

# Sisters for Sisters Education in Nepal

**Current Situation of  
Communities and  
Educational Institutions  
during the COVID-19  
Crisis**



The project is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Girls' Education Challenge

# About Sisters for Sisters' Education in Nepal

The Sisters for Sisters' Education envisions that marginalised[1] adolescent girls from four districts in rural Nepal – Surkhet, Parsa, Dhading and Lamjung will transition from basic to secondary education, and secondary to upper secondary, empowered to leave school to either secure a sustainable livelihood or continue with education.

The project provides key interventions working at various levels to create a “web of support” around vulnerable girls, including direct coaching and support for girls from peer mentors “Big Sisters,” community mobilisation from volunteers “Adult Champions” to engage families and raise the awareness of the value of girls’ education. Specialist volunteer support and training in schools and within the government supported in making education more inclusive for girls across Nepal. They will be equipped with skills, bolstered by strong learning outcomes that improve employability, enhance confidence and self-esteem to act as leaders, and enable them to influence and control their own sexual and reproductive health rights.

## Through Sisters for Sisters' Education;



[1] Marginalized girls are those harder to reach because of intersecting economic, time and social factors combined with difficult to address contextual factors. “Extremely marginalized” girls are those that belong to Level 3 marginalization in terms of hardest to reach because of a complex combination of context, social and economic factors and may need bespoke interventions tailored to an individual.

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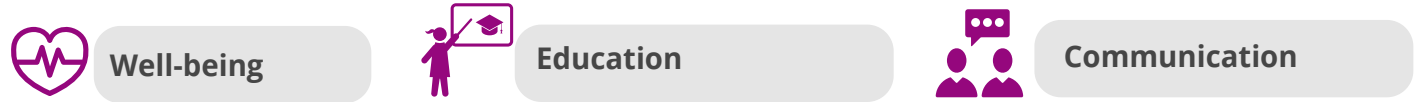
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# Introduction

Sisters for Sisters Education Project II has been working in Nepal since 2017 supporting improved educational outcomes for girls in 49 community schools across four districts: Parsa, Dharding, Lamjung and Surkhet. The project is scheduled to run throughout 2020 with activities completing in December when end line evaluation will take place. There are three core outcomes: Learning, transition and sustainability. 2020 now looks to be dominated by the corona virus pandemic affecting the world, and all three project outcomes. This report aims to provide an early snapshot of how life has changed for our actors looking at three themes:



Through it, we aim to identify the new challenges and emerging opportunities to ensure girls continue to learn in a safe and secure environment.

The first coronavirus case in Nepal was in January 2020. Since then the number of confirmed cases in the country remains low, and at the time of writing (May 10th 2020), there have been 110 cases with no deaths. That said, the number of cases is rising, and one of our project's treatment districts, Parsa, has been among the worst affected. The country's vulnerability is high and the impact of a major outbreak could be devastating due to the health system that has been widely reported as underequipped for the pandemic. As coronavirus cases worldwide began to rise in March 2020 Nepal took a series of measures to limit transition. Schools closed on 18th of March (leaving school-leaving exams postponed indefinitely) and a full nationwide lockdown was followed on the 24th March. The lockdown has remained in place since and travel outside of the home is extremely limited.

As a result, Nepal has so far avoided any major outbreaks. However, the lockdown presents many economic and social challenges. Aside from direct effects of the coronavirus infection, leading to COVID 19 the GPE, World Bank, UNESCO and others have identified indirect impacts of government restrictions which disproportionately affect young people, and most of all, girls. Among them:

- Increased risk of domestic and gender-based violence due to increased time in the home and less opportunity to report a threat
- Income loss due to the slow down in the economy from business and infrastructure closure. This contributing to lower quality diet and less access to general medical care
- Increased early marriage as families look to reduce household expenses
- Lack of transport leading to food scarcity
- Isolation and anxiety leading to increased mental health difficulties
- Increased child labour to replace the shortfall in migrant labour and reduce costs
- Short term loss of learning time for students
- Out of school students not returning to education or not sitting postponed exams

This research set to understand some of the factors affecting our primary actors so the project could mitigate against some of the hazards mentioned above and anticipate any unseen hazards. Foremost in our minds was identifying any children in immediate danger. However, we also wanted to investigate the feasibility of various alternative strategies which could be of interest to project, and policy planners

## Key Findings



### Well-being

No stakeholders reported incidents of coronavirus within the treatment communities. However, anxiety is high for a lot of our stakeholders. Even in districts without recorded cases there have been many returning migrant workers, and some stakeholders reported limited violations of government guidance.

The interviews flagged 13 incidents of gender-based violence, domestic violence or welfare concerns that warranted follow up enquiries or had been reported to local authorities. This indicates that concerns about safeguarding and welfare are warranted.

16% of community stakeholders (and 21% of teachers) were not sure how to seek support about violence or safeguarding issues and concerns.

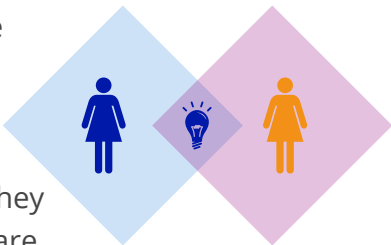
There were a number of responses that caused concern with regard to well-intended activities linked to the risk of transmission of Coronavirus. Reports included communal handwashing areas, delivering door to door awareness, asking community volunteers to disseminate information or asking teachers to visit their students

77% of Little Sisters are relying on homemade methods to manage their menstruation. Although it is not clear what methods they were using before the lockdown started, there were reports that girls need support maintaining hygiene.



### Learning (and the local education system)

81% of girls have self-initiated home learning without guidance from teachers. They are using their schoolbooks and reviewing the previous years' learning. However, they are losing motivation because they are not receiving instruction and do not have their new books to progress



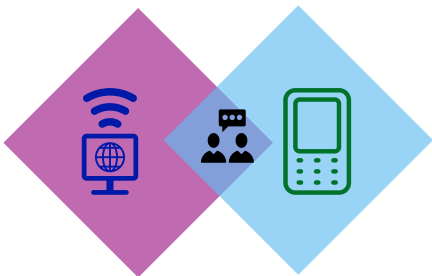
89% of girls are involved in household and/or agricultural labour. There has been a significant increase, and this is the biggest barrier to girls studying. Community stakeholders have occasionally used the term 'life skills' to refer and justify household and agricultural labour.

- Stakeholders have many productive ideas to utilise the time during school closure. However, they have not received direction (emanating from the central level) and so most have not initiated work (such as school planning or professional development).
- Community volunteers identified household support for education as vital. They suggest talking to children about the importance of education, creating a learning space in the home, and assigning specific study times.
- The second highest barrier to learning (identified by marginalised girls) was not having the correct textbook.
- Ward chairpersons are currently working hard to ensure government restrictions are followed, and communities are prepared for health issues and food insecurity. However, some of the social issues resulting from the lockdown are currently blind spots. There is an assumption that safeguarding will be ensured by police and judicial authorities.



## Communication

Adults are well connected to the internet (including 70% of Big Sisters). Social media presents opportunities for professional development and awareness raising.



63% of marginalised girls have access to basic phones. SMS, is an effective way to reach families, but we should not rely on internet-based services.

Radio is a popular method for distance learning. However, most stakeholders feel it would be effective if it were combined with another method. Printed materials were a popular choice. That said, marginalised girls were not enthusiastic about printed materials if they did not also receive other instructions.

Head teachers acknowledged the need to communicate with students but most contact details remain on the school site. Therefore, attempts must be made to retrieve these details if they plan to contact every student.

# Recommendations

## Well-being

Local government staff, at the ward and municipal level, need orientation on how isolation is affecting young and vulnerable people. Leaders need to be aware of the impact on mental health, and the increased risk of gender-based violence, and domestic/ child abuse. This will require a multiagency approach, and not relying on security and justice authorities. The education section needs to work with the other social sections to identify at-risk people and ensure that a consistent and robust approach for safeguarding children is in place. This requires awareness-raising so that all staff and children understand how to seek support mechanisms and report any cases of abuse. The project can assist with this using our expertise in child safeguarding to work with local government and implement in the field. Social media and SMS communication is an effective way to reach communities and utilising our community volunteers would be an effective way to do this.



To stop the immediate concern of transmission of the virus, clear guidance is needed around social distancing to support those in positions of responsibility to raise awareness. Alternative ways to raise awareness should be used such as speakers on rickshaws around communities. The project can support using already established connections and platforms via local authority meetings.

Field staff, district staff and community volunteers could be mobilised to engage in monitoring of community stakeholders, with a concentration on the emotional wellbeing, their mental health, and their vulnerability to violence or abuse. Community volunteers and primary actors may also be able to outreach monitoring to others in their network. Physical distancing shouldn't mean emotional isolation, and mobilising strong community actors to reach out to others increases the emotional resilience of the community as a whole. To facilitate this, people in the community require an easy recharge method (as recharge cards are no longer available), cheap call plans, and in some cases, directing funding.

The project's aims are increased learning outcomes leading to better life chances. On Maslow's[1] hierarchy of needs the project outcomes are at level 4 and 5. Currently, communities are at level 1-3 with widespread concern for basic needs such as food, money and menstruation products, lack of safety (from infection and from violence within the home) and without their usual sense of belonging. Therefore, activities in this year need to account for this significant change in needs.

## Learning

To utilise girls' enthusiasm for learning they require guidance and materials. The evidence suggests priority should be given to the distribution of printed textbooks for the new academic year and local radio programs to guide students with the materials. Digital and TV programs can complement the two core approaches, however, it must be recognised that fewer than 50% of marginalised girls will be able to access digital resources, even if they use non-network peer to peer sharing.

There has been significant behaviour change within the communities, and girls are doing more home and agricultural labour than before. In some cases, families seem to be dependent on girls. There are two potential threats from this. In the short-term parents may not let students' study at home. In the medium to long term, when schools open there may be enrolment issues. Both will require local advocacy by the project's network, but due to travel restrictions, other methods will be necessary. These are discussed in the communication section below. Community volunteers advocated good examples of family support for education and these messages can be disseminated by the project. There has been miss-use of project language, i.e. 'life skills,' which some actors are using to justify girls doing more household or agricultural labour. Whilst it is important girls support the family, the project and local leaders should be clear about what is suitable and maximum hours.

Education systems have been slow to advise schools. Many teachers, headteachers, and municipal education section heads are active on tasks like education improvement planning (schools and municipal level) and continued professional development. The project is connecting with organisations like the Nepal National Teachers Association and advocating our stakeholders engage in the online provision. We should continue to do this and work with cluster partners to advocate support for these initiatives.

