup>419</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Mikel S., 14, Bilbao, Spain, June 25, 2020; Artur D., 18, Tavush region, Armenia, June 11, 2020; Jacob Meyer, teacher, Beresford, South Dakota, United States, June 11, 2020; secondary school teacher, Yankton, South Dakota, June 8, 2020; and Jack N., 13, Brisbane, Australia, June 21, 2020.

that could better respond to many children’s individual social, emotional, and academic needs.

“My son found [online] remote learning easier than going to class,” said a mother in Finland. “He said several times that it lacks the noise, the interruptions, and that the teacher could just mute those who disrupted the class... He is a child that can get overwhelmed with social situations.”<sup>420</sup> A civics and history middle school teacher in Israel said, “For some of the subjects, it was even better than usual. Because there were no distractions, there were no discipline issues—which in Israel takes up a lot of our time.”<sup>421</sup> Some students at a New Zealand school also reported they liked being able to concentrate without the distraction of fellow students with behavioral issues disrupting classes.<sup>422</sup>

“Some students are not as successful in traditional classrooms with set schedules, sitting for six to seven hours a day,” said a grade 4 teacher at a school in Maryland, United States. “For some of them, the opportunity for some flexibility and more movement, is good.”<sup>423</sup>

A primary school teacher in rural Armenia said, “One of the advantages is an individual approach. Students do not answer in front of the class, and I give feedback individually and personally not in front of the whole class. It makes it easier for many of them... I think each of them felt important due to this approach.”<sup>424</sup>

Meanwhile Martha M., 17, in Denmark, reflected that she focused more on her schoolwork during closures because the social element of school sometimes impeded her learning.<sup>425</sup>

A lower-secondary teacher in Stockholm, Sweden, who temporarily provided online learning for students kept at home due to the pandemic, said “Some of the students have been affected quite positively from this experience, for example those that find the social

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<sup>420</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Helsinki, Finland, June 12, 2020.

<sup>421</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Maayan Bar Tsur, teacher, Haifa, Israel, June 6, 2020.

<sup>422</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, teacher, New Zealand, June, 2020.

<sup>423</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Emily Beer, Glen Burnie, Maryland, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>424</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Tavush, Armenia, June 15, 2020.

<sup>425</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Martha M., 17, Hellerup, Denmark, June 9, 2020.

aspects of being in classroom difficult,... students that do not always show up to school, or that are not actively participating in the classroom.”<sup>426</sup>

Sara W., 14, in Lebanon said “One good thing about online learning is that I have more confidence to speak up when no one is seeing you. We didn’t share video, only audio.”<sup>427</sup>

“Some of the kids on my caseload actually were turning in way more work,” said a middle school teacher in California, United States, with a number of students with information processing disorders. “The more independent learning model was beneficial, and they really liked it and grew a lot. I saw them advocating for themselves and reaching out.”<sup>428</sup>

Many teachers and students spoke about the times of day children chose to do schoolwork when no longer constricted by the schedule of a school day. Yet some parents and teachers also expressed concerns about children working later in the day.

Students often liked adjusting their learning hours to their own preference. Eleanora I., 18, in Italy said: “One very positive thing was waking up later. Waking up at 6.30 is hard, so it was a good thing.”<sup>429</sup> Célia L., 14, who lives in a small village in France, said of her experience with school closures, “I thought it was pretty good because you don’t have to get up early anymore. Instead of getting up at 6:30 a.m. I got up at 9 a.m.” Normally, Célia travels 45 minutes by bus to get to school.<sup>430</sup>

A principal in New Zealand said students worked “at all sorts of hours—and they were enjoying that!” So the school adjusted and had no online classes before 11 a.m. “We figured that being teenagers, they would be night owls. We didn’t care.”<sup>431</sup>

A mother of a grade 4 student in Zhejiang province, China said, “He had to take online classes, taught by his regular teachers. Classes were mostly in the morning... My son

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<sup>426</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Stockholm, June 15, 2020.

<sup>427</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Sara W., 14, Lebanon, June 18, 2020.

<sup>428</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with middle school special education teacher, San Francisco, California, United States, June 19, 2020.

