

# COVID-19 AND GIRL CHILD EDUCATION: PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES.

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## Abstract

*This paper argues that COVID-19 lockdowns negatively affected the education of many young girls in rural Zimbabwe, particularly those who ran into teenage marriages; because they had no other alternative productive activities to occupy them during school closures. Had there been other educational activities like readily available online lessons, community clubs, access to internet and many more activities which their urban counterparts are enjoying, less numbers of child marriages could have been recorded. The paper interviewed some parents from rural areas (Gokwe and Chirumanzu), on the state of affairs and discovered that 7 in every 10 families interviewed had their teenage girl married or had unwanted pregnancies before marriage. The paper recommends that mitigation measures should be taken so that young girls are kept in school as long as possible despite quagmires like the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19). Without sustainable programs for girls and boys in rural and urban areas, the gains yet to be achieved by all legislation promoting gender equality in education, the education Amendment Act 2020 and other intervention strategies from Non-Governmental Organisations like Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) which are paying school fees for girls in more than 29 districts of rural Zimbabwe will go to waste. Efforts should therefore be made through a multi-stakeholder approach to keep girls in school against any odds.*

**Key Words:** Marginalised, Vulnerability, Exclusion, Gender Equality.

## **1. Introduction and Background of the Study**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global health emergency on 30 January 2020, before characterising it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Remuzzi and Remuzzi, 2020). According to WHO, (2020) within weeks of onset, the contagious zoonotic disease had spread to over 100 countries across the world, becoming a worldwide pandemic, massively affecting countries like Italy, Spain and USA in less than 3 months (La Maestra, 2020) and the disease had spread to all parts of the world, including Zimbabwe. Like other countries, Zimbabwe effected the first national lockdown to curb the spread of the disease on 30 March 2020, followed by a series of lockdowns as guided by Government COVID-19 regulations. These national lockdowns saw schools closed amongst other institutions, leaving children of schooling age stranded at home for the better part of 2020. It is the understanding of this paper that when such quagmires like COVID-19 affect the country, it is the rural people who suffer most as compared to their urban counterparts. Considering the fact that rural girls have always been a marginalised and disadvantaged group in education due to already existing underlying conditions like; the distance they travel to school on foot, the time they wake up to catch up with school lessons, and other usual household chores they attend to before and after going to school, amongst others, the paper found it necessary to examine and assess the state of affairs of these girls in the rural areas during this special period of COVID-19 disturbances. These factors affecting rural girls in Zimbabwe include: Lack of sanitary wear, lack of school fees, shortage of school stationery, vulnerability to rape and other forms of sexual abuse during long school trips, the paper found it necessary to explore the perspectives of the parents in Gokwe and Chirumanzu Districts concerning the welfare of their teenage girls during the national lockdowns.

Zimbabwe has made a lot of efforts to meet the 50/50 gender equality in education. Many policies have been formulated since independence to increase the number of girls and women who get access to equal opportunities in education compared to their male counterparts. The Growth with Equity Policy of 1981, in which education was one of the

5 pillars saw a lot of girls enrolled for primary and secondary education as well as in tertiary institutions like teachers' colleges, nursing schools and vocational training colleges. Adult education programs also benefited many women since they gained literacy and numeracy skills. Later on in 2001, Government of Zimbabwe also launched the Basic Education Assistance Model (BEAM), to curb the challenges of school fees and levies after the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) had introduced user fees around 1996, which saw many children dropping out of school due to lack of fees. Although BEAM had challenges in its implementation just like any other policy, a significant number of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) benefited through the program, mainly girls who are always the last priority in the cultural context of Zimbabwe when there is a crisis in the family concerning school fees. To compliment efforts by the Government, some Non-Governmental Organisation like CAMFED Zimbabwe which was launched in 1993, also introduced programs to assist the girl child in accessing primary and secondary education in various districts of the country. The government also amended the education act in 2020, to include a section on free compulsory state funded education, in tandem with international documents on the rights of the child (the Convention on the rights of the Child 1989) as well as the constitution of Zimbabwe 2013 (National objective 19:1-3; Chapter 4:8; a-e). The same amendment act also allows girls who get pregnant while in school to continue with school as opposed to previous years when it was a serious offence which leads expulsion when one gets pregnant while in primary, secondary or tertiary colleges. All these efforts may be eroded and become a waste of time, and resources if special attention is not taken to ensure that despite the occurrence of disasters in the country, young girls must persevere and face the challenges like well-trained children and remain girls not brides until such quagmires are over. Such training, influence and direction is the responsibility of the parents who are the first contact of the children when they are going to school and very critical duty bearers in moulding the lives of the children. While Government also has a key role to play, like the formulation and implementation of Policies and Acts, provision of funds and infrastructure and so on, we cannot expect Ministers of education to go into homes and monitor day to day activities of the child-that's where the parent remains a critical stakeholder in upholding the rights of the child. The paper will therefore explore the experiences and