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[2] Maslow, A. H. (1943). 'A theory of human motivation.' Psychological Review, 50(4), 370-96. A good review of this can be found at <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Head teachers must also receive project assistance to ensure schools reopen safely. Some have been used as quarantine centres and these will require essential disinfectant. Schools are likely to have just two weeks between opening and SEE exams taking place, so teachers need to have 2 week exam preparation schemes of work planned. There will be a need to support student and staff emotional wellbeing when schools plan to open, and some of VSO's story-telling work could be effective in this.

## Communication

The overwhelming majority of stakeholders have access to a mobile phone. However, there are not effective communication chains. Headteachers will need to obtain contact details from schools for their students and establish effective communication channels for all primary actors. A direct line of contact for students should be set up and maintained whilst schools are closed. Teachers need to use this to contact students regularly so that their health and wellbeing can be monitored and developments in learning can be shared. The project should continue to use social media (such as the Facebook group for Headteachers and teachers) and utilise this opportunity to promote CPD and engage in joint planning.

To support distance learning and school re-enrolment there will need to be some reversals of recent community behaviour changes so that girls are no longer doing house or agricultural labour. With face to face advocacy inappropriate in the circumstances, we need to look at alternative methods. The research suggests there is high penetration of SMS and radio into communities, and adult populations are also engaging with social media, especially Facebook. The project could use the community network to build an 'audience'[3] and then use Facebook tools to create a 'lookalike audience' to target messages.

As discussed in the learning section, our evidence suggests that digital access for girls is growing, but not sufficient for widespread access and as such should not be advocated as a learning method since the most marginalised 50% will be left behind. Printed materials (specifically textbooks) and radio will have the highest penetration into communities. Therefore, we should advocate and support the distribution of textbooks, and coordination should take place from the municipal and ward level. Previously, textbook distribution was the schools' responsibility. However, in these circumstances that may not be the most effective option.

There is still a significant minority of households who lack radio access (around 25%). Therefore, our project, and other actors in the education cluster, should look for options to provide radios. The wind-up devices developed for low-income areas would be especially appropriate for the Nepal context where batteries are expensive and electricity supply is irregular. Simple button phones (often called Feature phones) have FM radio accessibility and the potential use of solar charge for devices would be alternative viable options.

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[3] A Facebook Audience is a group of Facebook users who are identified as interested in a product, service, or have a common interest (e.g. they like a page, photo, post or have joined a group). Facebook can use data analysis to identify people similar to the 'Audience' who have a high chance of also sharing the common interest. This is called a 'Lookalike Audience'. This allows promoted posts and advertising (Facebook's paid services) to target specific people who have a high chance of being the intended recipients of the message.



# Methodology

The data in this investigation was taken from two primary sources. In one source short phone interviews were conducted by field staff and community volunteers with marginalised girls connected to the project. The girls are all in the project’s treatment communities and have been identified as marginalised. They are either ‘Little Sisters’ (girls who receive mentoring from their Big Sisters) or EDGE club members (peer learners in the British Council’s English and Digital Girls’ Education project). 1235 data entries were collected from over 700 individuals. They answered closed questions which has produced quantitative data on their current health, their access to mobile devices, and their access to internet.

District	LS	BS	GFT	HT	WC	ESH	All
Dhading	12	11	-	9	6	4	42
Lamjung	13	17	12	12	-	-	54
Parsa	4	12	-	6	6	-	28
Surkhet	70	17	10	12	4	3	116
Total	99	57	22	39	16	7	240

The second sources were more in-depth interviews conducted by district office staff with 240 different project stakeholders with 6 different roles (see tables 1 and 2). The questions were wide ranging and varied depending on the different groups of stakeholders.

Table 1 interviewees in information gathering

However, they were under three umbrellas: wellbeing (the security, safety, physical and mental health of stakeholders and people in the communities); the status of education (the condition of learning and education management in communities and the local government system) and communication (the infrastructure and connectivity of stakeholders in the community with a view to disseminating messages, awareness and education).

Abbreviation	Stakeholder	Description
LS	Little Sister	School aged marginalized girl in the community
BS	Big Sister	Female, community volunteer mentor
GFT	Gender Focal Teacher	School teacher and community volunteer with the project
HT	Head Teacher	Head teacher of treatment school
WC	Ward Chairperson	Elected official of the treatment community
ESH	Education Sector Head	Permanent municipal government education manager

The questions were mostly open[4], and qualitative data was recorded. The qualitative data was then coded and tallied, producing quantitative data.

By and large, the data is presented in three ways: Tables of lists show the range of different suggestions made by stakeholders that could be used by the project (e.g. ‘how are you motivating children to study?’); bar charts show the percentage of stakeholders whose answers mentioned a different theme (one stakeholder may have mentioned more than one answer. E.g. ‘how are you accessing news?’), pie charts are used when the questions were closed in as much as respondents only made one response (e.g. ‘are you receiving sufficient information and guidance?’). Alongside these quantitative data presentations, there are selected quotes to illustrate the range of responses. These are taken from the translated summaries written by the interviewer and represented the direct voice of the stakeholder.

## Validity and Limitations

As table 1 shows, there are variances in the number of each stakeholder across different districts. The availability of project staff meant some treatment communities and districts were more represented than others. The 70 Little Sisters in Surkhet significantly over-shadows the four from Parsa. Similarly, the lack of representation of teachers and education sector heads from some districts provides some limitations to claims that our findings represent all districts of Nepal. Ward chairpersons were difficult to reach at this time because they were engaged in managing relief work. Where there were significant differences in answers from different districts, we have highlighted this in the analysis, and implementation partners may need to investigate surprising findings if there were not a large number of respondents from their implementation area.

Additionally, it must be reiterated that the selected quotes are representations of stakeholder perspectives and are not direct translations. Whilst we have made every effort to stay true to the direct quote of the individual, we have not subjected the interviews to recording and transcription or professional translation.

That said, we believe that our data and findings give a good snapshot of Nepali community learning environments in the early stages of the COVID 19 pandemic. We hope this report will be useful to planners, from inside and outside the project, who hope to respond to the changing needs.

[4] For the most part respondents were not given multiple choices to answer. Exceptions to this were yes/ no questions (e.g, ‘Do you have a mobile device?’) or comments on the most appropriate communication method (e.g. ‘There are plans to start distance learning using radio, TV, digital and printed materials. Which do you think will be most appropriate?’)

# Well-being

This section of the report will examine the physical and emotional wellbeing of primary actors and stakeholders within the SfS project across the four districts, gauging how communities in general are feeling and responding to the current pandemic. Ward chairpersons commented on the current status of the local economy and health provision, plus their immediate priorities. We examine the risk of a potential rise in cases of abuse (both physical and emotional) and whether stakeholders have noticed an increase, or have experienced or witnessed, any form of abuse. The report questions the confidence of participants’ ability to seek advice and what measures have been put in place by head teachers and wards to support vulnerable students and families at this stage in the pandemic.

## Phsical and Mental Well-being

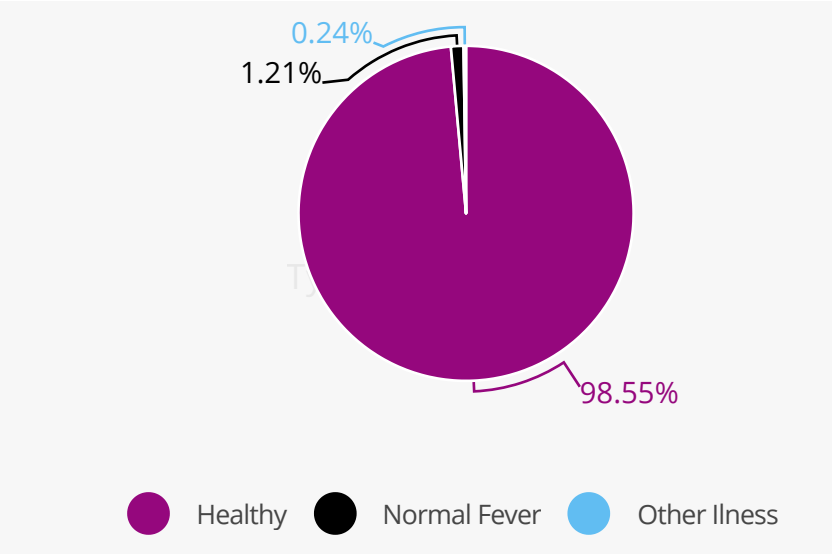


Figure 1 Physical health of Little Sisters

Most stakeholders described feeling uneasy because of the unpredictable and unanticipated situation presented by the virus and the restrictions enforced by lockdown. The disruption in routine and the uncertainty about the future presents huge concerns around wellbeing. The situation, as it stands in Nepal, could present a higher risk to our primary actors such as mental health difficulties caused by isolation, anxiety, or falling into poverty, than direct risks from the virus

As shown in figure 1, 98.55% of Little Sisters reported that they were healthy. There were a few cases of normal cold/ who and follow up calls have showed the girls have recovered. The interviews did not raise any possible cases of COVID-19.

When asked how they were feeling about the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, 50% of Little Sisters reported feeling ‘okay’, ‘normal’ or ‘safe’. 40% said they felt scared, as did 70% of Big Sisters. They used a variety of words from ‘uneasy’ and ‘uncomfortable’ to ‘terrified’, ‘fearful’ and ‘suffering mental stress’ to describe their feelings. 8% of LS and 9% of BS said they felt ‘bored’ by the current situation. Little Sisters in three communities in Surkhet (Gamkhola, Dashrathpur and Pokharabhanjyang) reported higher feelings of anxiety than other areas. An accurate comparison in the other three districts could not be made with the more limited data collated

”

I am astonished by the way we are in lockdown and cannot go anywhere at the moment

”

We are unable to give SEE. I feel that when this disease will come into control and we will be able to give exam”

Little Sisters from Dhading and Lamjung share their feelings

"I am afraid that we might get infected."

"I am worried that my study might hampered."

"I am feeling normal."

"I am worried that my study might hampered."

"We all are lock in home so I am feeling frightened and negative at this situation."

"I'm Feeling Bored."

"I'm Feeling fear and thinking about SEE."

Little Sisters from Dhading and Lamjung share their feelings

As figure 2 demonstrates, older stakeholders reported a greater sense of fear than younger stakeholders. 95% of teachers interviewed, said they were afraid and scared. Many attributed this to their concerns about the impact that lockdown would have on students. Two head teachers said it is their priority to stay safe. There was a general impression of shock amongst this group of stakeholders. They talked about how unexpected the situation is and described a sense of panic.