<sup>429</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Eleanora I., 18, Milan, Italy, June 15, 2020.

<sup>430</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Célia L., 14, Ain, France, June 8, 2020.

<sup>431</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ragne Maxwell, Porirua, New Zealand, June 16, 2020.

sometimes was too lazy to get up to attend the morning classes, so he watched recordings of the classes in the afternoon.”<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Zhejiang, China, July 31, 2020.

## V. Pressures on Teachers and Parents

Ideally, schools serve as social equalizers, delivering instruction and support that develops children's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential, and prepare children for a responsible life—regardless of the background of any individual child. However, as parents and other caregivers assumed more responsibility for children's education during Covid-19 related school closures, the quality of children's education increasingly, and sometimes solely, depended upon caregivers' time, ability, capacity, and education. Women predominantly assumed a disproportionate level of the associated additional domestic workload and responsibilities for ensuring and monitoring remote learning.<sup>433</sup>

Many teachers, particularly those who were also parenting during the lockdown, spoke of additional stress, increased workloads, and uncertain or lost income. Before the pandemic, there was already a serious shortage of teachers globally,<sup>434</sup> and in response to these pressures, some teachers decided to abandon the profession.<sup>435</sup>

### Pressures on Parents

With no, or diminished contact between students and teachers during school closures, parents and other caregivers assumed the role of supervising children throughout the day. They often ensured children participated in organized distance learning or developed their own alternative educational opportunities for their children. They may have provided technology support to their children, or been in charge of picking up worksheets from teachers or schools. Parents and caregivers who have had to work, particularly essential workers, have faced particular competing challenges. Similarly, parents whose previous

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<sup>433</sup> Damaris Seleina Parsitau, "Invisible lives, missing voices: Putting women and girls at the center of post-COVID-19 recovery and reconstruction," Brookings Institution, January 28, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2021/01/28/invisible-lives-missing-voices-putting-women-and-girls-at-the-center-of-post-covid-19-recovery-and-reconstruction/> (accessed February 22, 2021).

<sup>434</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "The World Needs Almost 69 Million New Teachers to Reach the 2030 Education Goals," UIS Fact Sheet No. 39, October 2016, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/document/world-needs-almost-69-million-new-teachers-reach-2030-education-goals> (accessed May 9, 2021).

<sup>435</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with preschool board member, California, United States, June 19, 2020; Daniela Andrea Ribeiro Espinoza, teacher, Santiago, Chile, July 9, 2020; NGO staff member, Venezuela, June 12, 2020; Tiauna Washington, teacher, Richmond, Indiana, June 21, 2020; teacher, Indiana, United States, June 24, 2020; school administrator, California, United States, June 8, 2020.

education levels did not match their children's, or who struggled with the predominant language of school instruction, faced challenges in supporting their children.

When governments imposed movement restrictions in response to the pandemic, they often exempted certain occupations—referred to as “essential workers” or “key workers” in English—whose ongoing physical presence at their place of work was not only permitted, but expected. One analysis in the United States suggested that many of those classified as “essential workers” during pandemic lockdowns do not have a college degree and that the median hourly wage in the sectors containing the majority of “essential workers” is lower than that of “nonessential” workers.<sup>436</sup> When schools made no accommodations for children of essential workers to attend even during lockdowns, these children were often left in arrangements less conducive to education than their peers who had parents at home.

“Because we serve underserved communities, a lot of the parents were working as essential workers,” said a grade 9 teacher in Houston, Texas, in the United States. “So a lot of students were at home without supervision, encouragement.”<sup>437</sup> As another teacher with many students from families of essential workers in Washington state, in the United States, said, “That’s been really challenging for kids to be at home and not have a parent there who can help them with their learning.”<sup>438</sup>

Alma Rincón Ochoa and her husband kept working outside their home during the school closures in Colima State, Mexico. Their second-grade son “was supposed to shut himself in” with his grandmother, but she was unable to supervise lessons. “It was super stressful to get home at 5 p.m. and have to begin the classes,” said Alma. “He was tired at night—he didn’t want to start the work then. There were times when he cried. ‘We have to get it done,’ I’d say, but he would say, ‘I’m too tired.’ Sometimes, on Fridays, I would relent.”<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Celine McNicholas and Margaret Poydock, “Who are essential workers? A comprehensive look at their wages, demographics, and unionization rates,” Economic Policy Institute’s *Working Economics Blog*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates/> (accessed May 9, 2021).

