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**Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms**

A photograph showing two women from behind, wearing headscarves, looking out over a vast mountainous landscape. The mountains are rugged and brown, with a prominent snow-capped peak in the distance under a clear blue sky. The foreground shows a dirt path and some sparse vegetation.

BRIEFING NOTE

**Digital education poverty in the time of Covid-19:
Lockdown widens the education gap for girls in remote parts of Morocco**

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Contents

Introduction	2
Morocco’s education gender gap	3
Tackling the education gender gap: The <i>Dar Taliba</i> programme	4
COVID-19, lockdown and the digital divide.....	5
Case studies: Technology changing lives.....	6
Education for All	6
Project Soar	6
Digital learning projects: Opportunities and limitations	7
About the author	8
References	9

Cover photo: A family walking in the Moroccan hills © Ella Williams

Introduction

It still remains unclear if schools in Morocco – which have been closed since March – will re-open in September, as cases of Covid-19 in the country continue to rise. According to a press release issued on 6th August, the 2020-2021 school year will officially begin on 1st September, however there have been no guidelines about how classes will be delivered.

For poverty-stricken families living in the economically deprived and remote regions of the Atlas Mountains, their priority is finding a way to feed their family without an income from work during the pandemic. But they face another urgent problem: as the lockdown drags on, the effects of educational poverty are becoming increasingly extreme as the digital education gap opens an even wider gulf between urban and rural students.

In this article, we look at the state of education for girls in remote regions of Morocco and how Covid-19 has widened the digital education divide.

Morocco's education gender gap

Morocco is one of the few countries in the world that spends around [25% of its yearly budget on education](#). The country has also introduced a number of educational reforms over the past two decades to increase access to and eliminate gender inequality in the education system. Despite these efforts, Morocco ranks [137 out of 149 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index](#) (World Economic Forum: 2018) and there is a great disparity between urban and rural areas in educational access and attainment.

In 2014, the net enrollment rate in lower secondary school was only [39% in rural areas against 88% in urban areas](#). Evidence from [Boutieri \(2016\)](#) and [Ibourk and Amaghous \(2014\)](#) also reveals patterns in school enrolment ratios and literacy that confirm stark disparities along gender lines: only 26% of girls attend primary and secondary school in rural areas, compared to 79% of boys.

Non-attendance and poor educational attainment amongst girls from rural families can be linked to socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and the pressures on children to work, as well as geographic barriers – which can be considerable. In the mountainous region of the High Atlas, children may have to travel more than 70 kilometres each day to the nearest secondary school – too far from the remote villages where many girls live – and road and transport infrastructure is very poor.

In addition, traditional gender norms, including parents' educational level and attitudes towards girls' education, play a significant role in preventing girls from accessing secondary education. The

expectation that girls will become wives and mothers often ends their studies after primary or middle school, and some families may be reluctant to send their girls to school at all.

Even when girls have the opportunity to begin secondary education, many drop out before obtaining their high school diploma to comply with tradition expectations of their gender role, such as helping with domestic chores at home, or marriage and childbearing. In addition, the education of boys tends to be prioritized to the detriment of girls. Families with very limited funds to pay for school transport or materials will often choose to educate boys rather than girls, regardless of their age or educational ability.

This combination of socioeconomic and geographic barriers, and the negative impact of prevailing gender norms, means that few girls from rural villages attend secondary school. Not surprisingly, therefore [female illiteracy in the High Atlas region stands at up to 83%](#), compared to just 14% in Casablanca.

Tackling the education gender gap: The *Dar Taliba* programme

In response to the crisis in rural female education, the Government of Morocco initiated the *Dar Talib* programme under the National Education and Training Charter of 1999 (Article 140). These boarding houses provide board and lodging for both male and female students close to local secondary schools, so that they can attend. Many houses also provide educational materials, such as textbooks, and organise educational and personal development activities.