perspectives of the parents in nurturing their girl children during the COVID-19 induced national lockdowns.

## **2.Literature Review**

### *Theoretical framework*

This paper heavily relies on the feminist theory. Feminism is about the equality in rights and opportunities between men and women (Caprino, 2017). The theory emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as women got educated and began to question their position, their treatment in domestic and public circles as well as their human rights. According to McAfee, (2018), feminism is defined using two claims, which are the normative and the descriptive claim. The normative claim asserts that men and women are entitled to equal rights and respect, while the descriptive claim has it that women are currently disadvantaged in terms of respect and rights. These two claims present what the ideal situation should be from a human rights-based perspective, against what the situation is in reality. This raises the need to be pragmatic and reactionary to the status quo in a bid to foster solutions in a way which does not disrupt societal structures, norms and values but rather in a way which embraces change in behaviour and attitude so that the normative claim can be achieved for women and girls.

### *The Status of girls' education worldwide*

For scholars like (Somani, 2017, and Mathur, 2021) educating girls has insurmountable benefits to families, communities and nations because girls are more likely to invest their income in food and family education. This means if you educate one girl, you have educated more people because the benefits will trickle down to the rest of the family. For UNWOMEN, (2012), children born to educated young women are less likely to die because they receive better care, better nutrition, and improved access to medical facilities since the mother can afford when she is in paid employment. Adding any number of years to a girl's education means adding a significant amount of income to their earning during employment, a reduction in fertility levels due to delayed marriages, and psychological well-being of the girls as they mature (Wodon 2018 and Leigh 2018). These benefits can only be enjoyed if awareness in in the society on the need to educate the girl

child. However, the statistics still show the opposite because so many girls are still out of school worldwide. According to UNESCO, (2014, and Somani, 2017), despite all international and national efforts, over half of children out of school are girls. Over 63 million girls are still out of school around the world. According to global statistics, just 39 percent of rural girls attend secondary school. This is far fewer than rural boys (45 percent), urban girls (59 percent) and urban boys (60 percent). In Pakistan for example; half a kilometre increase in the distance children travel to school reduces the chances of girls' enrolment by 20%. In Sub-Saharan countries significant increase in girls' enrolment were registered by building schools close by. These statistics are the reason why two thirds of the world's 796 illiterate people are women (UNWOMEN 2012)

### *Why Do Girls drop out of school?*

Relief web (2017) posits that there are more than thirteen reasons why girls drop out of school and these include early marriages, pregnancy, and violence at school, lack of funding, child domestic labour, dangerous journeys and poor sanitation among others. These challenges are common throughout the whole world, although they tend to be worse in rural areas and other poverty-stricken communities. In concurrence is Rodriguez, (2019) who avers that gender-based violence, menstruation cycle challenges, trafficking, conflict and crisis among others are the major reasons why girls' education have always encountered a drawback in many developing economies like Africa. In India for example, girls drop out of school due to poverty, long distances travelled to schools, and the attitude of the families when they are forced to choose how they spend the little money available, in most cases they have opted not to pay for their girl's school fees (Mathur 2021). In Niger, parents complain of the low-quality education being offered in primary schools and the girls are leaving primary school without being able to read. This has led the parents to decide to use their daughters for labour instead, and it's compounded by other factors like, long distances travelled to the school, transport and food costs, influence of relatives and forced withdrawals due to marriage (Wodon, 2018). Some of the reasons like poor performance and failure in examinations are caused by the already existing disadvantages to the girls since they are denied a chance to study like their brothers because they have to attend to home chores before and after school.