<sup>437</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Laken Cantu, teacher, Houston, Texas, United States, June 12, 2020.

<sup>438</sup> Human Rights Watch interview primary school teacher in Seattle, Washington, United States, June 22, 2020.

<sup>439</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Alma Rincón Ochoa, mother, Cofradía de Suchitlán, Colima, Mexico, June 19, 2020.

## Burden on Parents Who are Also Teachers

Closures left all working parents—including teachers—without childcare during the day. (For more on the gender disparities related to this, see the following section.) Teachers spoke of the burden of being both a teacher and a parent.<sup>440</sup> This affected women in particular; almost two-thirds of the world teaching workforce is women.<sup>441</sup>

“I always feel like I’m not doing enough,” said a single mother in Rhode Island in the United States about navigating her duties as a teacher while also making sure that her own two children attend virtual school. She felt stressed and overwhelmed.<sup>442</sup>

Maayan Bar Tsur, a teacher in Haifa, Israel, said, “It was really hard. When I did Zoom calls with students, they had to be really, really short... As soon as I turned on my camera, my three children would jump up and start showing the students the new Lego they had built.”<sup>443</sup>

A science teacher in a school in Italy, said, “There have been training opportunities...aimed to guide the teacher in how to do remote learning... I didn’t manage to take those courses because I didn’t have the time. I have a small child to take care of.”<sup>444</sup>

## Gender Disparities in Additional Child Care and Supporting Distance Learning

The pandemic exacerbated gender inequities in care giving within many families, and dramatically increased the time many people spent caring for others and doing unpaid

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<sup>440</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with teacher, Madrid, Spain, June 9, 2020; and Sian Hinton, London, United Kingdom, June 8, 2020.

<sup>441</sup> UNESCO, “Gender in teaching: a key dimension of inclusion,” September 2020, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374448> (accessed April 2, 2021); and UNESCO, “Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Building Bridges for Gender Equality,” 2019, p. 30.

<sup>442</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with kindergarten teacher, Providence, Rhode Island, United States, June 17, 2020.

<sup>443</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Maayan Bar Tsur, Haifa, Israel, June 6, 2020.

<sup>444</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with support teacher, Emilia Romagna, Italy, June 18, 2020.

housework.<sup>445</sup> While this affects people across genders, because women globally do so much more care work, they are most affected.<sup>446</sup>

“I am all by myself educating and taking care of my children. My husband doesn’t help me at all as he has to work,” said a mother of four children aged 3 to 10, in Karabalta, Kyrgyzstan, who also works part-time teaching English classes. She also is the family’s cook and cleaner. “Sometimes I don’t have time to sleep.”<sup>447</sup>

“I work 28 hours [a week] at one job and usually do another 15 hours or so on a second freelance job,” said a mother of a 4-year-old girl in Berlin. “I am separated from the father of my child and it is imperative for me to work... It is incredibly stressful. I have to work full-time and take care of my child full-time... Usually I rely on the grandparents, but they are old and therefore in the high-risk group. You feel you are working without a break. Every time she is sleeping, I work... We don’t have a TV. We only watch shows on a computer. So I cannot put her in front of the computer, because then I cannot work.”<sup>448</sup>

A Mexican mother of two, living undocumented in New York, United States, said: “For a while, my husband stopped working completely, so I would take care of one kid while he would take care of the other. He doesn’t speak English, so I help for the school. Now he is back to work half-time. We have very big difficulties paying our bills and the rent... Everything falls on me, and I have to constantly be here or else my kids won’t study!”<sup>449</sup>

A father in Toronto, Canada, said “My partner and I both teach...at a university, and our contracts ended in April. So for May and June my wife took it upon herself to really take on a lot of the home schooling. I was kind of the background helper.”<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> Heather Barr, “Caregivers Overwhelmed by Increased Demands Under Pandemic,” Human Rights Watch dispatch, June 2, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/02/caregivers-overwhelmed-increased-demands-under-pandemic>.

