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ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS: BETTER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND LIFE
OUTCOMES FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

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O'DONOGHUE: Hi, this is Jennifer O'Donoghue, fellow with the Center for Universal Education at Brookings and guest host for this episode of the Brookings Cafeteria podcast.

As part of our education and gender work at the center, I coordinate the Global Scholars program, which aims to strengthen the capacity of local leaders to drive evidence-based change in girls' education in low- and middle-income countries around the world. The program begins with a six month visiting fellowship at Brookings, during which time the scholars pursue individual research focused on improving learning opportunities and life outcomes for girls and young women across the global south.

Today, I am delighted to be talking with the 2021 Echidna Global Scholars, our tenth class of scholars who will soon be graduating into an alumni network of 35 girls' education leaders working in more than 20 different countries. The scholars will share lessons they have learned in their research over the past six months to help us understand what we can do as researchers, practitioners, policymakers, funders, or global citizens to ensure that every girl and every young woman can fully exercise her rights and through education.

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And now on with the show. Welcome, Echidna Global Scholars. Why don't we start by introducing ourselves. Arundhuti, could you go first?

GUPTA: Hi, I'm Arundhuti Gupta, an Echidna Global Scholar 2021. I co-founded Mentor Together, which is a national youth mentoring focused nonprofit organization in India. I'm based in Bangalore.

OSSAI: Hi, Edem Ossai, the founder of Mentoring Assistance for Youth and Entrepreneurs Initiative, based in Nigeria, and I am a 2021 Echidna Global Scholar.

ATTAL: Hi, everyone. My name is Nangyalai Attal, I'm one of the Echidna Global Scholars for 2021 and I'm from Afghanistan. Recently, I worked as senior policy specialist with the TVET Authority—Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority—for Afghanistan.

TRAN: Hi, I'm Tran, I'm from Vietnam. I'm 2021 Echidna Global Scholar. Currently, I am co-founder and managing director of ProPath Education Group.

O'DONOGHUE: Great, thank you, everyone, it's so nice to have you here. To get our conversation started, could each of you share the focus of your research and a bit about how your own life experiences and challenges have shaped your interest in this topic? Arundhuti, we'll head back to you.

GUPTA: So, my research looks at the role of a digital mentoring practice and policy ecosystem in supporting young women in post-secondary education or tertiary education in their work readiness, as well as their workforce transition plans. India has had a very low female labor force participation rate, a rate of only about 22 percent, which has been falling even pre-COVID. And it's overall a big puzzle or a conundrum when we look at the economic growth that India has seen, as well as the increasing participation of women in post-secondary education. In my research, I studied the triple impact of a skills deficit, a network gap, and restrictive gender norms, and both the potential of digital mentoring as well as evidence from the ground.

Coming to your second question around how I got involved in all of this work, I would say that it was very much a pay forward of mentorship that I was a beneficiary of as a young person. As a student in university, I was set on a different career path in finance, and it was at the insistence of a mentor that I started actively volunteering. And those simple acts of

community service were the most empowering things that I experienced as a young person, and there was really no looking back after that.

I founded Mentor Together, which is the nonprofit, two years after graduating from university with a simple goal to pay forward this mentorship but focus especially on young people who come from backgrounds of economic and social marginalization, for whom mentoring being left to chance could be even more serious in terms of their life outcomes and what may transpired for them.

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you, Arundhuti. Tran, over to you with the same question. Share with us a bit about, about your work and how you got there.

TRAN: My research focuses on developing women's entrepreneurship through education and training. This interest came from my first business experience over 20 years ago when I was in college. It was about selling handmade greeting cards. And this experience, however, ended just after one year because I had to formally focus on my studies with a hope to secure a more stable job—teaching, for example—when I graduated. And I know that it was what my parents expected, especially when they went through a postwar period of uncertainty in Vietnam. Even schools never prepared me for self-employment, and growing up in a Confucian country like Vietnam, I had been taught that women's core values should lie within the boundaries of their homes. Where men are the primary breadwinners, and women are caretakers of the husband and the children and the home. So the context where I'm leaving stopped me from being an entrepreneur as I wanted for a long time. And my mindset changed when I attended a training program focusing on female entrepreneurship in the United States over 10 years ago. Realizing how education is important to develop entrepreneurship, especially for women, has aroused my current interest.

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you, Tran. Edem, how about you?