By 2009, there were 1,297 dormitories nationwide, with a total of 143,732 students, 47,355 of whom were girls. The Ministry of Education runs 447 dormitories, while the Ministry of Social Affairs runs 850 dormitories and the programme operates through a partnership with *Entraide Nationale*, an independent government foundation. A number of dormitories are funded by the European Union and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Education for All, which runs six boarding houses for girls in the High Atlas region.

Obtaining a place in a *dar taliba* is often a lifeline for girls who, without this opportunity, might find themselves married by their 15th birthday. *Dar Taliba* have been shown to have a remarkable effect on girls' educational achievement. Across the boarding houses run by Education for All, for example, [girls achieve an average school pass rate of 90%](#), compared to the national average of 53%. In 2019 EFA girls achieved a 100% pass-rate for the Baccalaureate and 30 girls went off to university, three of them with full scholarships. These girls come from families with high rates of illiteracy and from some of the most remote and economically deprived areas of the country: many of them only had the opportunity to attend primary school sporadically.

COVID-19, lockdown and the digital divide

In response to the global Covid-19 pandemic, governments across the world closed schools in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus. In April, UNESCO announced that at [least 1.5 billion students worldwide and 63 million primary and secondary teachers in 191 countries were affected by school closures](#) as part of measures put in place to control the pandemic. The data revealed that half of all students, nearly 830 million children, who were not currently attending school because of stay-at-home orders, did not have access to a computer. More than 40% did not have Internet access at home. [In Morocco, this rises to 49.7%](#), although the data are not disaggregated by geographic area and the proportion is likely to be far higher in rural areas.

Teachers in low-income countries such as Morocco also lack support as they try to continue teaching children remotely. Few teachers have received online training or have the necessary access to technology. In rural areas, many teachers do not have a reliable Internet connection that will enable them to deliver online teaching.

On 13 March 2020, the Moroccan Government decided to shut down all schools in an attempt to curb the Covid-19 outbreak and a nationwide school closure came into effect on 16 March until further notice. Like many millions of other school students across the globe, students in Morocco had to shift to remote studying. Whilst students in big cities like Rabat or Casablanca have been able to complete their lessons online at home, girls living in *dar taliba* have had to return to their villages, where they can't afford Internet access, let alone a computer.

While many students, even those in the most remote areas, have access to a mobile phone, these rarely function effectively as learning tools. Many areas cannot access mobile networks, cutting girls off completely from their teachers and friends and making it impossible to access any of the online teaching materials issued by the Ministry of Education. In those areas that are covered by networks, it is expensive to, for example, watch study videos on YouTube or attend lessons via video call. Many families also opt for cheaper data passes that grant access to essential communication apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, but don't allow general Internet use.

For girls in the remote villages of the High Atlas, the problem goes beyond the lack of access to learning technology, such as a computer or Internet access. Extreme poverty means that any girls also lack the most basic resources, such as the national curriculum textbooks, which makes it impossible for them to study remotely. Girls from these remote parts of Morocco have already overcome often unimaginable hurdles to gain a place in a *dar taliba* and access secondary education. The Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the digital education divide is only widening the gulf between these girls and their urban peers.

Existing gender norms are also feeding into the gender digital divide. Even within households that have access to devices and network connection, [girls often have significantly less access to mobile](#)

[phones](#) and [the same is true for the internet](#). This is the result of norms that prioritize boys' education, as well as [increased oversight and restrictions around girls' Internet access](#) by various gatekeepers within the household.

In many countries across Europe, such as France, national secondary school examinations have been cancelled to mitigate the impact of digital educational poverty on students. Instead, students received an average score in each subject, based on the marks they achieved for tests and homework throughout the year. In Morocco, however, the Ministry of Education announced on 12 May that, while tests and exams were cancelled for primary and secondary education, 2nd year Baccalaureate exams (the national secondary school leaving examination) would still be held in July.