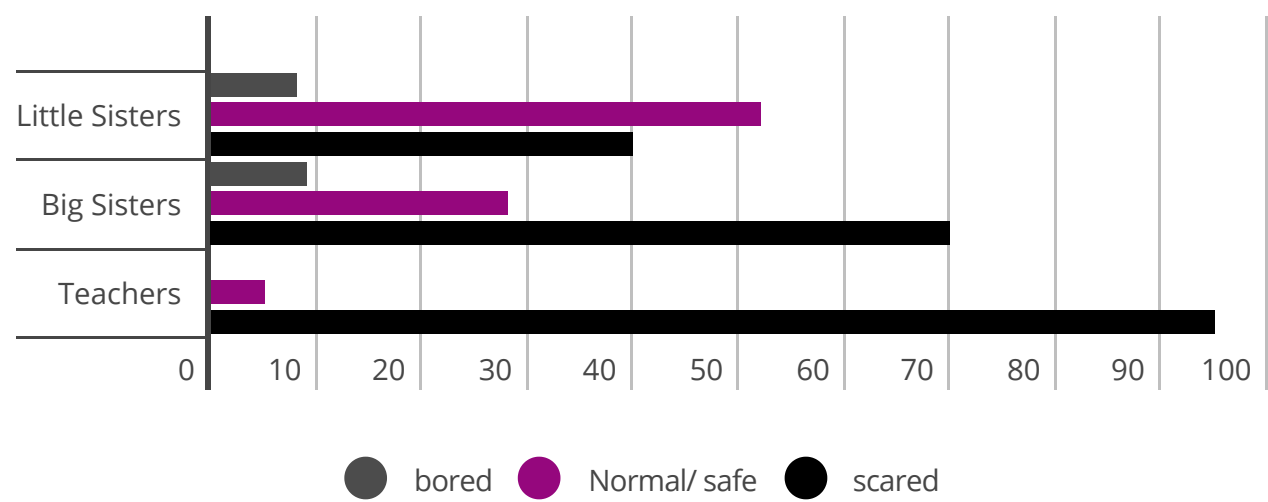


Figure 2 Feelings reported by stakeholders

74% of the responses expressed these feelings, with one head teacher expressing the anxiety he felt over the anticipated workload when schools open. "It is a critical situation for all people. We are afraid and we don't know when it will finish." The feeling of anxiety might be a concern for other head teachers as lock down continues. The project should plan to support staff and head teachers in their preparations for the start of the school year,

and this is a higher priority than previous years. As described later, enrolment is likely to be a challenge as community behaviour is reverting to out of school children. Additionally, many students will return to school having experienced high anxiety and perhaps trauma. School staff will need guidance to help children come to terms with their experiences.

# Community Wellbeing

Stakeholders across all four districts reported people are following the government guidelines. All Little and Big Sisters' responses were in line with government recommendations such as maintaining social distancing, staying at home, washing hands, etc. There were two additional behaviours and actions they described; 15 girls included drinking warm water and two said they are refraining from touching domestic pets, both of which are not WHO or GoN advice. Although these actions do not pose a threat, it demonstrates the need to disseminate official recommendations to our community actors.

Ward chairpersons felt confident people were remaining at home and following the advice given. 82% of Teachers felt that people are following advice but concerns amongst this group were raised around the scarcity of food and medical supplies. Two teachers said they were concerned about children misusing phones and another commented on the concerns in her community about people playing cards.

When asked about the economic and health status in their communities, 38% of Ward chairperson said they were concerned about daily wage earners. There were also concerns for farmers whose crops have been destroyed either by the weather or lack of transport to sell their produce. 37% of Ward Chairperson said that their ward are lacking PPE and medicine. In one municipality, the Ward Chairperson spoke of having 12 sets of PPE and three extra ambulances that have been put in place. Most said that the current priorities for their ward are to monitor people entering, enforce quarantine and distribute aid. Five Ward chairpersons discussed data collection to identify at risk individuals and families, and others are acting on data they have collated to target marginalised families. One in Parsa described a handwashing station that has been set up which raised concerns about the risk of large numbers of the community meeting in one place.

Spring is a significant harvest time, which has been interrupted by the outbreak and complicated by adverse weather. Lack of employment and food scarcity is already a significant issue for daily wage earners and their families, who will need support following the lift of restrictions. Challenges of this magnitude are already instigating sickness and desperate measures for families across Nepal. Wards have prioritised physical health at this stage with many schools in the project being used as quarantine spaces. However, with such pressing issues regarding physical health, there are hidden risks that are particularly threatening to our primary actors. Amongst the 84 responses from teachers and educational professionals, none linked the current situation to concerns around the mental health of others. 60% of stakeholders expressed fear and anxiety, which suggests mental health requires an additional response.

## Safeguarding and Abuse

75% of Little Sisters said they have been in contact with their Big Sisters since the lockdown started. However, some Big Sisters said they were not able to contact Little Sisters and EDGE club members or they lacked calling credit. Where concerns have been raised in a few responses from Little Sisters, the project team has asked Big Sisters or Community Mobilisers to follow up on issues they raised. With many partner staff absent from districts, a clear process will need to be in place to ensure equity in response plans, so that all Little Sisters feel supported and have an easy channel of communication to discuss health issues or seek advice.

When head teachers were asked if they had identified the most vulnerable students and families, 23 said they hadn't and that it was the responsibility of the Ward. 14 said yes (although 11 of these were in one district, Surkhet). Of those that had identified vulnerable families, they had raised awareness with the ward chairperson, supported the distribution of food and three had set up a mobile economic units. Many head teachers responded to welfare questions with the same procedures they give in normal times and there was no evidence of a change in strategy now schools are closed. Many of the responses did not demonstrate a sense of responsibility for head teachers to identify students and families who are at risk whilst schools are closed.

There is international concern at the increased risk to women and girls who are potentially trapped in unsafe domestic environments. Amongst 156 marginalised women and girls (Big and Little Sisters) there were three causes for concern related to potential abuse and excessive child labour. This demonstrates the importance of the project connecting with primary actors and forming community support and monitoring groups. Across all stakeholders there were 13 examples of safeguarding concerns which had either been reported to local authorities or were passed to the VSO safeguarding focal person to follow up. Seven of these were GBV cases, two reported witnessing violence when their local health posts lacked supplies, three had witnessed excessive child workload and one ward chairperson had intervened to prevent a child marriage. Despite the evidence, some community leaders remain ignorant of the increased risks. For example, one ward chairperson said "No, there is no GBV or early marriage cases found in the community. People are busy doing household chores. They support their family."The response indicates the feeling of home as a safe space without acknowledging the risks, staying at home poses for some. If the lock down continues, there is a huge concern that there will be further cases of child marriage and abuse.

When asked what strategies are in place to prevent possible risks caused by COVID-19, the Ward chair persons and Education sector heads had an array of responses. 11 Ward chairpersons out of the 16 we spoke to said that strategies were not needed as the systems in place are sufficient. Three said they would raise awareness with students, one said to work with the police, two said the justice committee, one said they would be more vigilant and four (all in Parsa) said they are raising awareness face to face by visiting people in the community door to door.

This raised concerns over the systems in place to raise awareness but also the risks of spreading infection on a widescale in an area that has a high infection rate of coronavirus. There is wide variation the strategies and attention leaders are devoting to increased risks of abuse during the lockdown. Many are putting their faith in existing systems and do not recognise the need to compliment these systems in the new scenario.

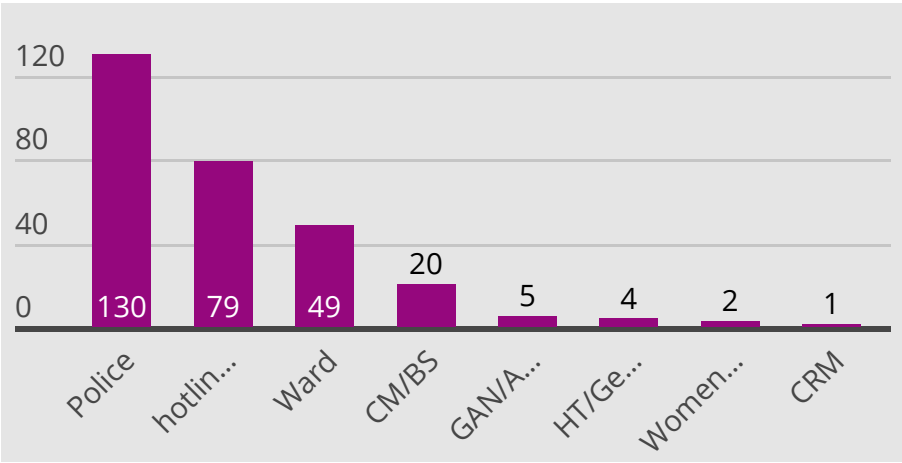


Figure 3 Sources of Support

As figure 3 shows most stakeholder groups were aware of suitable reporting methods and many gave multiple answers. However, 14% of Little Sisters, 10% of Big Sisters, 21% of teachers and 5% of head teachers said they weren't sure or didn't know how to seek support or report a case. One Big Sister said that she would hold a 1:1 meeting rather than seek support which could expose her to huge risks.



# Menstrual Health and Hygiene

The project asked if there were other immediate wellbeing needs of marginalised girls in our communities to meet their menstrual health and hygiene needs. Two Big Sisters in one community said Little Sisters can still buy commercial, disposable products from a local shop. 77% of Big Sisters said Little Sisters are using homemade pads or relying on traditional methods using the cloth. Big Sisters reported that five Little Sisters need support to maintain hygiene. One said, ***“soap has become more costly.”*** One teacher reiterated this concern, ***“They are unable to access menstrual hygiene products. There is poor condition of management of health and hygiene during this time.”***

We received few responses from marginalised girls in some districts, and this limits our certainty that immediate wellbeing, health and hygiene needs are being met. It may be necessary for the project to conduct further investigation across these districts. None of the respondents discussed concerns around confinement measures during menstruation, however, in some communities this practice may not be perceived as an issue if it is regularly practised.

## Status of Local Education:

### The Education System and Community Learning

Schools closed on the 18th of March and will remain so for the foreseeable future. This will undoubtedly have a big impact on the learning outcomes of marginalised girls. This section will examine the experiences of girls, teachers and other stakeholders. Firstly, it examines what educational and non-educational activities are taking place, andplace and identifies educational barriers and opportunities. Secondly, it briefly examines the education and local government system during the crisis. Specifically, it identifies education leaders’ priorities and evaluates how effectively information is being disseminated.

### Learning Behaviours and Barriers

The majority of marginalised girls are engaging in learning activities and this appears to be self-initiated. 81% of the marginalised girls said they had engaged in schoolwork in the previous week. This was particularly high among girls in grade 10, whose final examinations have been postponed due to government restrictions. This was reiterated by mentors, 77% of whom said their mentees, and other marginalised girls they had contacted, were engaging in schoolwork. This is impressive, since there was little evidence of teachers giving instructions to students.

01

Surkhet Big Sister

"nowadays (they are) busy cutting crops."

02

Surkhet Big Sister

"During the last conversation they were busy harvesting crops and they said they were managing time to study their course book."

03

Surkhet Big Sister

"In phone call they said that they are studying their course book once in a day."

04

Surkhet Big Sister

"Their last final result is not out yet. But, they have borrowed upper grade books and started reading at home."