OSSAI: Thanks, Jen. My research is focused on education in emergencies and how they affect girls, specifically how they address issues of access, quality, and relevance for girls. I look at this through the Oyo State Government in Nigeria's school on Air intervention launched in 2020 during the COVID-19 led school closures. My interest in education in emergencies was influenced during my childhood after losing my father at the age of 13. I saw firsthand how the loss of the primary income provider in the family could represent a threat to my education and the education of my siblings. Particularly, I saw how economic factors interact with gender factors to make girls' education more vulnerable in times of emergencies and setbacks. Even though crises come in myriad forms, I continue to see that my story is represented in millions of girls across Nigeria, where their education becomes even more vulnerable and they face higher risks during crisis. I, therefore, would like to explore these situations to see how we can draw out lessons to better safeguard girls' education and learning during times of emergencies.

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you so much, Edem. And, Nangyalai, over to you, same question.

ATTAL: So, my research focuses on increasing girls' participation in agriculture education in Afghanistan. I grew up in the countryside. My parents were not formally educated, but my mom had basic religious education, and she would teach girls from the immediate neighborhood basic religious education. And at that point, I was going to school and when I would come back, I would teach those girls how to read and write, and that is how our natural bonds to support girls' education began from childhood.

In the countryside, you could see young women and girls working in agriculture education, and according to studies 70 percent of rural women are either directly or indirectly involved in agriculture. However, when I was working at the TVET Authority, I realized that the participation of girls in agriculture education is just about 12 percent. Given that the

agricultural sector is one of the top growth sector in the country, so we were seeing an enormous potential loss, and that is how I got into how we could increase girls' participation in the short term and in the long term.

O'DONOGHUE: Great, thank you, Nangyalai. So, all of you conducted your research in a time of emergency that hit education particularly hard, whether that was the school closures and economic shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic or, and, and/or the conflict, drought, and food shortages in Afghanistan. As we have seen historically and across the world, girls' education is often the most vulnerable to disruption in times of emergency like these. What are some of the practical applications of your research that can help protect and promote girls and young women's rights and future pathways in times of crisis? What does your research say needs to be done as we move forward? Edem, why don't we start with you?

OSSAI: Thank you again, Jen. My research involved interactions with adolescent girls at upper secondary school level in Oyo State, both in schools across rural and urban areas. And what the research showed us was keenly that, girls continued to seek learning and want learning even during times of crisis. Despite the school closures, girls remained fervent to want to continue their education.

We also find that in contrast with this deep desire for continued learning, there are many limitations that continue to bar girls from accessing the opportunity. It stood out, for instance, that girls continue to lack meaningful control of their time during times of crisis, given that they have to adopt more adult responsibilities due to the absence or loss of caregivers. Girls also have an increase in the burden on domestic activities and chores, and so there's very little opportunity for them to devote time to learn. And so that is a challenge, and girls want to see more cooperation from their family members to enable them access learning opportunities.

Girls also experience lack of access to significant tools and devices that enable them [to] learn. In times of crisis, the formats of learning often change, and during the COVID-19-led crisis, we saw that many interventions leverage technology, as well as traditional media, to broadcast lessons for schoolgirls that require them to also have certain devices or at least mobile phones to access these lessons. Unfortunately, due to issues of parental distrust based on fears that these tools will expose girls to illicit relationships with the opposite sex or unwanted pregnancies, girls disproportionately to boys have less access to these tools. And so girls want to see more access for this for themselves. Girls also want to have more control of their time and just all around support from family members to enable them [to] learn.

ATTAL: Further, to what Edem mentioned, in the case of Afghanistan, we have studied and conducted our research with over 300 young women and girls, students and professors of agriculture. What we found was that there was the persistent negative social perception of agriculture education itself. Despite that young women and girls they were highly aspirational, they wanted to become veterinarian doctors, agricultural engineers. Ninety percent, we have found, wanted to pursue a higher degree in applied agriculture, something that was, that did not exist.

And this negative perception, for example, in case of families, 37 percent said that girls needed parental permission to pursue agricultural education. In addition to that, 40 percent of agriculture veterinary students stated that they were pushed back or pushed away by their friends and relatives to stop studying agriculture. So, this persistent negative perception of agriculture/veterinary education was one of the solid and really challenging barriers for girls to pursue their aspirations and to move on to the world of work.

