Talking points
Webinar
Inclusive policy and practices in education continuity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic for the most at risk girls and boys
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- On behalf of Plan International Asia-Pacific, I would like to extend my warmest welcome to everyone who has shown up in this webinar, including our guest speakers coming from the Asia Pacific Coalition for School Safety (APCSS)'s our regional partners: Save the Children and Unicef;

- Amidst the unprecedented crisis caused by COVID-19, the webinar is taking on an important issue addressing the right to education of the most-at-risk girls and boys living in the peripheries, remote areas, and with disabilities. It is also high time to highlight how governments and actors in Asia Pacific not only promote but also implement an inclusive education policy and practices;

- The pandemic has caused immense disruption to education, affecting over 90% of the world's student population, including 743 million girls.[1] In settings where schools have been closed as a result of the pandemic, children, especially girls miss out of the protective environment provided by their formal education including life skills and access to essential information.[2] Compounded with socio-economic downturn, children and young people would face challenges in accessing their normal support system: healthcare and protection such as: gender-based violence, child marriage, and trafficking. Girls and other marginalised groups in displaced settings would be at greater risks for that;

- Distance learning as a solution in many countries creates a 'digital divide'. Girls tend to have lack of access to online learning as in low and middle-income countries, boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone and 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone that can access internet.[3] Children with disabilities oftentimes need learning aids that are not available at home and they are more likely to have missed out their learning and drop out of their education, exacerbating their already low enrolment rate to education.[4]

- In the context where many governments in Asia-Pacific have gradually reopened the schools and provided blended learnings, Plan International has also worked in this section, built upon its existing efforts and partnerships with regional organisations as well as national and local-level coalitions and governments to advocate and implement inclusive responses and recovery;

- With the Global Education Cluster, for example, it has joined hands to develop and launch the Safe Back to School Practitioners' Guide in the sub-regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia [through APCSS]. I am also sharing with you that Plan International and partners have launched a publication "Building-back Equal: Girls back to school Guide". Such a guide underlines the importance of safe

[1] Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Global Protection Cluster (2020), "Safe-back-to-School: A Practitioner's Guide"
[2] Plan International and Save the Children (2020), "Because We Matter: Addressing COVID-19 and Violence Against Girls in Asia Pacific"
[3] Plan International 2020
[4] UNICEF EAPRO (2020), "Ensuring an inclusive return to school for children with disabilities"

return to school for girls, as even before the pandemic, 130 million girls were already out of schools[5]. Shortly, you would discuss about it;

- Through various collaborations, we've made strides in making our response inclusive in the countries we work in. In China, for instance, at the initial stage of the staggered school reopening, we provided safe lunch boxes for children and hygienic risk information in school. In India and Bangladesh, youth communities have an initiative to provide home tuition, relief and risk messages to poor households. With radio schooling programme, we've provided an adaptive alternative mode of learning in rural Nepal and Indonesia. We integrated gender, disability, ethnic minority-sensitive messages in our risk communications in countries like Cambodia, Thailand, Lao PDR, Viet Nam, and Myanmar.[6]

- On that note, I wish you all a fruitful exchange of ideas and experience to create programmes that keep the education system in Asia-Pacific resilient, safe and inclusive for every girl and boy regardless of the hazards.

[5] UNESCO, UNICEF, Plan International, UNGEI, Malala Fund, (2020), "Building back equal: Girls back to school Guide"
[6] Situation report on COVID-19 response of Plan International Offices in Asia Pacific