While the Ministry announced that these exams would be based on material covered before the closure of schools in March, girls in remote regions had been effectively cut off from any teaching or learning for four months. The Government offered online lessons, and some of the online learning tools are excellent, but many girls do not have a device or cannot afford the Internet charges to access these vital resources. At the same time, many girls have been required to spend their time helping with housework and childcare in the absence of schooling – a result of gendered expectations – which has left them with little or no time for study. While boys may have been expected to take on family agricultural work during lockdown, prevailing gender norms favour boys' education over girls, with families [more likely to prioritize boys' access to remote learning technology](#).

Case studies: Technology changing lives

To bridge the digital education gap, charitable associations in Morocco have set up campaigns to get vital access to the Internet and technology for girls in the remote Atlas region.

Education for All

Following the closure of its boarding houses, Education for All launched a campaign to raise money to provide tablets, SIM cards and Internet data for girls in their final year of secondary school. After raising over £5,000 and completing the complex logistics planning that was needed to reach girls in various remote locations, Education for All distributed tablets to 26 final-year girls. The tablets enabled them to study remotely as they could access revision materials offered by the Ministry of Education and watch revision videos for the national curriculum on YouTube.

Project Soar

A digital access project was also carried out by Project Soar, a non-profit organization based outside Marrakech. Project Soar works with facilitators to provide a programme of 50 lessons to empower teenage girls throughout rural Morocco.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) is supporting a short-term project in collaboration with Project Soar to provide Internet access to 400 vulnerable teenage girls across 40 locations in Morocco. This has allowed girls to access the Internet and supplemental online educational materials in preparation for the High School entry and Baccalaureate exams. With Internet access at home, the girls can gather online study materials, participate in WhatsApp tutoring sessions and organize study groups with their school peers.

Digital learning projects: Opportunities and limitations

For NGOs and other charitable associations, digital access campaigns, such as purchasing tablets and Internet data, which is relatively cheap in Morocco, offer one way to enable girls from the most remote regions to continue their studies during the pandemic. The positive impact of providing this simple technology can also extend well beyond the lockdown. EFA plans for the girls to return the tablets after their exams so they can be passed on to other girls by the NGO each year, allowing them to stay connected when they are away from the boarding houses for longer periods, such as the summer holidays.

In addition, projects like those of EFA and Project Soar aren't just about getting girls through their secondary school leaving exams. Closing the digital education poverty gap is essential for the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals of equal access to secondary education, gender equality and rural development.

There are, however, significant limitations to this kind of digital-access project. The girls who benefited from the two case study projects represent only a tiny fraction of those whose education has suffered as a result of the digital divide. NGOs have limited geographic coverage and available funds and it is highly unlikely that families will be able to support their children's remote education without NGO support.

According to a 2018 study by Oxfam, the [average yearly income in rural zones in Morocco stands at less than 8,678 Moroccan dirhams per year](#) (approximately £718 at the time of publication.) Families in the rural High Atlas are often supported by only one breadwinner, and many faced serious financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. Even if families are able to gain access to hardware such as a tablet through NGO or government support, paying the data costs of around £10 per month would be prohibitive.

If we look specifically at this exam cycle, it may be that digital access efforts came too late, or were not enough to close the digital gender gap effectively. Data from Education for All show that girls have been severely impacted, even with the support of tablets: Baccalaureate pass rate among final year girls fell from 100% in 2019 to 72% in 2020 (data available on the [EFA Facebook page](#)).

As Morocco enters the sixth month of its state of emergency, urgent action is needed to prevent the education divide widening still further along gender and geographic lines. Measures could include [the government provision of devices, connection and data](#), either directly to students or through local volunteers who can facilitate local group learning. Radio and TV could also be leveraged to facilitate distance learning programmes. Once schools reopen, there should be [a major campaign to encourage girls from rural zones to return to school](#), which could be delivered through radio and TV broadcasting, alongside local home visits.

About the author

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