TRAN: Continuing what Nangyalai and Edem just shared, in my study I saw that the Vietnamese female business owners in times of COVID crisis are more vulnerable to revenue losses and business closure than their male counterparts. So to protect and promote female

entrepreneurship, among the recommendations I offer in the research, one was that the government should place women entrepreneurs' need in the center of the targeted policies and interventions. However, they should not end there. They should balance between women's needs and future expectation of entrepreneurs for sustainable growth. Furthermore, policies and interventions should support one another to maximize the intended effects. This would require both vertical and horizontal collaboration among government agencies, private sectors, and civil society.

GUPTA: So in my research, what I found is that young women across the country in India, over 4,000 of them from over 10 states, was able to access digital mentoring, and the young women who went through the personalized mentorship found that they were able to improve on their range of their work readiness skills. They were surrounded by a very diverse network of career mentors. And also that these mentors championed much more gender transformative norms around the economic empowerment of women than what these young women typically faced in families and communities.

So building on all of this research, I proposed three practical applications. First, safeguarding the ability and the right of women to continue to access tertiary education in India. We've seen very promising gains, and today young women access them in equal numbers as men. But given the impact of COVID on the livelihoods of those in the informal sector, which is where most of the economically marginalized women have families working, targeted financial support is very important not just to cover the costs of tertiary education, but also the costs of digital access devices, and data, which is so important to ensure young women equally participate in this digital economy.

The second application of my research is in proposing an ecosystem of actors, especially in the higher education space supported by the state that can promote inclusive participation of young women in mentoring programs.

And the final application is in ensuring that digital mentoring is delivered safely with impact in mind, with the right set of actors are enforcing quality standards, program design evaluations, as well as a broad-based funding source that can ensure we support young women's transition from education into the labor force to allow them to thrive.

O'DONOGHUE: Tran, you mentioned just now the importance of putting women's needs in the center, women business owners needs in the center of both practice and policy. And in your research, you talk about the difference between the technical skills needed to start and manage a business such as finance, communication, or human resource management and the mindset that's needed to really thrive in the entrepreneurial world, which might include such things as self-confidence, risk taking, and leadership. How can this mindset be effectively developed in entrepreneurship training programs for women, especially when your research found that women in your study felt the sort of identity conflict between being a woman and being a leader or an entrepreneur.

TRAN: Thank you, Jen, for this interesting and practical question. While technical skills are more important to start and manage a business, a mindset such as self-confidence, respecting leadership, and resilience is needed to grow a business, especially in the crisis like what we are now facing. And my research found that Vietnamese women entrepreneurs tended to focus more on technical skills than entrepreneurial mindset. And the analysis of my interviews with them revealed that his tendency was influenced by two factors: the narrow view of entrepreneurship and identity conflict between being a woman and being a leader or an entrepreneur, just like you, you mentioned.

So, to effectively develop entrepreneurial mindset, we should start from these two root causes. First, we have to ensure that they fully understand what it means to be an entrepreneur. We should have them understand that entrepreneurship goes beyond owning and running a business, and we can do that by guiding them to envision how future is makes

them as entrepreneurs or showcasing growth models and giving them the opportunities to learn from real experiences as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, to deal with our gender identity conflict, the program should be designed to help them navigate stereotype, threat, and identity management. Specifically, we could include sessions on self-awareness so women entrepreneurs would learn to identify their beliefs, values, and interests and become confident enough to act on them consistently. In order to ensure equal and full participation of women entrepreneurs in this program, there should be a gender dimension. To address women-only concerns and challenges, the program should also create a comfortable and safe space for them to speak up.

GUPTA: If I could add to what Tran mentioned, I think this part of her research was so insightful and really resonated with me because of this broader concept of what is it that young women need to be prepared for, especially as they're in education or as they're early in their career. And there's so much evidence that comes from our reports that say that eight of the 10 most valued skills today at work, irrespective of whether you're starting your own organization or working for someone, say relate to skills like self-management, working with people, problem-solving, aspects that are so rarely addressed in tertiary education curriculums or the pedagogy of instruction.

And I think what I find is that, similar to what Tran said, was that there are these real skill deficits when when young women especially are looking to plan ahead. And for in the Indian context, I think additionally, the skills of low- agency and self-efficacy, because of highly patriarchal social norms, were other areas where young women, especially the work readiness skills, were further exacerbated the deficit in them through these skills, which are very contextual to the lives of women. And evidence from the program found that mentoring in digital formats supported by very evidence-based curriculum took the real life experience of mentors and give them a way to practice this and help their young mentees learn these

skills and practices in a way that was helpful to them, not just to their day-to-day life, but also help them envision this for their future.