<sup>446</sup> UN Women, “Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights,” 2015, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/poww-2015-2016-en.pdf> (accessed October 2020), p. 11.

<sup>447</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Karabalta, Chuy region, Kyrgyzstan, June 1, 2020.

<sup>448</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Berlin, Germany, May 2020.

<sup>449</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with mother, Queens, New York, United States, June 5, 2020.

<sup>450</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 7, 2020.

## Teachers' Workload

Teachers shared a spectrum of perspectives on how their workload was affected by school lockdowns: some reported doing no live online teaching, and less of a workload;<sup>451</sup> others said they were doing online teaching, and also less work;<sup>452</sup> while others reported working more, or a heavier workload at the beginning of distance learning, but later transitioning to a lower load. A few students complained of teachers who they felt did no work. While teachers' specific experiences differed, they were similar in that they highlighted the innumerable challenges faced by education systems to adjust to and accommodate necessary public health protection measures.

Two teachers in Sweden, whose schools did not close down, said their workload increased because their colleagues who had any possible symptoms of Covid-19, stayed home and could not work.<sup>453</sup> A teacher in Brazil who lives with his parents “who are at risk” said he was scared that he might “bring the virus home to them once school opens.”<sup>454</sup>

A secondary school teacher in Finland who continued teaching online said: “It was hard work, triple the work, making a video, listening to it yourself, and also observing the actual lesson... At first, I worked from five in the morning to five in the afternoon, for a couple of weeks, then I started to be so exhausted that I couldn't sleep and was shaking uncontrollably, my body started to react... Holidays were spent doing work.”<sup>455</sup>

“It was double the work,” said a teacher in Australia. “I have been teaching for 20 years and have never experienced this.”<sup>456</sup> A primary school teacher in the Netherlands said “Normally, I work four days for 32 hours, and I'm off on Mondays. During the school closing I worked more hours and sometimes including the Monday. This was partly my own fault because when children called me, I felt responsible to respond.”<sup>457</sup> A teacher in Bilbao, Spain said she was available 24 hours a day for her students, including weekends—

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<sup>451</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with teachers in Baltimore, United States, June 9, 2020; Houston, Texas, United States, June 12, 2020; Kiel, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, June 3, 2020; and Tokyo, Japan, May 29, 2020.

<sup>452</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with teachers in the United States in Springfield, Oregon, June 16, 2020; New York City, June 18, 2020; and Chicago, Illinois, June 20, 2020.

<sup>453</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with two teachers, Stockholm, Sweden, June 15, 2020.

<sup>454</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Fabio de Lima, teacher, São Paulo, Brazil, July 13, 2020.

<sup>455</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with a teacher, Helsinki, Finland, June 9, 2020.

<sup>456</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with primary school teacher, Murwillumbah, New South Wales, Australia, June 11, 2020.

<sup>457</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with primary school teacher, the Netherlands, June 11, 2020.

whenever her students, who were preparing for national examinations, needed support.<sup>458</sup> A teacher in Russia said he worked at least 50 hours a week during quarantine, up 20 hours from before. He felt his health got worse as a result.<sup>459</sup> In Madrid, a teacher said at first she was working 30 percent more time, but that then stabilized.<sup>460</sup>

Some teachers were largely absent—and students felt the differences between teachers. “I haven’t heard from my geography teacher,” said Tsering W., 16, in Belgium.<sup>461</sup> Hind M. in Casablanca, Morocco, said “Teachers of Arabic, French, Islamic education, and History and Geography never showed up” to distance learning.<sup>462</sup> Prastri Agung Kamurahang, 17, in Sulawesi, Indonesia said that before the pandemic she had chemistry class two hours each day: “But the teacher only came once a week, 30 minutes at the most, doing online teaching.”<sup>463</sup>

## Costs to Teachers

Many teachers reported to Human Rights Watch that to support their students’ distance learning, they personally assumed some costs, which were not reimbursed by their schools. For example, a headteacher in rural Zambia said his school’s teachers used their own money for airtime and mobile data to send students assignments and documents.<sup>464</sup> A teacher in Russia said that his wife bought another laptop during the first week of lockdown because they could not both share the one they already had, for work.<sup>465</sup> In Germany, a primary school teacher said she paid to mail materials to one student, because the school would not pay for it as it was too heavy.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Bilbao, Spain, June 12, 2020.