### *What is being done?*

In Zimbabwe, the Government through its various ministries and Non-Governmental Organisations are making a lot of efforts to curb the various challenges contributing to the proliferation of school dropout cases for girls. Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED), a non-Governmental Organisation is playing a critical role in more than 29 districts in rural areas of Zimbabwe to pay fees, provide sanitary ware, school stationery, provision of bicycles and other disability gadgets for children living with disabilities, ensuring that girls stay in school (CAMFED, 2019). The Government of Zimbabwe introduced the Basic Education Assistance Model in 2001 in a bid to assist orphaned and vulnerable children in accessing education. Despite the existence of implementation challenges ranging from favouritism and exclusion of the real intended beneficiaries from the program amongst others, the model helped a lot of girls continue with their education at the time of implementation (Mangwaya 2015, Nyambuya 2018 and The Borgen Project 2019). In 2020, the president of Zimbabwe passed the Education Amendment Act (2020) in which section 4 of Chapter 25(25:04) (1a) states that the State must ensure that sanitary ware is provided for girls (Fambasayi (2020). Lack of access to proper hygienic sanitary ware has been presented in different forums and argued by various scholars as one of the reasons why girls from poor communities like rural areas in particular, miss school during their menstrual days. This had led to poor performance at school in various subjects resulting into poor grades and securing poorly paid jobs in future, as compared to their male counterparts. In addition, the newly amended act provides for compulsory state funded education (section 5:1) and places a ban on expelling girls who get pregnant while they are in school (68c) This amendment act is a welcome development in terms of girl child education since girls have always been expelled from school, teachers and nursing schools once they get pregnant. This trend which has stayed for decades in Zimbabwean schools and tertiary education colleges like teachers' colleges and nurses' training schools is viewed by this paper as gross gender bias because the male student who is partner to the unwanted pregnancy was left to continue with school while the girl

child was expelled. Monitoring and evaluation are still needed to find out if the new act is actually being implemented to the advantage of the girls.

In Rwanda, Care-Rwanda has implemented a program called Keeping Girls at School (KGAS) and it was implemented in 30 pilot schools. In addition to paying their basic education needs like school fees, stationery and uniforms, the program has developed activities in 3 areas namely: Mentorship, Voluntary Saving Loans and Community Score cards. In the Mentorship project, girls are placed in clubs where they are taught the benefits of education to the individual girls and their communities. In the Voluntary savings loans club, girls are taught to save money and start small businesses of their own as they are training on entrepreneurial skills for the future. Lastly, in Community Score Cards, the girls and their parents do community activities and advocate for change in schools and communities in issues affecting them. The Rwandan experience is a case example yielding good gender equality results in East Africa since more girls are found in school at all level than boys. Even in parliament women hold more seats than men, a very welcome initiative in the quest for women empowerment. (Laterite, 2015 and Leigh, 2018). These activities are very good because they make the girl want to stay at school despite other challenges that may be encountered. If a girl is made a leader, an advocate, or an active member of these clubs, they would want to keep going because it will give them room to exhibit other talents they have even if they are not stars in academic performance.

### **3. Methodology**

The paper used teleconferencing for focus group discussions in Gokwe and Chirumanzu districts. Two focus groups of ten people each were conducted in each of the two rural districts. A fifth focus group of 10 people was conducted in Harare as verification and comparison methods of the status quo between rural and urban areas.

#### 4. Findings

1. 7 in every 10 families interviewed in the two rural areas had their teenage daughters married or eloped from home due to unwanted pregnancy. Only 1 out of the 10 families interviewed in Harare urban was found to have a teenage girl who left home for a boyfriend and parents were making efforts to locate and bring her back home before schools open.