O'DONOGHUE: Thanks, Arundhuti. I think you bring up some important points that we've all talked about over these past six months around, you know, what's the connection and the relevance between education and educational experiences and the real world. And I know, Nangyalai, for example, one of the key findings in your research was the importance of that real world connection or how, you know, agriculture education could build pathways for participation in the world of work for young women. Could you tell us a bit more about the relationship that you found between this real world connection or lack thereof and girls' participation in formal agricultural education in Afghanistan?

ATTAL: Sure. In addition to all the challenges that young women and girls in particular studying agriculture, we're trying to navigate the fundamental challenge that they were facing was lack of jobs after graduation from agriculture education. For instance, we found that at the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock, only 7 percent of their workforce was female, and probably they were all in positions that were not really decision-making. And young women and girls reported and said in our surveys that lack of internships and hands-on training were something that they were highly concerned about. And for instance, even within the TVET sector, within agriculture education, of all the teachers, permanent teachers, only 3 percent were female. And then what Tran mentioned earlier about role models, here female students want to see role models. They wanted to , some of them wanted actually to become teachers, and in our survey we found that 87 percent of Agriculture Institute students wanted to become female teachers. But since they don't have bachelor's degrees, they could not be qualified as candidates. So there are real challenge for them to navigate moving on to enter the workforce, both in public sectors and the private sectors.

TRAN: Can I add more about real-world connections from what I found in my research with women entrepreneurs in Vietnam, because it's so interesting for me to see the similarity between Nangyalai sharing and my with the women entrepreneurs. So the women entrepreneurs in my study told me that they were really hungry for real-world connection, which might come from the format of mentorship, for example. Their meeting with a mentor can help them improve the knowledge gaps, and a mentor can also help them expand their business network. This is especially a benefit for for young aspiring female entrepreneurs who have small business network and lack practical experiences. Moreover, they appreciated the opportunities to learn from real stories of experienced entrepreneurs in panel talks and to see how a women entrepreneurs handle their daily work inside _____. They also love networking opportunities with their peers to be motivated and inspired from those who might face the same challenges. They _____ the chance to hear, see, and learn from such role models, really help them acquire skills and knowledge needed for their entrepreneurial journey.

O'DONOGHUE: And this idea of role models and the importance of role models to girls and young women was something that I think came out in all four of your research projects, and in particular in this more structured sense of mentoring. Arundhati, in your research, for example, you found that digital mentoring was an effective way to reach girls from low-income families across India. And EdTech has really taken center stage and many of the education conversations in this COVID world, with some pointing to its potential to support or accelerate learning, and others warning of the negative effects of a growing digital divide. How can we best leverage digital technologies so that all girls and young women, regardless of income level, have equal access to high quality mentorship and networking opportunities?

GUPTA: Yes, this is a really important question that's being debated by so many actors in this space. First, if we were to speak of the context of, like you said, COVID has highlighted the importance of digital delivery of services to young people across the world, whether it's in education or even any of these afterschool programs to ensure that there isn't complete disruption in times of crisis.

COVID has also accelerated digital technology adoption, and it's often accelerated trends that were already very promising. In India in 2020, women's ownership of smartphones grew 11 percent, faster than the rate, equivalent rate for men. And already this was on the back of exponential growth in internet users. But there is reason to think of being more intentional because I don't think technology is a silver bullet in any way to reach or be impactful by itself. If any policy or practice doesn't consider human-centered approaches to understanding if technology can reach young women—what do young women want from any technology-mediated service—and then in an ongoing way, if we don't understand the experience of users with it, technology in itself will not do all of this.

What that meant for us in the context of digital mentoring was, A, looking at how we could understand limitations to young people accessing devices and data. For most of our young women, given the economic marginalization they faced, they could not afford to do, to keep topping up their data plans, and they needed access to emergency funds to be able to do that to access both education and other support services. When it came to what they wanted help on, we had to be very mindful of it wasn't just individual skills, but also very serious network gaps where, like we all said, they aren't supported by very diverse and large numbers of career role models. And that's not just your one mentor, that's seeing many, many mentors. So a digital network that allowed us to create over a thousand role models had a lot of latent potential to challenge those network gaps at scale, something that in-person mentoring in our program experience wasn't able to do. So all of this has meant that there is

immense potential in digital, but policy and program practice has to take a very human-centered design approach to implementing any digitally mediated service.