<sup>459</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Izhevsk, Russia, June 6, 2020.

<sup>460</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Madrid, Spain, June 9, 2020.

<sup>461</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Tsering W., 16, Brussels, Belgium, June 20, 2020.

<sup>462</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Hynd M., 18, Casablanca, Morocco, June 18, 2020.

<sup>463</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Prastri Agung Kamurahang, Tondano, Minahasa regency, North Sulawesi, Indonesia, July 14, 2020.

<sup>464</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with headteacher, Zambia, June 5, 2020.

<sup>465</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Izhevsk, Russia, June 6, 2020.

<sup>466</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Brandenburg, Germany, June 1, 2020.

## Reduction in Teacher Salaries

The vast majority of public-school teachers interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported no changes to their salaries, although some reported reductions in supplemental income. Some teachers at private schools, however, had their salaries cut.<sup>467</sup>

A teacher in a public school in Morocco, said the education ministry reduced his salary by one day per month as a “mandatory contribution to the Covid relief fund.”<sup>468</sup> A teacher in Jordan said she lost an expected 80 dinar (US\$115) monthly bonus, that she had already budgeted to spend on a diploma certificate in education.<sup>469</sup> A teacher in South Dakota, United States, said teaching assistants were not allowed to work and were not paid, and that teachers lost expected extra income from coaching sports: “Since teachers in South Dakota are paid so poorly, a lot of them really depend on that extra \$4,000 to \$5,000... We use that to pay our bills!”<sup>470</sup> A teacher in Russia said her salary was not reduced, but she had less income as she could not do private tutoring during lockdown.<sup>471</sup> In London, England, a teaching assistant accepted non-education tasks at the academy where she works, for fears that she could otherwise be laid off.<sup>472</sup>

Just one teaching assistant interviewed by Human Rights Watch—who worked at a residential school that continued in-person education for children who have experienced abuse or trauma, or who have autism—reported a raise, of US\$1 an hour.<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with two teachers, Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 20 and 24, 2020; mother, Kabwe, Zambia, June 5, 2020; and Cynthia Agali, Lagos, June 11, 2020.

<sup>468</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Rabat, Morocco, June 14, 2020.

<sup>469</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Karak, Jordan, June 6, 2020.

<sup>470</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, South Dakota, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>471</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher, Izhevsk, Russia, June 3, 2020.

<sup>472</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teacher assistant, London, June 11, 2020.

<sup>473</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with teaching assistant, north-east United States, June 10, 2020.

## VI. Education is Every Child's Right

As a teacher you try to ensure that everyone gets to exercise their right to an education.

— Emma Aggelid, secondary school teacher, Östersund, Sweden<sup>474</sup>

International human rights law guarantees every child the right to education, even in times of public emergency such as a global pandemic. Children also have the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and have a right to life<sup>475</sup>—as do their teachers, school staff, family members, and everyone else<sup>476</sup>—and thus governments must take appropriate measures to combat diseases. Governments must also ensure that institutions such as schools, and the provision of services such as education, conform with standards established by competent government authorities, in the areas of safety and health.<sup>477</sup>

In all actions concerning children undertaken by governments, including in situations necessitating the balancing of competing rights, the best interests of children shall be a primary consideration.<sup>478</sup> Any restrictions on children's rights must serve a legitimate aim, be necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory.

All children have the right under international human rights law to **free and compulsory primary education**. “Free” primary education means that primary education must be available and accessible without charges to the child, parent, or caregiver.<sup>479</sup> The “compulsory” nature of primary education is an obligation firstly on governments to ensure that all children indeed receive a primary education. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that oversees governments’ compliance with the right to education under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, has underlined that individuals who have not received or completed the whole period of

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<sup>474</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Emma Aggelid, Östersund, Sweden, June 24, 2020.

<sup>475</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 6 and 24.