05

Surkhet Big Sister

"They need to support the family. They might forget the course related matter "

Surkhet Big Sister."

Box 1 Selected Quotes from Big Sisters about Little Sisters’ Activities

01

" I am waiting for result."

Little Sister, Dhading

02

"Exam has been completed."

Little Sister, Surkhet

03

"We helped our parents in field."

Little Sister, Surkhet

04

"Last Week we had a lot of work in field for seasonal plating and crops."

Little Sister, Surkhet

05

"I couldn't give time in my study because of I have to help my parents in farming and household work. After finished to cut wheat I will continue my study."

Little Sister, Surkhet

06

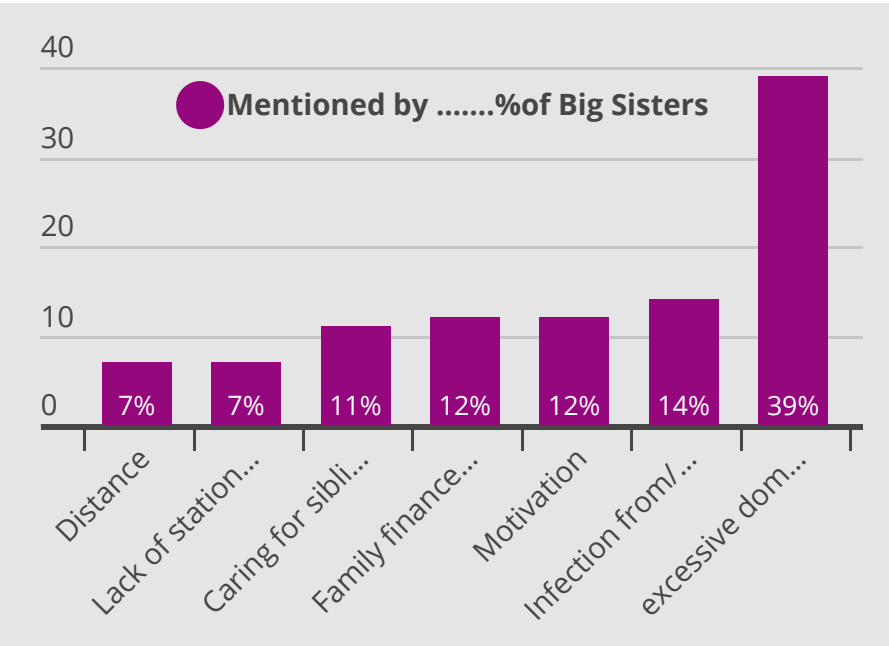
"I have to help parents so I couldn't manage my time for study."

Little Sister, Surkhet

Most of the girls were using their course books, however they have now finished the books and are ready to start studying at the next grade. Many had tried to obtain study materials from their upcoming grade, borrowing old books from friends and family members.

There was some evidence of peer learning (for example, siblings helping one another). However, many who had siblings said they were not enthusiastic about studying because they had not been issued with books for their new class.

Box 3 Comments by Little Sisters who were unable to study in the previous week



Of the 18 girls who said they had not studied in the last week, 17 were in Surkhet (24% of the Surkhet respondents). Big Sisters[5] identified 20 different barriers marginalised girls were experiencing during the current restrictions and school closures. The eight most mentioned are set out in figure 4. A major obstacle reported by Little Sisters and Big Sisters was overburden of agricultural work and household work which reduces time for studying. This is because the pandemic has coincided with a major harvest time in Nepal, and government restrictions have prevented normal migration of labour.

Figure 4: Barriers to Little Sisters' learning mentioned by their Big Sisters

Additionally, families are attempting to reduce costs as they anticipate an uncertain economic future.

Many of those who are studying are only doing 2-3 hours a day, whereas before the schools closed they were often doing 8-10 hours a day.[6]Overall, 89% of girls reported they were doing some degree of household or agricultural work, though for the majority this did not impede their studies.

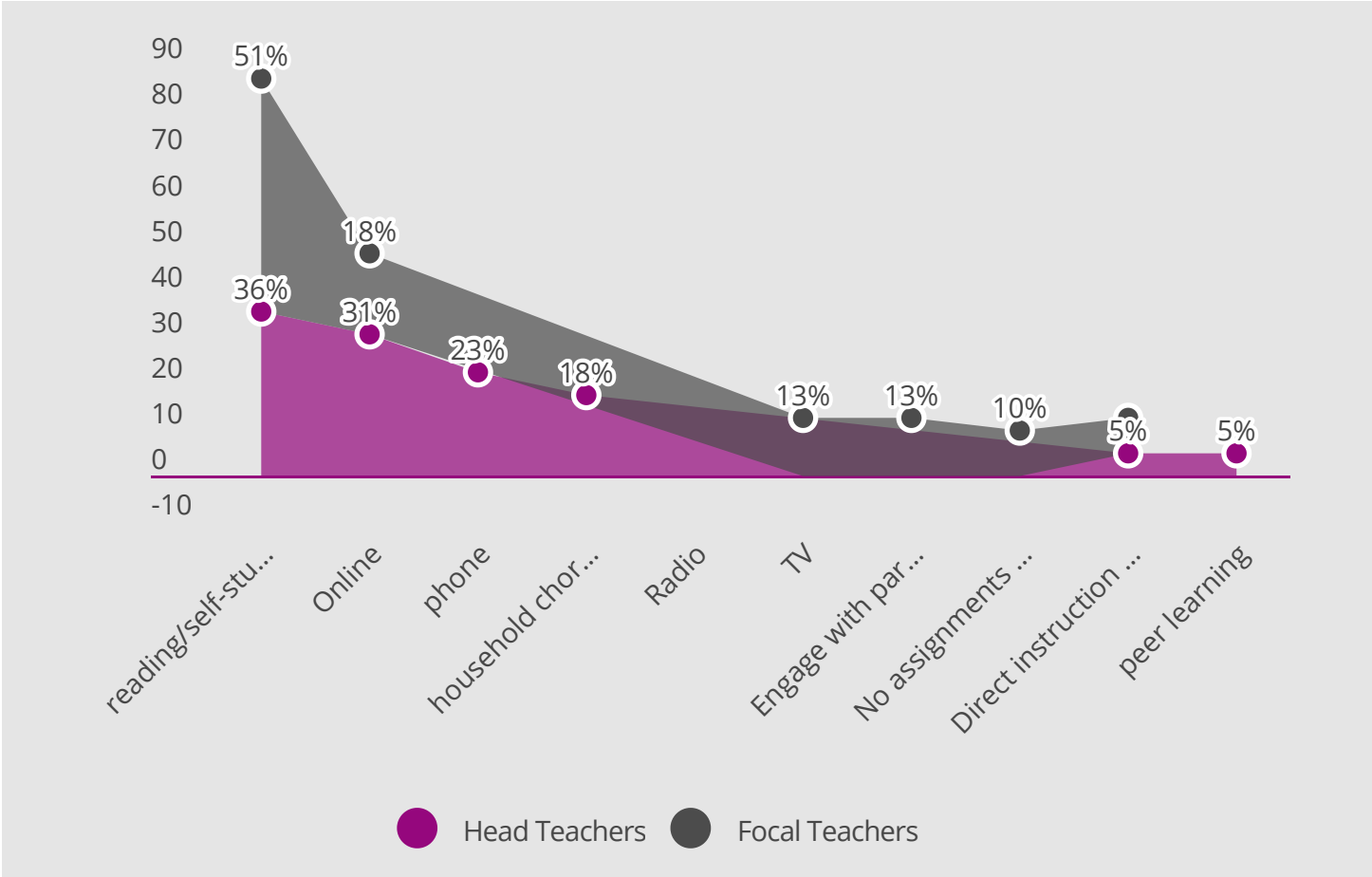


Figure 5 Ideas from focal teachers and head teachers for home learning activities

[5] Big Sisters are selected as mentors because they are from the same community and face, or faced, similar challenges due to marginalisation. Therefore, they are very good stakeholders to identify challenges faced by current students.

[6] Immediately prior to the school closures on 18th March there was exam preparation tuition classes, adding 2-4 hours of study to the girls' days.

Even if girls are not working in the field, they are often called upon to support parents who are taking on more work. Adding to the complex financial and agricultural context, the attitudes of community members may contribute to overburdening the girls with work. More than a quarter of teachers mentioned that students should be helping parents and suggested that undertaking household chores amounted to developing life skills. Leaders and teachers need guidance on clear messages about ways for students to utilise their time.

## Learning Materials and Activities

Students also lack access to educational materials. The restrictions came after the end of year exams but before the start of the new academic year. As a result, some girls are waiting to discover if they have progressed to the next class, and almost all are having difficulty accessing the appropriate learning materials for their new class. This was particularly mentioned by girls when they were asked about their siblings' study behaviours. However, some have been able to borrow books, which demonstrates a high level of motivation to continue with studies.

86% of teachers and 80% of headteachers thought that students should be engaged in self-study or learning tasks (on the other, hand 8% of headteachers expressly said learning was not feasible). However, only 27% of teachers had any plans to contact students, and at least 59%[7]of headteachers are unable to access contact details for students' households until schools open. As shown in Table 3, when asked about how students should engage with learning both focal teachers and headteachers mentioned reading at home or self-study more than anything else. They were less specific about how this could be done or encouraged beyond reviewing previous learning[8]. The next most popular method was online, despite acknowledging existing digital penetration into the community was not sufficient to support online learning at this time (see next section). 18% of the focal teachers suggested household chores would lead to life-skills. Whilst a reasonable contribution to household work is not damaging to education, it is clear from our findings that many girls find this is their greatest barrier to learning while the schools are shut. Therefore, it is concerning that the project's advocates for girls within the schools are conflating chores with life-skills and the project needs to work to differentiate between these things.

Our findings suggest there is widespread consensus among community stakeholders that children should be learning, but this is not being expressed by local government. Just two municipal education section heads mentioned that they expected teachers to guide students' to learning tasks and none of the ward chairs suggested education was one of their priorities.

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[7] 23 out of 39 head teachers reported that they either have not got contact details for students' households, or that those records are in the school and they cannot access them at this time. Of the remaining 16 head teachers it was clear they had recorded contact details, but it was less clear if they could access them in the current circumstances. This seemed to depend on the interviewer and the way the question was phrased. All the head teachers in Surkhet and Parsa were clear that they were unable to contact students, however all the head teachers in Dharding said they had contact details.

[8] Students have their current text books, but most expect to have changed class when they return to education.

Younger community volunteers (the Big Sisters) were highly creative in their ideas for educational activities that girls could be involved in. Of the 57 interviewed, 45 have children in their household and they were asked what they were doing to engage them in learning. They had 13 different ideas; the most popular ones are set out in table 4. It seems that the most important factors are demonstrating the importance of education by talking to students (motivating), setting aside specific study time, or by making a suitable study space available such as a learning corner. All these are behaviour shifts that can be achieved through awareness raising and at low budget.