OSSAI: Just building on that, I would also say that as education plan is, seek to leverage technology to ensure that learners and especially girls who are often marginalized in times of emergencies can continue to safely access qualitative learning opportunities that are relevant to their needs, this throws up important considerations that are very critical. One of the things that our research showed was that accessing school lessons through traditional broadcast media, girls complained about the one way format of lesson delivery, which involved them listening as opposed to interacting. And given that gender plays a role in how we learn, and girls tend to be relational, wanting to ask questions, seek clarification, gain detailed explanation—this inhibited instructional mode represented a great barrier to girls being able to access qualitative learning from these programs. It is therefore important that interactive features must be built into technologies, digital technologies, to allow girls to have a full range of, you know, interaction and be able to ask questions and clarify points that perhaps are lost on them and these tough concepts.

Another important point is that technology also represents a channel for other kinds of information just besides formal subjects. And so, for instance, during the school closures, we found that girls were able you know through technology girls come in contact with disinformation, girls come in contact with different kinds of information that affect their psychosocial needs. And so to be relevant in times of crisis, education using technology has to provide holistic content that addresses all of these wider needs of girls in moments like that.

Finally, technology oftentimes basically reenacts the world and all its existing biases. And so if we're not sensitive or gender responsive enough, we simply migrate existing gender biases into content that are delivered through technology. School … Content, for

instance, when analyzed, we found that it introduced girls to content that reinforced existing gender biases, whether in the form of male teacher distribution across subjects or just in general use of words and pronouns. Seven pictures were painted to girls about seven rules specific to them and, you know, for instance leadership, productivity and, numerical rules were painted to girls as masculine rules. And so all of these things need to be considered, and there's a huge responsibility on education planners when considering leveraging technology for learning.

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you, Arundhuti and Edem, for those really thoughtful points that you made around the promise, but also some of the important considerations in moving forward with digital technologies. Edem, I want to follow up with you a bit more around what you were talking about in terms of the gender responsive future. You know, this was something that you really focused on in your research in the School on Air program, as you mentioned, which was due to the COVID-19-related school closures, but really serves as a as a way for us to learn more broadly about how we can ensure this sort of gender responsiveness in our interventions in any sorts of emergencies, right? I think there's a lot to be learned from this particular case that you studied that can be applied to different kinds of education disruption, say a pause in schooling due to climate emergency or maybe even armed conflict. What would you say are some of the general principles that education planners and community members should keep in mind to ensure that they deliver high quality, gender responsive education in any type of emergency?

OSSAI: It is important as we look at emergencies and crises to recognize that though they present in different ways, and crisis takes on different forms, you know, and so reactions to a specific crisis, you know, will require different levels of expertise per time. However, one thing we all can agree on is the very fact that crisis in itself is a constant, you know whether it presents in the loss of a loved one who is a primary income provider or in you

know a disruptive public health related pandemic or you know an armed conflict, it is certain that we will experience as human society setbacks and disruptions.

And so the lesson from this for education planners is to adopt a long term planning approach to dealing with crisis by setting up permanent systems for dealing with crises that basically establish a frame around which all of the other sort of more specific responses can be built. It is critical, for instance, for governments, for ministries of education, to have specific, you know, actors who are mandated or dedicated to with the mandates for dealing with, you know, crises and disruptions. And so, ensuring permanent budgets to these offices, for instance, ensuring ongoing and continuous support through capacity building and training to these actors is critical, and ensuring that there is a mechanism that is, you know, cross-sectoral and also built across all levels, from federal to state levels in a nation to ensure adequate coordination during moments of crisis.

Secondly, in establishing these permanent systems, one thing that is also very critical is to ensure that girls' voices are built into the planning systems, the planning processes within these systems. Girls must be directly consulted, and the consultations must be incorporated into the programs. So, we should not just be thinking for girls, but actually consulting girls to hear their opinions. And there are multiple examples drawn across the world that show cost effective ways that these can be done even during times of crisis when funding is typically even more constrained.

