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Africa's lost girls

Covid-19's severe impact on girls' education in Africa calls for renewed efforts to improve school enrolment rates

One of the most under-reported effects of the Covid-19 pandemic is its adverse effect on girls' education, especially in Africa. An entire generation of African girls has been lost after lockdown-induced disruptions in their education, as many girls did not return to school after they reopened last year.

For instance, a study in Kenya found that 16 per cent of girls and 8 per cent of boys did not return to school in 2021 after nearly a year of school closures. This will – without a doubt – impact gender parity in education and stunt the lives of many girls who might have received an education had the pandemic not occurred.

Moreover, there is a real danger that the negative trends precipitated by the pandemic will be long-lasting. More than two years after the outbreak of the pandemic, many parents are still choosing to send their sons to school while keeping their daughters at home to help with household chores. Some parents who lost their livelihoods during the pandemic also got their school-age daughters married in exchange for dowry. In Kenya, 16 per cent of girls aged 15 to 19 who got married during the first year of the pandemic said they would not have been married off if there was no pandemic. In March 2021, UNICEF warned that 10 million girls worldwide were at risk of child marriage because of Covid-19.

Rising poverty

Tragically, these choices are being made at a time when most African countries are experiencing rising poverty and inequality levels as a result of reduced economic activities precipitated by pandemic-induced lockdowns. The pandemic has reversed the gains Kenya made in reducing poverty and inequality levels by pushing an additional six million Kenyans into poverty. And since poverty levels among women, particularly single mothers, is usually higher than among men, women are suffering disproportionately from the aftershocks of Covid-19.

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Women working in the informal sector or operating small businesses have been particularly hard hit. One survey showed that more than a third of small businesses in Kenya that were operational before the pandemic had closed down by July last year.

Another report showed that nearly 4 out of 10 Kenyans have been unable to pay rent since the outbreak of the pandemic. This is a more than five-fold increase from pre-pandemic figures, which showed that less than 1 in 10 Kenyans could not afford to pay rent on time. Reduced incomes or unemployment are forcing many parents to forego the education of their daughters.

Domestic violence

Like many women across the globe, African women have also been experiencing more domestic and sexual violence in the last two years. The pandemic triggered a 'shadow pandemic' globally, including in Africa: domestic violence cases rose dramatically during the lockdowns and many adolescent girls experienced sexual and other types of violence.

In East Africa, there was a 48 per cent increase in reported cases of gender-based violence, with Kenya also reporting a significant spike in rape and defilement cases. In Lagos State in Nigeria, domestic violence cases rose by over 100 per cent during the first lockdown period in 2020. The Central African Republic recorded a 69 per cent increase in reported injuries to women and children and a 27 per cent increase in rape cases. Women living in refugee camps also experienced more domestic violence. An International Rescue Committee (IRC) survey in 15 African countries found that more than 70 per cent of displaced and refugee women saw a rise in domestic violence in their communities.

Crucially, evidence has shown that girls become more vulnerable to sexual violence or abuse during school closures as they no longer have the protection that schools offer. About three-quarters of the adolescent girls interviewed in a study in Kenya said they had experienced or witnessed more sexual, physical, or emotional abuse during school closures, which they attributed to tensions arising from loss of family income and restricted movement during lockdowns. Official data from Kenya show that sexual abuse of minors rose dramatically in 2020, from 5,397 reported cases in 2019 to 6,801 in 2020, a 26 per cent increase.

Unwanted pregnancies

This sexual abuse of girls has resulted in many unwanted pregnancies. South Africa's Gauteng province has witnessed a 60 per cent increase in teenage pregnancies since the start of the pandemic, which has been attributed to a variety of factors, including lack of access to sex education among girls, reduced access to contraceptives during lockdowns and sexual violence. This has affected the number of girls in the province who returned to school when schools reopened.

The rise in teenage pregnancies and child marriages has ensured that an entire generation of African girls has been shut out of the education system. The pandemic's impact on African women and girls will likely result in few African countries being able to meet their Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, as the loss of education and skills among the current generation of school-age African girls will have long-term economic impact on African economies.

Covid-19's severe impact on women and girls in Africa calls for renewed efforts to improve school enrolment rates among girls.

The data might suggest that closing schools was a bad idea because it put girls in harm's way. However, one cannot blame African governments for taking strict measures to contain the spread of the virus. African countries' healthcare systems are too weak and under-equipped to deal with a large influx of patients. And given that Africans were – and remain – the least vaccinated population in the world, governments did not want to take any chances. It is obvious now that they did not foresee the impact these measures would have on women and girls.

Get the girls back to school

Covid-19's severe impact on women and girls in Africa calls for renewed efforts to improve school enrolment rates. This will require a multisectoral approach that involves parents, schools, communities, governments, and international development organisations. It is still not too late to reintegrate these lost girls who, through no fault of their own, have been shut out of the education system.

African governments must also put in place social safety nets to cushion those who have been most adversely affected by the pandemic. However, with rising national debt and inflation – which is likely to increase as a result of the current Ukraine-Russia crisis – in most African countries, it

is unlikely that African governments will spend money on social welfare programmes in the short term. Should this turn out to be the case, it's African women and girls who will continue to pay the heaviest price.



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