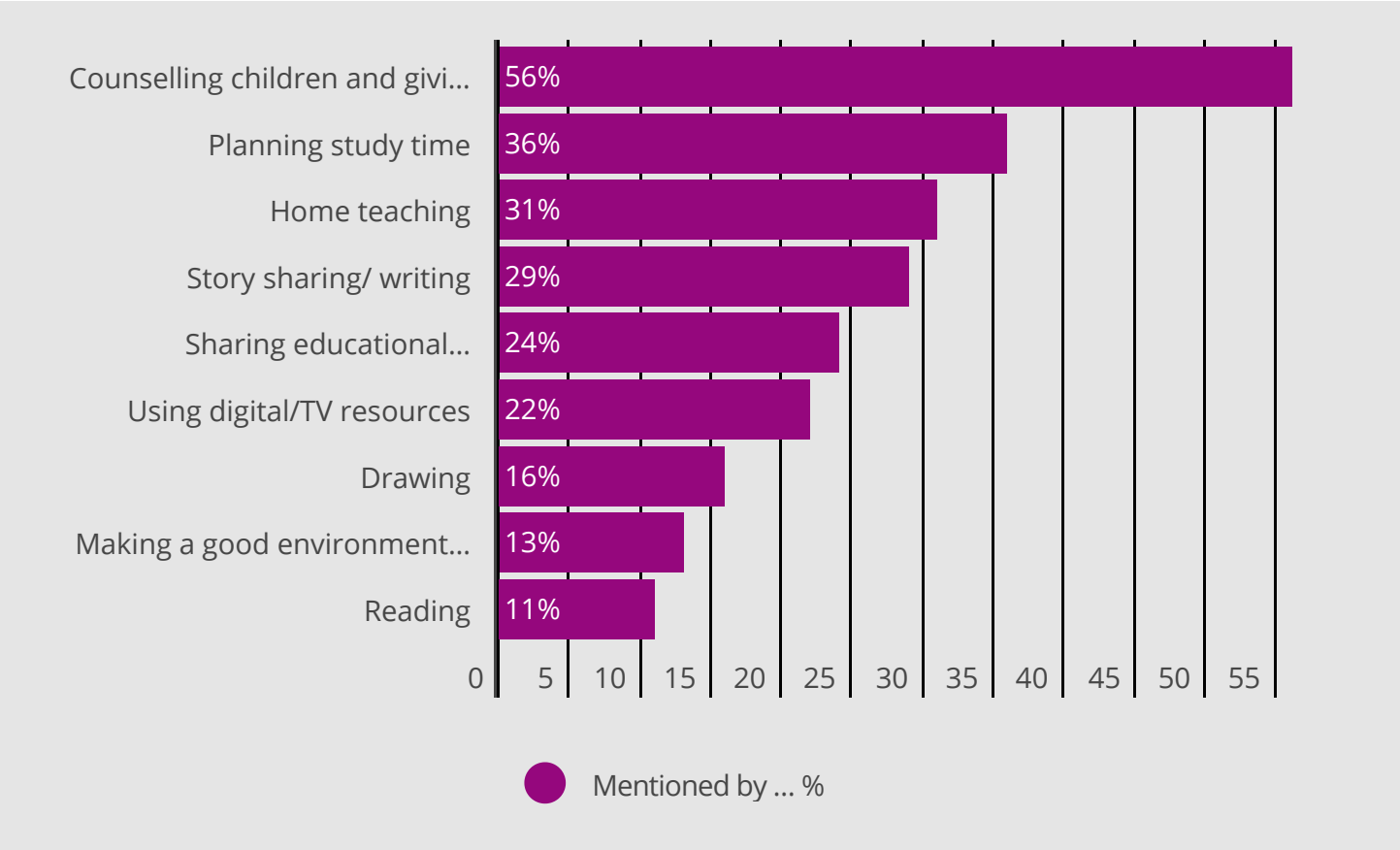


Figure 6: Ideas from community volunteers to engage children in learning

## Challenges to Study

As mentioned above, 89% of girls reported that they had been helping their parents, and it was the biggest concern for Big Sisters. ‘Help’ included household chores, looking after siblings or doing agricultural work. There is some suggestion that the lack of movement means labourers are unable to travel to where they are needed, and so family members are making up the shortfall. This is concerning because it may establish old behaviour patterns and decrease education enrolment. Especially if financial difficulties mean community people are unable to afford to pay daily labourers once travel restrictions have been removed.

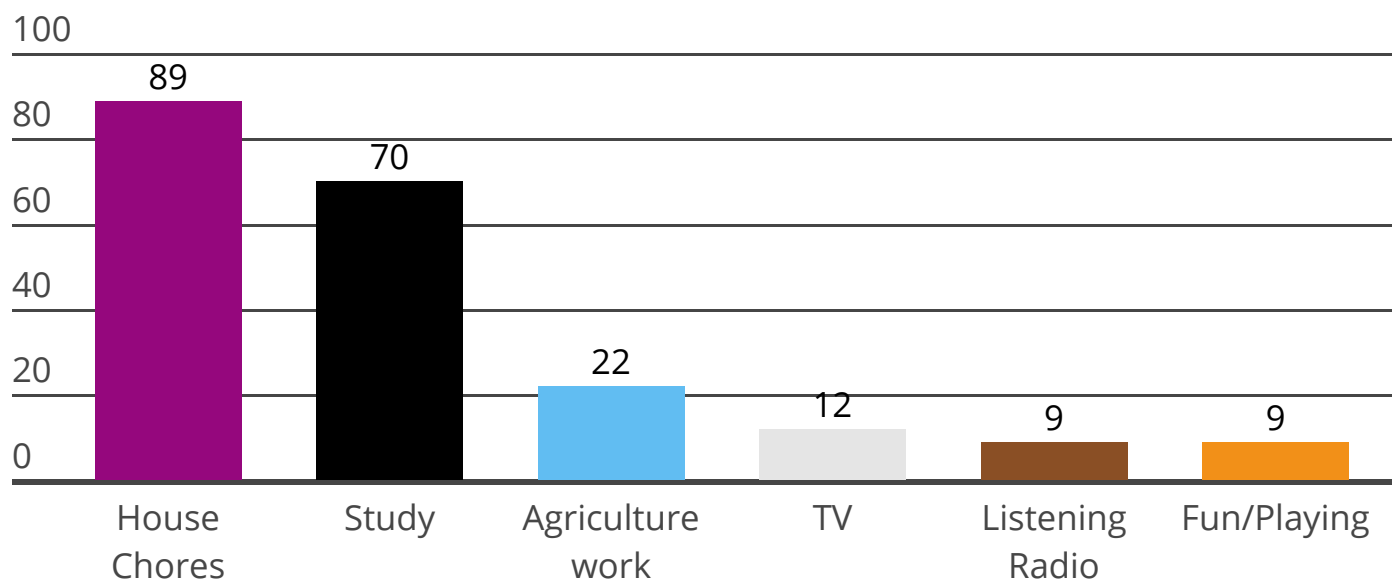


Figure 7: Marginalised girls' activities during school closure

As shown in figure 7 very few of the girls mentioned watching TV (12), listening to the radio (9) or fun/playing (9). There are two main implications of this: Firstly, there may be concern that girls are not managing, or being allowed, time to relax despite the heightened level of anxiety that they have also reported. This could be due to mental health not factoring into many stakeholders’ priorities. Secondly, radio and TV were both highlighted by other stakeholders as effective forms of delivering education. However, (as some stakeholders feared) it seems these are not media girls are currently engaging with. It is also notable that using phones and online activities were very rarely mentioned by the girls. This would imply that digital delivery of education would require significant behavioural change.



# Education System

This section examines communication and practices within the education section from the municipal education section leads to the head teachers.

## Guidance and Information Sharing

As shown in figure 8, the majority of school leaders report that they are receiving sufficient guidance and information about the crisis. However, the higher level stakeholders are less likely to report that they are receiving guidance than the head teachers. This might indicate that there is less information available to perform more complex roles. Also, when head teachers were asked about their sources of information many of the responses were 'news', 'radio', 'TV', 'online' or 'social media'. Therefore, these head teachers believe that generic news coverage is sufficient to perform their role and they do not need guidance that is specific to education. However, 41% (16 head teachers) reported they were receiving information from the ward or, in the case of two in Dharding, the head teachers themselves are the chairpersons of the pracharprasar (relief) committee.

”

**"No haven't got any guidance. However, I am using my own conscience over the management of this crisis."**

Ward Chairperson

**"Not much but few from palika to be safe and distribute the relief."**

Ward Chairperson

**"I've had some discussion with Education direction office, and we are thinking about online discussion with all of the education heads from all the palikas of Surkhet district and Karnali province as a whole. "**

Municipal Education Sector Head

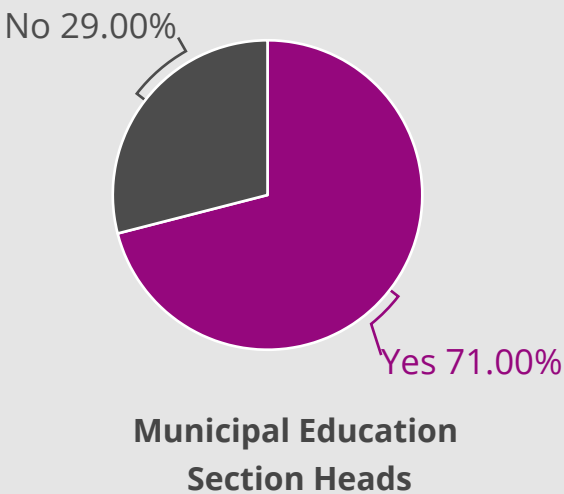
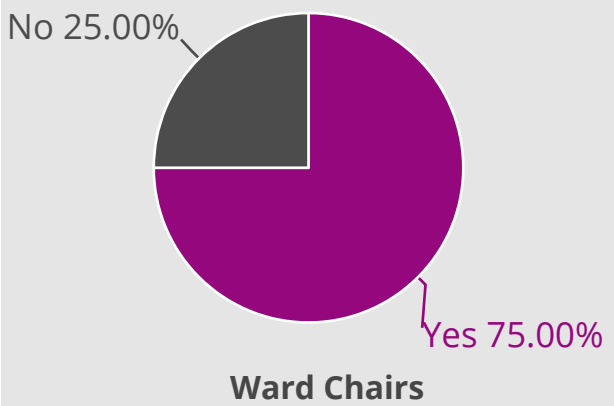
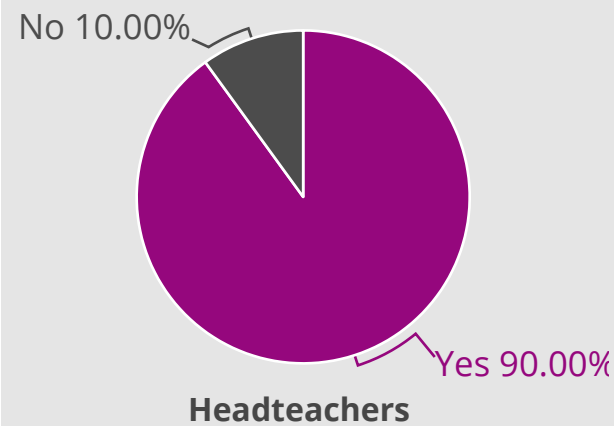


Figure 8: Education leaders who report they are receiving sufficient guidance to perform their role

As some of the comments and data in figure 6 and box 4 demonstrate, more than one quarter of the local government leaders we spoke to felt that they were not getting adequate guidance but were doing as best they could in the circumstances. In the absence of more specific guidance, leaders are focusing on immediate threats of virus infection, public spread and the economic impact of mass unemployment. Whilst this is understandable, it concerns us that leaders’ priorities are not more holistic. Some important secondary threats, such as domestic violence, child abuse and lack of access to education might be overlooked unless stakeholders are directed to act. 14 headteachers thought that project should support the relief work or provide aid to families and five thought suggested support in increasing awareness around COVID-19. The emphasis on staying safe is vital but leaders must also consider preparations for indirect impacts of the virus, the need to keep education going during the lockdown, and preparing schools and communities for the return to education.