Another critical point to stress is how very important it is to partner with parents and communities in moments of crisis to ensure that the most marginalized and vulnerable girls, who face higher risks at these times, are reached with whatever interventions and responses and programs we design. If the lens is shifted away from merely delivering programs in times of crisis to actually ensuring learning outcomes are derived by girls, then all of these measures working together will ensure that girls' voices are inputted into the planning, and

also the family members are carried along and we build partnership with these family members so that in the competing list of activities that are often put forward for girls to do at home and other spaces where they occupy, education tops the list in these moments.

ATTAL: Edem referred to the lack of funding, and I think I will start there with what is Afghanistan facing. Afghanistan is unfortunately at the heart of so many crises, and that is putting a lot of pressure on disproportionately affecting young women and girls. In terms of funding, after August 15, after the fall of the previous government, 90 percent of technical and financial resources actually drained from Afghanistan. And according to the World Food organization, more than to 22 million Afghans, more than half of the population, is suffering from acute hunger right now. And according to UNICEF, 2 million children are at the verge of death. And these numbers and these these crises are affecting lives on a daily basis. But, I think in the short term what the world needs to do is to continue to provide this funding to feed those that are hungry. The sudden stop of, for instance, paying teachers' salaries that teachers depended on that for the past 20 years is affecting many teachers and female teachers, students, and classes. So I think, we have universal rights, we also have universal responsibilities. And I think this is the time that we need to deliver on these universal responsibilities and to not politicize it.

And I think in the long run, what we need to do is also to work on improving the perception of agriculture, introducing that as first-class education so that young women and girls are more encouraged to participate. And young women and girls will act in agricultural production is is substantial in Afghanistan, and this ongoing food insecurity is adding further pressure on agricultural sector and the role of young women and girls and their skills in increasing food security and food production. And I think the world should not turn their back on young women in Afghanistan.

O'DONOGHUE: I want to build off some of the things that Edem and Nangyalai, you just said, I think, Nangyalai, those very dramatic numbers that you offer for us about around what's happening in Afghanistan, as well as the you know universal responsibility that we have to continue and to protect the rights of girls and young women in a world in which to borrow a phrase from Edem, crisis is a constant, right. So, you know, we often think that crises or emergencies come every now and then, but really, what we're seeing across the world now is that crisis is with us almost on a daily basis. And so this need to think about, you know, how do we do the work, how do we live up to those universal responsibilities in these times of crisis becomes ever more important.

And the research, as we mentioned earlier, the research from the past has shown that girls' education is often the most vulnerable in these times of crisis. Some of the research that's coming out now that we've been living with COVID for two years is showing that it's perhaps more nuanced than that, right? And so that while girls are maybe more affected in some ways, girls' education has been resilient in others.

And so I just want to end our podcast and our conversation today with a question to all of you around, you know, what do you feel that you see in your research? Does your research suggest that these crises are further entrenching or exacerbating the barriers that girls and young women already faced to realizing their aspirations in and through education? Or do you see this, and is there sort of evidence from your research, that this is a potential moment for disruption that we can imagine a world where we move ahead where girls' education is not the most vulnerable to crisis? And why don't we start with you, Tran, for this question?

TRAN: Yes, I agree with you that unfortunately, we are living with a crisis nowadays. And I think that we we all heard that in every crisis there is an opportunity. So on the one hand, my research indicated that the pandemic has intensified many of the challenges that

female entrepreneurs in Vietnam already faced. For example, they are disadvantaged by additional childcare and housework, to get no special support for their businesses compared to those run by men. They lack digital literacy to adapt to the changing markets, and they have less time for professional development.

While presenting such problems, my research revealed limited progress that have been made on women as entrepreneurs, digital constraints in policy design, implementation, and evaluation. But on the other hand, it reinforced the opportunity for us to fight systemic changes. Is it time for us to confirm that beyond urgent fiscal assistance, long term interventions like education should be more invested to build a more inclusive and sustainable economy. So capacity building cannot be a standalone effort, but it should go hand-in-hand with improving the context within which female entrepreneurs are working. And this is more imperative than ever to listen to the voice of women entrepreneurs to really understand what would be most helpful to them to survive and thrive in businesses.

GUPTA: Building on what Tran said, I would also echo that I think the crisis has exacerbated inequalities in economic participation of men and women for sure. More women have left the workforce than men. And then consider the case in India, where even pre-COVID in the last 30 years the female labor force participation rate had dropped 42 percent, while the rate for men had remained roughly the same. So that crisis has definitely exacerbated, which is extremely, a very grave situation for India.