<sup>476</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 7(b) and 12; and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 6.

<sup>477</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 3(3).

<sup>478</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 3(1).

<sup>479</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “General Comment No. 11,” UN Doc. HRI/GEN/Rev. 8, 1999, para. 8.

their primary education, or who have otherwise not satisfied their basic learning needs, retain their right to receive a fundamental education.<sup>480</sup>

Under international human rights law, governments must also ensure different forms of **secondary education** are available and accessible to every child. Human Rights Watch calls on states to take immediate measures to ensure that secondary education is available and accessible to all free of charge. Noting the political commitment to provide 12 years of free primary and secondary education, with 9 years of education compulsory, made by all United Nations member states with their adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, Human Rights Watch also calls on states to make education compulsory through the end of lower secondary school.

**Indirect education costs** constitute disincentives to the enjoyment of the right to education and may jeopardize its realization. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has said that therefore governments have to take measures to eliminate financial barriers to ensure education is “free of charge.”<sup>481</sup>

The right to education is guaranteed for all, **free from discrimination** on any grounds. Positive steps must be taken to include children who are often excluded from education systems and who experience multiple and often intersecting forms of discrimination, including girls, people with disabilities, refugee and immigrant children, LGBT children, children living in rural areas, children living in poverty, and children affected by armed conflict.<sup>482</sup>

For example, **people with disabilities** should be able to access quality, inclusive education on an equal basis with others in the communities where they live,<sup>483</sup> and should be guaranteed equality in the entire process of their education.<sup>484</sup> Governments should

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<sup>480</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “General Comment No. 13,” UN Doc. E/C.12/1999/10, 1999, paras. 22-23.

<sup>481</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “General Comment No. 11: Plans of Action for Primary Education,” UN Doc. E/1992/23, 10 May 1999, para. 7.

<sup>482</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “General Comment No. 13,” para. 55, and “General Comment No. 20,” UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/20, July 2, 2009, paras. 18 - 35; and Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, “General recommendation No. 36 on the right of girls and women to education,” UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/26, November 2017.

<sup>483</sup> Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, art. 24(2) (a)-(e).

<sup>484</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General Comment No. 2, “Article 9: Accessibility,” UN Doc. CRPD/C/GC/2 (2014), para. 39.

ensure that children are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of their disability, and ensure reasonable accommodations, or effective individualized support measures that maximize academic and social development.<sup>485</sup>

Similarly, **Indigenous people** have the right to all levels and forms of education without discrimination. Moreover, governments should take effective measures—and when appropriate, special measures sometimes referred to as affirmative action or positive discrimination—to ensure continuing improvement of their education conditions.<sup>486</sup>

Another element of non-discrimination in education is that governments should ensure that **the standards of education are equivalent in all public educational institutions of the same level.**<sup>487</sup>

Education should be **adaptable**—that is, flexible to the changing needs of societies and communities, and responding to the changing needs of students.<sup>488</sup>

Every child has the right to receive an education of **good quality**, which requires a focus on the quality of the learning environment, of teaching and learning processes and materials, and of learning outputs.<sup>489</sup>

School closures, and inadequate distance learning alternatives, may also infringe upon **other children's rights**, including to adequate nutritious foods, to freedom from violence and abuse, to the highest standard of mental health, to play, to freedom of association, and to seek, receive, and impart information.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 24(2) (a)-(e); and Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education,” UN Doc. CRPD/C/GC/4, November 25, 2016.

<sup>486</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, September 13, 2007, arts. 14 and 21.

<sup>487</sup> Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1960, art. 4(b).

<sup>488</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “General Comment No. 13,” para. 6(d).

<sup>489</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, “General Comment No. 1,” UN Doc. CRC/GC/2001/1, 2001, para. 22.

<sup>490</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, arts. 13, 15, 19, 24, 27, and 31.

## Strong Presumption Against Retrogression in Education

I know that education is the first to get cut, but in a time like this I would like to see the government increase the education budget. In this time of trauma, more counselors are needed in school, and more people adept at helping work through this, and smaller class sizes.