## Local Government Priorities, Activities and Expectations

Many teachers and headteachers are not being utilised during school closures. 50% of teachers and 28% of headteachers have no specific plan until schools reopen and only 27% of teachers[9]are planning to contact students. As figure 6 shows, there is a range of activities which teachers and headteachers could be doing (such as School Improvement Plans- SIPs or planning for enrolment) that are only being considered by a small percentage of the school staff.

Teachers	Head teachers	Ward chairpersons	Municipal education sector heads
No specific plan	50%	preparing and publishing internal results	41%
regular communication with students	27%	no specific plan	28%
prepare end of year results	14%	SIP/ infrastructure/ planning for new academic year	21%
household chores	14%	home learning	15%
awareness raising about COVID 19	9%	relief distribution	15%
communicate with other community volunteers	5%	enrollment	8%
follow government guidelines	5%	Communication families or students	8%
	communicate with teachers	5%	

Figure 9: Stakeholder plans and priorities during lockdown (percentage of stakeholders who mentioned each)

Moreover, we found extremely limited evidence that the different levels of school leadership were collaborating. Four of the seven municipal education section heads reported that they had spoken to headteachers regarding the end of year exam results but not about education planning, and 13 out of 16 ward chairpersons have not spoken to headteachers about educational planning. As table 5 shows, none of the ward chairpersons or municipal education sector heads was prioritising education beyond publishing the schools’ exam results.

[9] Particularly concerning, since these are the focal teachers with responsibilities to the school and project to ensure marginalised girls are safe and receiving appropriate support.

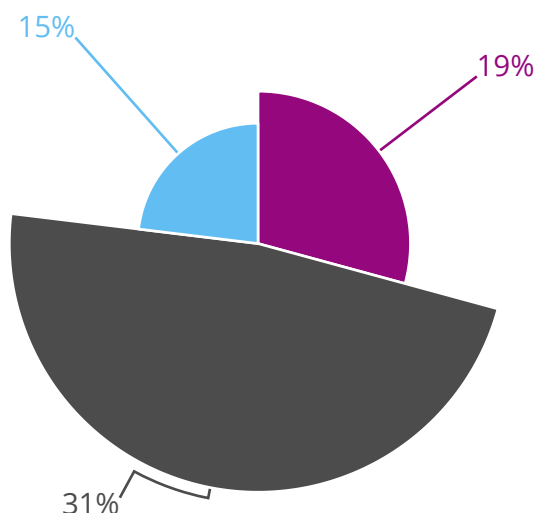
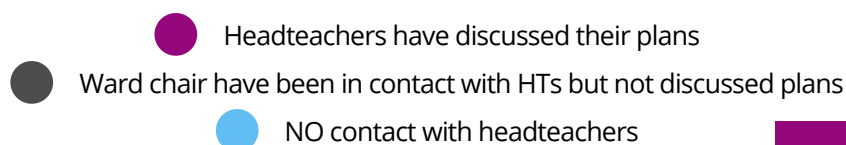


Figure 10: Communication between ward chairpersons and head teachers

Stakeholders’ expectations of others vary considerably as shown in Table 6. This indicates there is a lack of communication and guidance. A large number of education and school leaders emphasised safety and reducing the threat of corona virus. This is particularly understandable in Parsa, which has had a relatively high number of infections compared to other districts across Nepal. However, as the school closures and threat of infection appear likely to continue for some time, there is a need for clear guidance to teachers and students which is not being delivered. 86% of teachers expect students to be studying, however, most haven’t had any contact with students to give guidance or feedback.

”

**"All the world is facing this unexpected new-born virus and we too are recently only focusing on safety"**  
 Ward chairperson Dhading

**"I had visited head teachers. They suggested making plans for education only after the lock down is over."**  
 Ward chairperson, Parsa

**"I 've met (the head teacher) frequently but now we are talking about corona prevention nothing about education plans."**  
 Ward chairperson, Parsa

**"In this situation it is very difficult to manage the basic needs like food and medicine. How can we even think of digital learning?"**  
 Ward chairperson, Parsa

**"We have not discuss on (digital) method because all school teachers went to their homes and, about the virtual class, students needs to be in groups or in school which is not good at this time."**  
 Ward chairperson, Surkhet

Figure 11: Selected comments from Ward Chairpersons about their priorities and education

“I don't have any expectations other than keeping themselves safe”  
**Head teacher, Parsa**

“At this moment I expect students, rather than just study, should support their parents with household chores as it is the peak of harvesting. They should also learn some discipline at home. As I am doing some online training, I expect other teachers to join it, however they don't seem that interested. I am also expecting some plans from all the teachers for the next academic year.”  
**Head teacher, Surkhet**

“Teacher should contact the students: What are students doing at home at this moment? What is the health condition of the students and their family members?”  
**Head Teacher, Lamjung**

# Communication and Access to Digital Learning

## Distance Learning Delivery

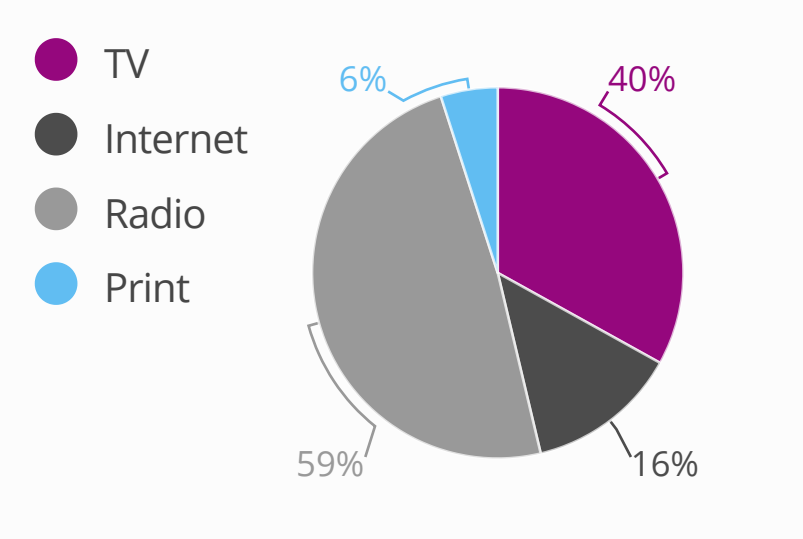


Figure 12: Best method of distance learning delivery according to marginalised girls

Overall, there was consensus that radio offers the best option for marginalised students to access distance learning. Stakeholders admitted that other methods offered more opportunities because of the visual aspect, however in all cases there were concerns about the access and availability of the media in the communities. There was also consensus that internet and digital would not be effective for many students because of the lack of access to devices, and the poor telecommunications infrastructure. However, there is discrepancy between the data here and the availability of digital devices in the community.

There was also consensus that the internet and digital would not be effective for many students because of the lack of access to devices, and the poor telecommunications infrastructure. However, there is a discrepancy between the data here and the availability of digital devices in the community. The cost of digital access (mobile data charges) seems to be the main obstacle. If this is waived, as has been reported, then it is possible digital learning will be a more popular option.[10]

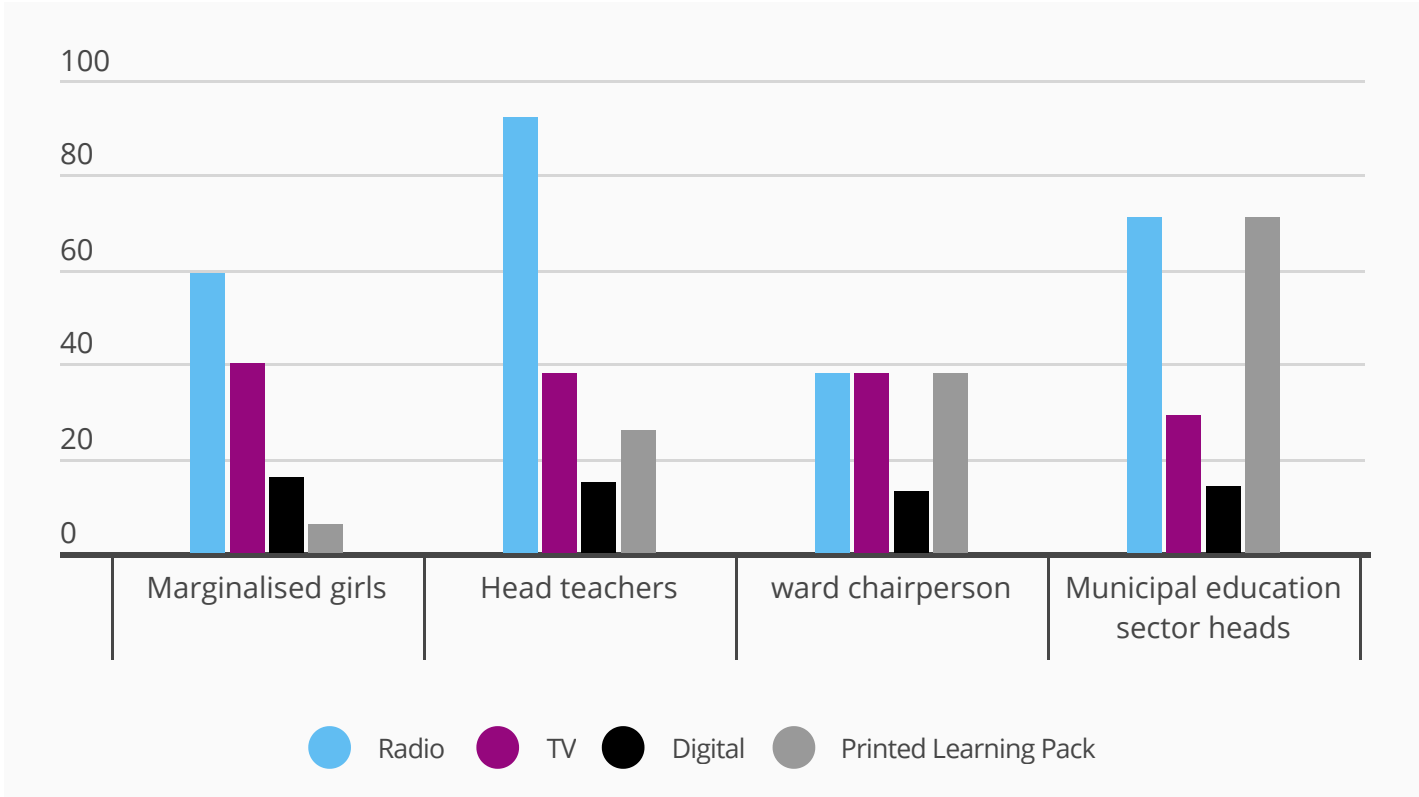


Figure 12: Mentioned methods of distance learning desegregated by stakeholder group