2. *“It’s not easy to protect the girls from unwanted pregnancies because they have nothing to do. We do not have the smart phones so that our girls can be occupied by lessons”*

From the parental views above it shows that COVID-19 has compounded the already existing problem of early marriages for girls. More early marriages for girls of school going age were reported in rural areas of Gokwe and Chirumanzu as compared to girls in urban areas who had better access to online lessons due to availability of the online lesson friendly gadgets like smartphones. The lockdown measures effected by the government to curb the spread of Corona Virus Disease has promoted idleness in rural areas since the online lessons conducted in urban areas were out of reach for rural parents due to costs and lack of the smartphones required.

3. Parents expressed concern and indicated that their children could have continued with school had it not been for the on-going COVID-19 lockdowns. Rural parents feel they have been disproportionately disadvantaged because they are poor and do not have enough money to pay for extra lessons so that their children continue to be occupied during the lockdowns.

4. Covid-19 impacts on the girl child could have been averted had there been other programs outlined for girls in rural areas so that the young girls are occupied during school closures due to national lockdowns.

5. There was also an indication from the parents that “there was no incentive for the girls to continue with education since there are no jobs. Very few role models are found who got rich through education but it appears most rich people today are not even educated. So COVID -19 or not, there is nothing to incentivise them to continue learning”

## **5. Discussion of Findings**

The situation in some rural areas is currently disappointing in terms of girl child education because a lot of the girls got into child marriages during the COVID-19 national lockdowns. While it is an improvement that the Government has amended the education Act to welcome pregnant girls back into school, it may not be obvious that all the pregnant girls will go back to school in their conditions. This can be caused by the fear of stigmatisation from others, expectations from the newly joined families and the general lack of interest from the girls to appear in public again after such events. Under such circumstances, the newly amended Act may appear to be failing when in actual fact there are other underlying conditions preventing the pregnant girls from re-joining school. What it means is sensitisation and awareness campaigns should be promoted by civil society and other Non-governmental Organisations. The best-case scenario will be to try as much as possible to ensure that the girl child is not abused, exposed to hazardous circumstances due to poverty, or other circumstances negatively affecting the smooth flow of girl child education as expressed by scholars like Rodriguez, (2019), Relief web (2019) and Mathur, (2021).

The host of hurdles preventing the success of girl education should be averted using the micro approach where the immediate family at household level (core family) should take it upon themselves to ensure that each you girl completes secondary and tertiary education under whatever circumstances. Since the role of the extended family where the aunties and the uncles are no longer readily available to take their traditional role in nurturing the children, this paper encourages all parents to take all roles,(their own role as parents and the role of the uncles and unties).This is a war to ensure the girl child stays in school so that gender equality in education can be achieved(Sustainable Development Goal number 4).Agenda 2030 is a war and it can never be won when families and communities are still expecting things to be done for them and their children

while they fold hands and expect the Government to do something. Besides, the efforts already being done by the Government (BEAM, STEM, Education Amendment Act and many more), should never be taken for granted. Such policies always come with their own implementation challenges as alluded to by Mangwaya, (2015) and Nyambuya, (2018) In most of the times time, civil society has cried for good legislation to promote or change situations in society and when such changes are done, the input of every stakeholder is required so that the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these policies is effective and efficient. A multi-stakeholder approach is required, where duty bearers like the community, the traditional leaders, churches, law enforcement agents, community workers, teachers, nurses, and local business people should all join hands to ensure that environments are safe for girl children to freely and safely travel to school without being sexually abused. The fact that any group is being identifies as a duty bearer does not mean the individuals within the group are safe and friendly to the girls. A lot of girls have been abused sexually in the name of church loyalty or intending to report cases to the police or traditional leaders, who in turn takes advantage and worsen the situation for the girls. Duty bearers should never be too trusting because there are people who abuse such trust and things can happen under one's nose without anyone noticing. Such perpetrators should be reported and face the full wrath of the law without fear or favour. This paper is advocating for safe communities where children grow and flourish with abuse. However, results being discussed in this paper are based on the views of the parents who were concerned that their children may not be able to complete their education because of teenage pregnancies that occurred during the COVID -19 lockdowns. The reasons for such girls opting to leave home and get married or get impregnated by boys who may refuse paternity of the pregnancy were not established because the paper relied on information from the parents only.