— Emily Beer, grade 4 teacher, Maryland, United States<sup>491</sup>

Some teachers and parents expressed concerns about government under-investment in the education sector even before the pandemic, and how marginalized children were often most affected by such under-funding.<sup>492</sup> Moreover, many parents and teachers shared concerns about cuts to education budgets during the pandemic, and fears of reduced funding to education in the coming years—in response to uncertain domestic and international economic conditions—just when schools need more resources to address and ameliorate the loss of learning during the pandemic.<sup>493</sup> According to a study by the World Bank and UNESCO in February 2021, two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries cut their public education budgets during the pandemic; and one-third of upper-middle and high-income countries have done the same.<sup>494</sup>

Under international law, free and compulsory primary education is part of the minimum core content of the right to education, and as such its fulfilment is an obligation that governments must meet, even in times of emergencies such as the pandemic. Under international law other aspects of the right to education, such as secondary education, must be realized by governments to the maximum of their available resources. This recognizes that the realization of the right to education can be hindered by a lack of resources. Nonetheless, there is a strong presumption against retrogressive measures being taken in relation to rights, including the right to education. Any retrogressive measures that would have a negative impact on the existing levels of education provision and achievement, require strong justifications. As the UN Committee on Economic, Social

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<sup>491</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Emily Beer, grade 4 teacher, Glen Burnie, Maryland, United States, June 8, 2020.

<sup>492</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with mother, Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia, July 29, 2020; Sam Ol, father, Battambang province, Cambodia, August 2, 2020; teacher, Madrid, Spain, June 9, 2020; Angel Gonzalez, father, Long Island, New York, United States, June 14, 2020; and Ben Johnson, teacher, Chicago, Illinois, USA, June 20, 2020.

<sup>493</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Emily Beer, teacher, Glen Burnie, Maryland, United States, June 8, 2020; teacher, Norwich, United Kingdom, June 9, 2020; teacher, Barcelona, Spain, June 11, 2020; special education teacher, Colorado, United States, June 15, 2020.

<sup>494</sup> World Bank Group and UNESCO, “Education Finance Watch 2021,” February 2021.

and Cultural Rights has set out governments have the burden to demonstrate that they took such retrogressive measures only after careful consideration of alternative options, assessing the impact of their actions, weighed this against children's other rights, and while fully using their maximum resources.<sup>495</sup>

## Access to Internet Now Key to Many Children's Right to Education

The internet is often a fundamental enabler of many human rights, including children's right to education.<sup>496</sup> Lack of access to affordable and reliable connectivity, and poor availability and accessibility of devices can affect children's realization of their right to education—as well as their rights to seek, receive, and impart information; to freedom of expression; to freedom of association; and right to play—widening inequalities between children with access to these technologies, and those without.<sup>497</sup> In recognition of the need to close these digital divides, governments around the world had committed to strive to provide universal and affordable internet access by 2020.<sup>498</sup> However, they failed to meet this goal and have not committed to a revised target date.<sup>499</sup>

The pandemic has rendered internet access almost indispensable in realizing the right to education in a non-discriminatory and equitable manner. As governments turned to remote learning, including online, internet access became both a prerequisite and a new barrier that effectively excluded many from accessing their right to education. Children in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities were disproportionately shut out of learning,

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<sup>495</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, "General Comment No. 13," para. 45; and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Frequently Asked Questions on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Factsheet No. 33," December 2008.

<sup>496</sup> UN Human Rights Council, "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet," Resolution 38/7, A/HRC/RES/38/7, July 17, 2018; UN Human Rights Council, "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet," Resolution 20/8, A/HRC/RES/20/8, 2012; and UN Human Rights Council, "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet," Resolution 32/13, A/HRC/RES/32/13, July 18, 2016, p. 2, para. 6.

<sup>497</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment," CRC/C/GC/25, March 2, 2021, para. 54.

<sup>498</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goal 9.C, "Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020," <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/?Text=&Goal=9&Target=9.c>.