[10]Further discussion available on EdTech Hub 2020 NEPAL “ASK ME ANYTHING” SESSION: RESPONSES TO AUDIENCE QUESTIONS <https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/UXQG7GRG> The MoEST has been coordinating closely with the mobile and internet providers to provide free access to the online learning portal. This would likely facilitate digital learning for girls (and is recommended), but would not meet the needs of the most marginalised who do not have access to suitable devices.

There was significant variation according to district and according to the locality. For example, the majority of stakeholders who were positive about TV lived in Dharding with some others in Lamjung. Similarly, printed materials were very popular with headteachers in Dhading than in other districts. However, the popularity of printed learning packs varied considerably more according to stakeholder. Printed materials were the least favourite option for marginalised girls but among the favourites forward chairs and municipal education section heads. The reasons for this perhaps require more investigation. Perhaps girls are concerned the learning materials alone would give them no access to guidance from teachers. Other stakeholders chose printed materials with mixed methods, suggesting they recognise printed materials should not be distributed in isolation. This method would also offer the least modality change from the established teacher and student practices When planning the research, we did not consider the importance of distributing the new next books for the 2077 academic year (2020-2021).

<b>“Due to lack of income and poor economic condition we need support for internet access.”</b> Little Sister, Lamjung	<b>“I think T.V will be appropriate. We cannot afford money to buy data for study. With T.V we can both visualize and hear.”</b> Little Sister, Dhading	<b>“Radio would be effective as it is a medium that is available in most of the student’s houses”</b> Little Sister, Parsa	<b>I’m currently learning through radio through Pokhariya F.M</b> Little Sister, Parsa
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Selected perspectives from marginalized girls about the best method for distance learning in their community

	Marginalised girls	Head teachers	Ward chairpersons	Municipal education sector heads
Radio	Girls reported access to radio is high, and this is their favoured option, except in Dharding 59%	92% thought radio would be effective due to connections (already initiated in some areas) but 18% worried children weren’t interested.	Ward chairs recognised this would reach the greatest audience. 38%	Very high access in the community, and effective to engage all families 71%
TV	TV is a popular in the mountain districts: Dharding and (to some extent) in Lamjung but less so in Surkhet and Parsa 40%	Popular in Dharding, but less so in other districts, where access was said to limit effectiveness. 38%	In some communities, TV was very popular, but in others there is very poor access. 38%	Only a few felt there are enough in the community 29%
Digital	Across all districts there was scepticism there would be sufficient access and girls do not want to be left behind 16%	Teachers were enthusiastic about the possibility but doubted there was sufficient access to reach students. 15%	Most thought this had the most learning promise, but due to dispersed teachers, lack of devices and connectivity, they believe it will be effective. 13%	Only one thought there was enough access for digital learning to be effective 14%
Printed Learning Pack	This was not a popular option. There is concern it will not be interactive or activity focused. 6%	All in Dharding thought this would be effective, but only one in the other districts agreed. 26%	Some ward chairs are sceptical about printing and delivery. However, many favoured this, above other methods. 38%	Many thought this would be effective, if it is blended with another method, preferably radio 71%

Summary of stakeholder preferences for distance learning (and percentage of stakeholder group who mentioned each method)

However, this was a major concern for girls when they were asked about their study habits. The evidence here suggests that if new books are distributed alongside radio-based guidance then there will be maximum access. This leaves the question of teacher involvement and creating feedback loops for students to improve their productive work.

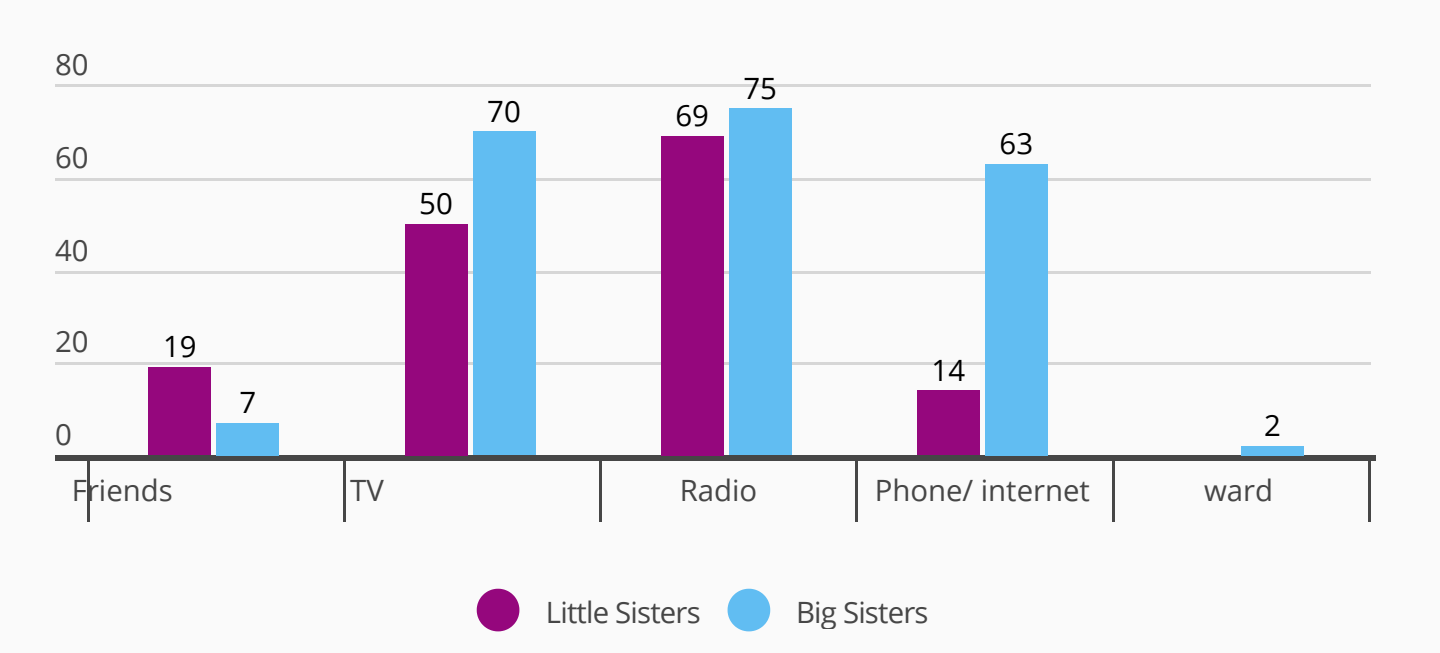


Figure 13: How marginalised girls and women are informed about the crisis

In the previous section we discussed school, education and community leaders’ access to information which demonstrated most felt they were receiving adequate guidance. The interviews also collected data about the methods stakeholders are using to access information. Almost all teachers and head teachers mentioned a range of news media such as radio, TV and online. A few mentioned social media and SMS alerts. Findings also suggest a significant number of head teachers and ward chairpersons are communicating regularly by phone, and that most head teachers are also communicating with their schools’ teachers. There was limited evidence of head teachers and head teachers communicating with students of students’ families, but this is not happening in a systematic way. This gives concern that more marginalised households will not receive communication from community leaders. There was evidence of confusion about responsibility for identifying and communicating with the most at-risk families. Head teachers believed this was the wards responsibility, whereas the ward chairpersons said this would be done by police or judicial committees (but only when there was a question of legal infringement).

Figure 13 shows the sources of information identified by marginalised women and girls (Little Sisters and their Big Sister mentors). For both groups radio and TV were significant sources, and in the case of Big Sisters, phone and internet (including SMS and social media) was also important. Friends were important for the younger girls. Ward leaders were not significant for either group. As a result, we can suggest that radio would be a cost-effective way to deliver messaging for both groups and social media (e.g. Facebook) would be effective for about 1/3 of Big Sisters (mostly young women).



# Communication Within the Community

Government of Nepal have been exploring various options for delivering distance learning and are preparing a multi-format delivery. Therefore, we collected data on mobile phone and internet access for marginalised schoolgirls. This was collected in two formats. Firstly, field staff are tracking all primary actors, and secondly a smaller sample of girls were contacted for more detailed interviews. Collecting the data in two ways allows for some triangulation. The interview sample from Surkhet is significantly greater than that from the other districts. Therefore, the data has been desegregated by district.

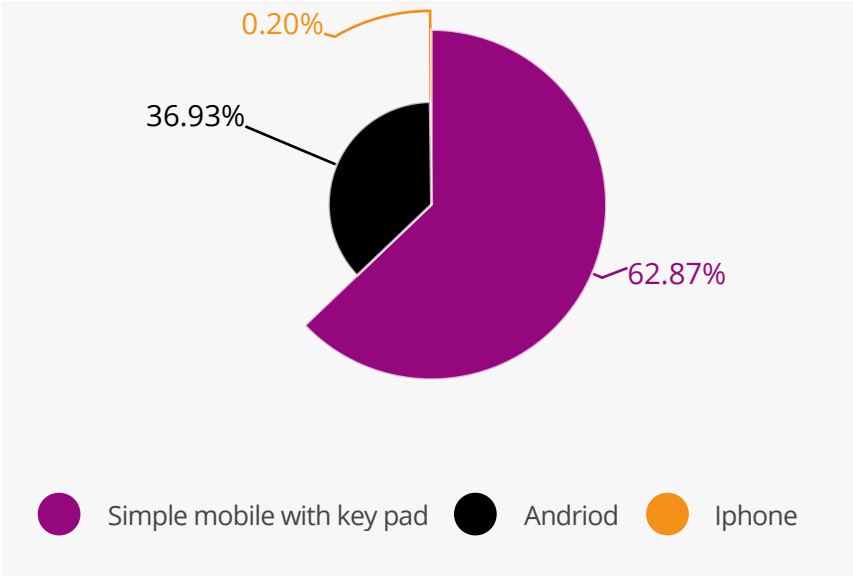


Figure 14: Type of phone device in the household of marginalized girls (tracking data)

The data shows that almost all stakeholders have access to a mobile phone, although for marginalised girls it is usually owned by a family member. This may be a barrier to accessing digital resources, however it also improves safety and identity security. Figures 11 and 12 show the types of phones marginalised girls have access to. There is discrepancy between two data sets. Figure 11 was taken from a large sample of online tracking data, whereas figure 12 includes the large sample tracking data and the smaller sample phone interviews.