It is important at this point to discuss the issues pertaining to rural poverty in Zimbabwe which appears to be contributing to the proliferation of teenage marriages in most rural areas. Some parents indicated that the girls were running away from poverty at home and think they may get a better life elsewhere. As parents, they are of the view that they need an enabling environment and financial assistance from the Government to start income generating projects so that they are able to provide their daughters with all their needs.

An increase in community projects, small loans which are well monitored are encouraged if the Government can find funding partners for the benefit of rural communities. Such projects and income generating activities should involve teenage boys and girls, giving them enough roles as leaders so that they have something else to occupy them in case of school closures. Learning from the experiences of other countries is encouraged and this paper recommends the example of Rwanda as a successful East African country where girls are topping the charts in leadership higher education. Rwanda is using community projects, clubs, advocacy, parent involvement as a multi-stakeholder approach to encourage and teach girls to be self-sufficient as future leaders and advocates for their communities. As averred by Laterite, (2015) and Leigh, (2018), these programs are giving the girl child so many reasons to continue with school since these projects operate from school. One can only be enrolled into them through their schools. Zimbabwe can also follow such example to encourage girls to stay in school and avert poverty challenges, encouraging skills development and secure futures for the girl child. Besides the classroom academic activities, which we all know student's performances differ; a lot more activities which are beneficial to the child can be introduced through schools so that the girls are motivated to stay in school as long as it takes. An example can be given here of some Missionary schools which have introduced girl heeled shoes and stockings, braided hair and many more for Advanced level girls. This has motivated other low-level learners to work harder so that they can also wear the same when they get to Advanced level, thus increasing the number of girls who proceed to Advanced level.

On another note, the parents were also discouraged by the situation in country since there are no jobs for the educated. Very few role models can be seen of educated rich people. Instead, it is the uneducated that own most of the means of production under what is being called the "era of the uneducated", so a change must be made to ensure that educated role models are not struggling or living under destitute conditions. Although the paper does not encourage any girl to run away from home because of difficulties like shortage of luxurious goods like perfumes, lotions etc., parents are encouraged to do the best they can to ensure that their children, boys and girls are well provided for. This will motivate them to perform even better in school, as well as preventing them from being lured by elder men who may be offering them these provisions. On the part of the girls,

the paper encourages each girl to be vigilant and stand up against abuse to get education up to institutions of higher learning like colleges and universities. Difficulties are to be overcome and they do not kill-there are role models who grew up in even more difficult circumstances and still managed to attain their highest level of education possible and still marry later on at a mature age.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper concludes that COVID -19 national lockdowns in Zimbabwe have had a toll on the continuity in education of many girls in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. While the disease is a difficult challenge to many nations across the world, mitigation measures should be quickly put in place to ensure that boys and girls are ready to continue with school when the conducive environment permits. Parents, business people, Non-Governmental Organisations and the international community should complement the efforts of the Government to ensure alternative ways are found for children in the rural areas to continue with their education. Lessons learnt from other countries like Rwanda indicate that girls need extra activities which are practical and relevant to their livelihoods while in school so that they are motivated to stay in school. The Rwandan experience of keeping girls in school can be emulated to increase the number of girls who complete secondary education and join tertiary institutions.

This paper makes the following recommendations:

1. The Government and the private sector can introduce small loans for projects through clubs and other attractive packages for “Advanced Level” students. One has to be in high school to qualify. The same can be introduced in institutions of higher learning so that students leave these institutions already empowered to stand alone as business entrepreneurs.
2. Stiffer penalties should be awarded to perpetrators of child marriages. The law should be harsh on adults who marry minors under whatever circumstances. Child marriage should be criminalised. Parents and husbands should be arrested when they accept lobola transactions, or found staying with a child below 18 years as a wife.

3. Safe communities should be achieved through a multi-stakeholder approach. Efforts should be made to involve community leaders, churches, law enforcement agents, parents, extended families, community workers, health workers and business people amongst others to join hands and put measures to eliminate child abusers so that their communities are child friendly for education promotion using the available infrastructure.

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