<sup>499</sup> International Telecommunications Union, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2020*. (Geneva: ITU, 2020), pp. 4-5.

as they were least likely to have meaningful internet access; this, in turn, deepened the educational inequities they faced before the pandemic.<sup>500</sup>

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has stated that in fulfilling their obligations to ensure education is free and accessible to every child, governments should adopt special, targeted measures to ensure equitable access to the internet for educational purposes.<sup>501</sup> Human Rights Watch calls on states to take all necessary measures to overcome digital exclusion, including through provision of free, equitable access to the internet for educational content. States should pursue policies and programs that support all children's affordable access to, and knowledgeable use of, digital technologies for educational purposes.<sup>502</sup>

The Abidjan Principles on the human rights obligations of states to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education were adopted in February 2019 in Côte d'Ivoire by a group of experts on the right to education. They draw on states' existing legal obligations regarding the delivery of education including authoritative interpretations provided by human rights bodies, such as the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Principles outline states' obligation to regulate companies providing ancillary services that enable learning to ensure that their actions facilitate, not obstruct, the right to education.<sup>503</sup> States working with the private sector to facilitate access to connectivity or devices for education should ensure that such measures are available for all children, and accessible to those with disabilities. Where children rely on services from the private market to access their right to education, states should also ensure that private actors do not infringe on children's other rights, including their rights

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<sup>500</sup> UN Economic and Social Council, "Report of the Secretary General: Progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals", E/2020/57, 2020, para 41

<sup>501</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, "Statement on the Covid-19 Pandemic and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," E/C.12/2020/1, 2020, para. 15. *See also* UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment," CRC/C/GC/25, March 2, 2021, para. 101.

<sup>502</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art 29(1), 1990; Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General Comment No. 1," CRC/GC/2001/1, 2001; and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment," CRC/C/GC/25, March 2, 2021, paras. 9 & 28.

<sup>503</sup> "The Abidjan Principles—Guiding Principles on the human rights obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education," 2019, <https://www.right-to-education.org/resource/abidjan-principles> (accessed February 22, 2020), principle 4, para 58.

to privacy, to play, to seek, receive, and impart information, to freedom of expression, and to freedom of association.<sup>504</sup>

## International Cooperation and Assistance

Three core international human rights treaties refer to the need for international assistance and cooperation to support the progressive realization of the right to education.<sup>505</sup> Such cooperation and assistance may take the form of economic support, but also sharing of technical expertise and good practices that respect a recipient country's international human rights obligations.

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<sup>504</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment," CRC/C/GC/25, March 2, 2021, para 103; and OHCHR, "Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights," 2011, [https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf) (accessed April 2, 2021), principles 1 & 13.

<sup>505</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 2(1); Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 4 & 28 (3); and Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, art. 32.

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## “Years Don’t Wait for Them”

### Increased Inequality in Children’s Right to Education Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the education of an estimated 90 percent of the world’s school-aged children. “*Years Don’t Wait for Them*”: *Increased Inequality in Children’s Right to Education Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic*, is based on over 470 interviews with students, parents, and teachers in 60 countries between April 2020 and April 2021. It documents how Covid-related school closures did not affect all children equally, as governments failed to provide all children with the opportunity, tools, or access needed to keep learning during the pandemic. Students from groups already facing discrimination and exclusion from education even before the pandemic were disproportionately adversely affected.

Governments’ long-term failures to remedy discrimination and inequalities in their education systems, and often to ensure basic government services, such as affordable, reliable electricity in homes, or facilitate affordable internet access, meant schools entered the pandemic ill-prepared to deliver remote education to all students equally. Children from low-income families were more likely to be excluded from online learning because they did not have reliable electricity or sufficient access to the internet or devices. Historically under-resourced schools particularly struggled to reach their students.

Education should be at the core of all governments’ recovery plans: governments should address both the impact of the pandemic on children’s education and pre-existing problems. In light of profound financial pressures on national economies from the pandemic, governments should protect and prioritize funding for public education.

(above) A man helps a child with his lessons inside a tent, in a camp for displaced Syrians in the village of Kafr Yarmouk in the northwestern Idlib governorate, as educators in Syria attempted distance learning after the country’s various regions sent students home hoping to stem the coronavirus pandemic in April 2020.

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(front cover) Alison Quinotoa eyes her cell phone as she receives classes via the internet, at her home in La Josefina, Ecuador, in September 2020, due to her school being closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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