And I would say again that the opportunities is in the digital adoption of technology. Despite that period where more women in India left the workforce, women's ownership of technology and mobile internet was on the increase. So that is the silver lining that we have to look at. And particularly what I think is the opportunity is now to think of digital technologies and products not as like a fallback because we have to do them because we cannot do in-person programs or services. Like in the policy brief I lay out, digital mentoring

could actually be uniquely able to tackle these three deficits that young women face at scale. For 90 million young women in tertiary education, it can help young women learn skills, it can build those diverse networks that can efficiently exchange information and opportunities for young women, and it can at scale advocate for more gender transformative norms around the economic empowerment of women for families.

So the silver lining is now in this whole group of actors, whether it's international education actors, civil society, and other formats, think tanks, corporates, employers, donors to come together to really reimagine what digital technologies and products can do and make sure that they aren't just a fallback in times of emergencies.

ATTAL: Yeah, building on what Arundhuti mentioned. You know, Afghanistan is facing multiple crises, and all of these crises, definitely as we could see, exacerbated the barriers towards girls' education in general. And lately we've found that of the 34 provinces, only in eight provinces girls were allowed to go and attend public high school. You know I don't want to be dramatic, but to say it could be a reversal, or all what we have achieved could be gone really quickly, if we don't work hard and make sure that young women and girls are protected in these difficult crises and situations.

But I think, on the other hand, it could, this difficult crisis that we face could also present a potential moment. Now for the past 20 years, we spent billions and even trillions of dollars on war, conflict. I think now we could allocate this money into the education system, the education of infrastructure, increasing labs for agricultural schools, increasing the number of agricultural institutes, and investing in the potential of young women and girls instead of war and conflict. In some areas of the country, there is peace that it was not there for the past 40 years.

In some areas that presents some opportunities, but I think it's time for the international community to bring those funding into the education system of Afghanistan.

Through nonprofit organizations, for example, there are long established there, and address the legitimate aspiration and legitimate needs of the Afghan girls that they aspire to to pursue. So I think there is a moment, but there is also this very, very difficult situation that if not navigated I think we would have just abandoned the young women and girls of Afghanistan. And I think that would be very sad for the world to see.

OSSAI: So just re-echoing the previous scholars' words, I will also say that, I mean, the innate paradox in every crisis is the fact that coexisting with the negative impact of such crises also lie the opportunities for growth and improvement that these crises represent. And, you know, so this is evident even from my research.

However, we find that these opportunities for growth are not automatic or do not exist in default mode. Societies, governments, education planners, stakeholders have to be very intentional in making certain that those groups who are vulnerable even in times that are normal and face higher risks during times of crisis, efforts are put in place to make sure that they are not left out. Societies that deal with crises are not male. Rather, societies dealing with crisis are mixed societies. And so these societies have to have a mixed approach looking at things from not just a male lens, but a mixed lens, and to study the differentiated patterns, the different impacts, the different needs, the different challenges of the different groups in these societies. This is the only way we can make sure that we do not intensify the already existing inequities or exacerbate them but make certain that, you know, those who live on the margins of such societies are finally integrated into the learning opportunities that they need.

And so that's the lesson for me. It is a situation of great potential to improve the world and move away from the old order where we lost so much great potential of young girls and women to add value in our societies and move it to a new world where we finally harness the great potential that exists in our girls are deeply aspirant to achieve the greatest heights. And so COVID-19 represents a moment for the world to pause and finally adopt a wide, equitable

lens in making sure that girls all over the world have their needs captured in education planning.

O'DONOGHUE: I think the word that I'm taking from all of your very thoughtful answers is "intentionality," right, that we have perhaps an opportunity, and I think we've heard a lot about that opportunity, you know, that can come out of crisis and building back better. But if we don't put in the hard work, if we don't learn from past decisions, and if we don't move forward with intentionality, that we're at risk of really entrenching some of the problems that we are carrying with us from our past decisions currently.

Tran, Arundhuti, Nangyalai, and Edem, thank you all so much for this really rich discussion and for sharing with us important insights that can help us, help guide us with intentionality as we move forward and work to ensure that all girls and young women are able to fully exercise their rights both in and through education.

I'm Jennifer O'Donoghue with the Center for Universal Education at Brookings. You can learn more about the Echidna Global Scholars and their research at our website, Brookings dot edu. Thank you.

DEWS: Thanks to Jennifer O'Donoghue for guest hosting this episode, and to the Echidna Global Scholars she interviewed.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.