Between 48%-63% have access to a basic phone, and 37%-52% have access to a smart device (android or I-phone). This means internet capability and peer to peer sharing of digital resources are not realistic if we are to reach the most marginalised students.

Even in the districts where smart phone ownership is highest (where peer to peer sharing would be most feasible) the data indicates less than half the households of marginalised girls would be able to access resources.

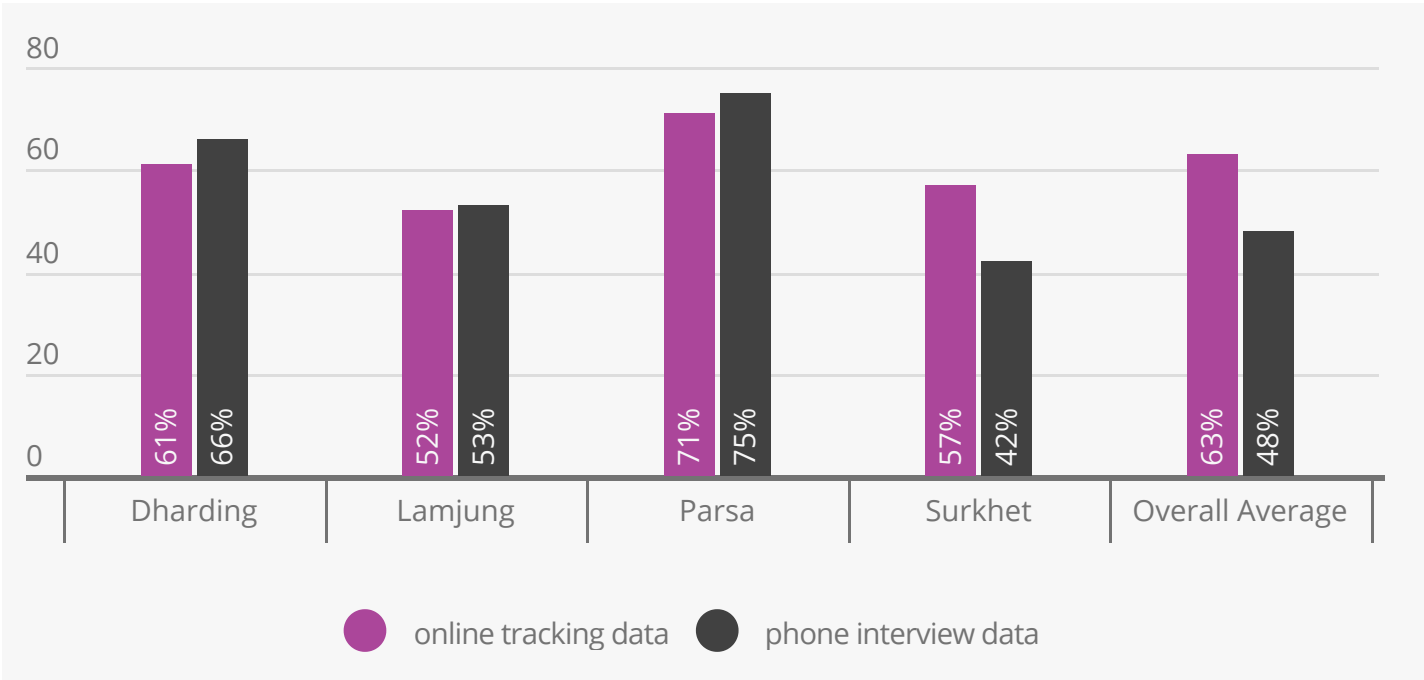


Figure 15: Marginalized girls who only have access to a 'basic' mobile

As shown in figure 13, 57% of girls do not have access to the internet and 37% rely on data packages. Additionally, many girls said that the cost of data to access the internet using a mobile device is prohibitive. This supports many stakeholders' opinion that digital means will not be an effective way to undertake distance learning. The data suggested that internet access in Parsa was particularly low (under 25%) however, the disaggregated data could not be sufficiently triangulated to be confident in the findings.

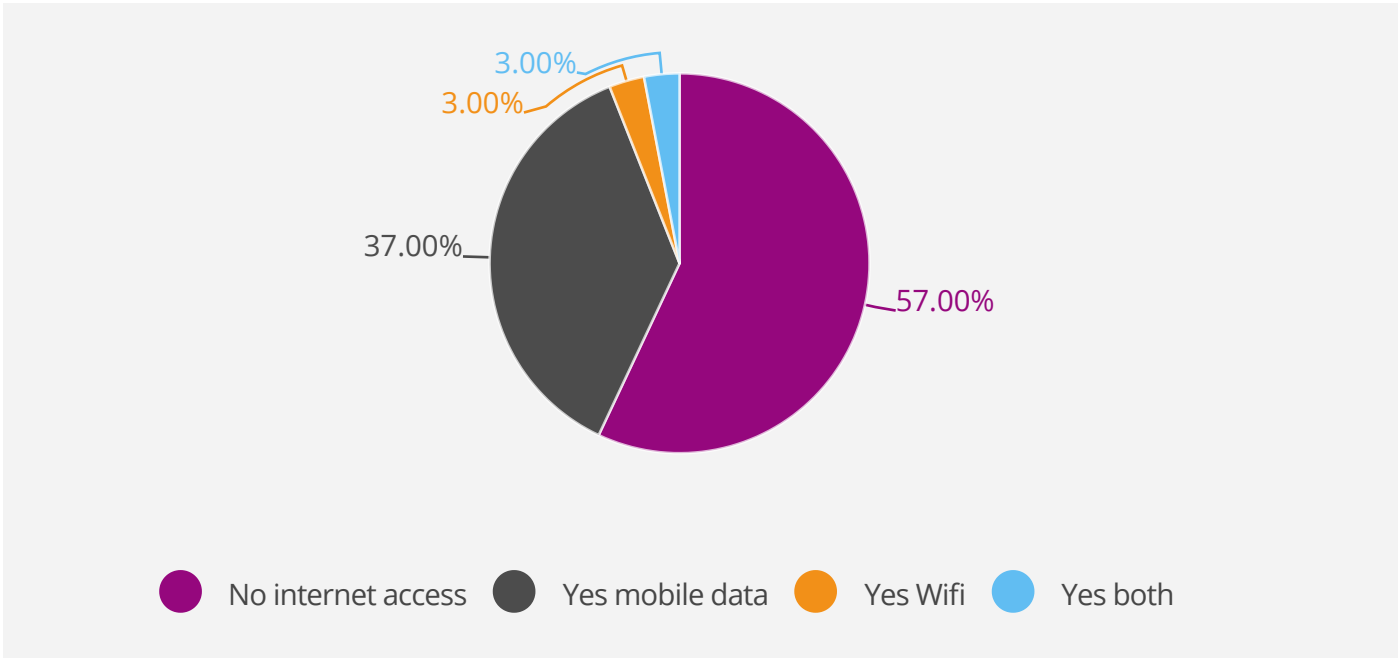



Figure 16: Internet access in marginalized girls' households (tracking data)

With internet access in each district likely to be between 25% - 50%, we can suggest that digital resources will not be the most effective method of distance learning for many students in these communities. However, the figures are more positive than those suggested by teachers and headteachers. This is important because it suggests teachers and headteachers are not always reliable sources of information about technological access in their communities.

All Head teachers said they have contact details for the teachers in their school. 13% of the responses from head teachers suggested that they are in regular contact. Beyond this there is a mixed picture of communication between school actors. Most head teachers were expecting teachers to be in contact with each other or their students. However, most head teachers do not have access to the contact details for all students because these are stored in the school. Furthermore, least three (possibly nine) head teachers said they do not have contact details for their students.



“Communicate with each other and find out the possible resource which is helpful.”

“Teachers should make their yearly action plan and students ask their teacher if they have any difficulty.”

“Teachers should contact the students to find out what students doing at home at this moment and what is the condition of the students’ and their family members’ health.”

Selected quotes from head teachers about expectations of teachers related to communication

Sisters for Sisters has been experimenting with social media as a way to contact teachers and head teachers. Two districts set up Facebook groups within the first few weeks of the school closures to create a platform for communication for head teachers and teachers. 2/3rds of head teachers have joined the groups. 41% of the teachers we interviewed have also joined the group and said that it provides a good space to share information. Head teacher responses also suggested that the platform would be good for information exchange relating to the pandemic, emergency planning and creative solutions to improve teaching.

Two head teachers suggested students should be invited to join which perhaps indicates the head teachers' assumption of the use of the social media site amongst students. A centralised platform to reach students widespread would be an effective way to deliver accurate messages but Facebook would raise safeguarding concerns around potential misuse and child safety with the age restriction of 13. Certainly, if head teachers were to insist on all teachers joining a Facebook group, it would provide a platform for reliable information to be shared and create a direct channel of communication.

## Conclusion

We hope that this report will be useful and invite you to revisit the recommendations. The COVID 19 pandemic is a major threat to many of our established norms, and education is no exception. Whilst limiting transmission and protecting the most vulnerable must be a priority, we must not lose sight of children's rights to safety, security and education. Due to our community volunteers and our long-term relationships with schools, the Sisters for Sisters project has a great opportunity to work with education leaders and community actors to formulate the most effective contingency plans for community schools in Nepal.

Despite the anxiety and uncertainty they face, in terms of their health and economic viability, the marginalised girls in our project have overwhelmingly demonstrated their motivation and capacity to learn. Four in every five girls studied in the previous week, without guidance, prompting or threat. There are significant barriers to deliver the education they deserve; however, their enthusiasm is a great opportunity.

It is our hope that the information gathered and presented in this report will be effective to project managers and staff, as well as those within the organisation and beyond to understand the context more fully and make more informed decisions as we move to keep Nepal learning.

## Acknowledgements

This report was compiled in May 2020 by James Russell [james.russell@vsoint.org](mailto:james.russell@vsoint.org) and Nicola Whybrow [Nicola.whybrow@vsoint.org](mailto:Nicola.whybrow@vsoint.org)

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For more info visit:

[www.girlseducationchallenge.org](http://www.girlseducationchallenge.org)

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