



## COVID-19 and Girl Child Education in Uganda. What are the Emerging Issues?

### Overview

In March 2020, the first case of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) was reported in Uganda. This led to various COVID-19 response strategies that included closure of all education institutions.

In Uganda, over 15 million learners are out of school and almost half of these are girls and young women. A study by Save the Children (2020) indicates that when child protection systems including schools are locked down, all children (boys, girls and children with special needs) are affected, but the marginalized are more vulnerable. It is widely believed that closure of schools is likely to worsen gender inequalities.

The education sector is working closely with all stakeholders to ensure continuity of learning, however, pre-existing gender inequalities which promote unfriendly learning environment at home, as well as less prioritization of girl child education may hamper their education (Kabonesa C & Kindi F.A: April, 2020).

The policy brief identifies challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on girl child education in Uganda, and proposes recommendations.

### Introduction

Uganda, like the rest of the world is struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus has affected the social, economic, and health status of all populations. In a bid to contain its spread, the Government instituted several measures that entailed closure of all education institutions. This affected almost 15 million learners across the different education levels. Of those affected, almost 52% are adolescent girls and young women (Table 1). There are reports of rampant

### Key Issues

1. Many girls may not return to school due to various forms of violence and sexual abuse.
2. Teenage pregnancies are rampant. Despite the policy allowing young mothers to return to school, they are usually stigmatized, which leads to school dropouts.
3. Child protection structures and law enforcement structures are weak and perpetrators are usually not followed up.

gender based violence (GBV) in households, mostly affecting women and girls. To that effect, the girl child has to be protected from the virus, gender based violence, as well as exploitation that may affect their education.

**Table 1: Uganda's School Going Population**

Category	Number			Percentage		
	Male	Female	Total	M	F	Total
Level (Age Group)						
Pre-Primary (3-5 years)	1,885,663	1,771,263	3,656,926	19	17.4	18.2
Primary (6-12 years)	3,727,967	3,631,907	7,359,874	37.5	35.7	36.6
Secondary (13-18 years)	2,586,964	2,661,741	5,248,705	26	26.2	26.1
Post-Secondary (19-24)	1,749,786	2,108,967	3,858,753	17.6	20.7	19.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,950,380</b>	<b>10,173,878</b>	<b>20,124,258</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020



## Measures to address effects of COVID-19 on girls and young women in school

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) together with Development Partners have developed a COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan focusing on three areas: continuity of learning, the learning agenda, and reopening of schools and institutions after the lockdown. The plan also stipulates measures to minimize the adverse effects of the virus to learners and to enhance the capacity of MoES, district local governments (DLGs), and other stakeholders to promote protection of all learners.

The MoES Gender Unit developed key messages targeting parents on safety and security of learners during this pandemic. These messages have been shared with internal stakeholders, United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. Additionally, radio and television talk shows on safety and security of learners continue.

The MoES has conducted capacity building for DLGs, head teachers, and school management committees (local council 1 chairpersons, para-social workers in conjunction with community-based services) to support learners including adolescent girls. Messages on positive parenting, elimination of violence, psych-social support have been developed and disseminated.

The Ministry has promoted coordination among education stakeholders and other agencies for a more effective response, provided cross sector coordination with stakeholders as issues affecting adolescent girls at this time require a multi-sectoral approach. Furthermore, MoES has conducted several awareness and education activities.

The MoES, in partnership with Uganda Youth and Adolescent Health Forum (UYAHF) organised a webinar on menstrual hygiene management (MHM) with an aim of understanding the unique menstrual health and management challenges for girls and efforts to address them; and a webinar on dealing with GBV during the COVID-19 crisis organized by Forum for African Women

Educationists (FAWE). Key issues that emerged from this webinar are that there is need to strengthen the multi-sectoral approaches in addressing GBV.

The Gender Unit organized a webinar on addressing adolescent girl challenges during COVID-19. The Unit is also finalizing guidelines for prevention of HIV/teenage pregnancy and re-entry of child mothers; developing key messages on ending teenage pregnancy and early marriages in Uganda. In spite of these efforts, girls are experiencing gender related constraints that are impacting on their concentration on home studies and threatening their return to school after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Key bottlenecks to girl child education during the COVID-19 pandemic

### Household chores

At home, girls have been over burdened by domestic chores during this period and this has affected their continued learning and revision. A study by Plan International (June 2020) established that school drop-outs were caused by an increase in domestic and caring responsibilities, and a shift towards income generation. This means that girls' learning at home was limited. Nabachwa A. (Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation, TBC: April, 2020) noted that many children, especially girls are being loaded with all housework and child-rearing responsibilities, leaving them with no time to revise.

Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation further noted that whereas it is good to engage children in work, the tasks given should be appropriate to their age regardless of sex to support all children spare time for revision and play. Dialogue should be created between children and parents/caregivers. Agreeing on time for housework and designating time for play, academic revisions, and skills building should be done in a friendly manner that enhances care and trust between parents and children. This is rarely the case in many homes.



## Violence

The closure of schools has increased girls' vulnerability to various forms of violence. Girls are more likely to face various forms of violence ranging from physical, emotional, neglect and sexual abuse. This is because they are now too close to the perpetrators (sometimes close relatives, or their peers) leading to less concentration (Save the Children, 2020).

Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation, noted that although government together with its partners were addressing GBV, with the current lockdown such systems and institutions/organisations are no longer optimally operating. Girls and women that have reported cases have been frustrated as their calls are not responded to, and their movements are restricted.

Increased sexual risks especially to the girls have led to teenage pregnancies and child marriages. Vulnerable girls are more likely to engage in transactional sex in order to meet their basic requirements such as food. Incidences of incest have increased because girls are living with these people full time. In refugee-hosting districts, 60% of people said they have observed an increase in acts of sexual violence against children by peers, caregivers, and community members.

A report from Save the Children indicated that law enforcement in regard to cases of violence against children and domestic violence is weak as the offenders are not followed up. Several girls that have been violated may never receive justice and support to go back to school.

### Teenage pregnancy and early marriages

Ahead of the 2020 Day of the African Child, Save the Children had a discussion with selected children on how COVID-19 was affecting them. This story from Wakiso District sums it up. *"A girl in primary five in a neighbouring school was impregnated by a man working in a stone quarry. When schools closed, her mother sent her to sell*

*samosas and cassava to the people working in the stone quarry. Her mother realized recently that the girl is pregnant. She asked her to abort but the girl refused. So the girl now moves around the village with the man who got her pregnant," (Sarah, Wakiso District).*

Save the Children reports an increase in child marriages, as adolescent girls are being married in exchange for bride price during this COVID-19 period. This was most common in the north and northeast parts of the country where rates of child marriages are already very high.

#### **Box 1: Concerns about girls in Gulu District**

*Charles from Gulu District was worried about a rise in teenage pregnancy and child marriages. "In some villages, parents are giving away their girls to men for marriage so that they can get money for food," (Officer, Save the Children, May 2020).*

In many parts of the country there has been an increase in girls drawn into commercial sexual exploitation – trading sex for money, food or even sanitary towels. In Karamoja, girls are increasingly going to work in gold mines to make ends meet.

Most girls have become pregnant as a result of being outside the protective environment provided by schools as shown below.

**Box 2:** *Ever since schools were closed, so many girls and boys are idle and in one place. They are keeping busy by getting involved in behavior which could lead to unwanted pregnancies and child marriages. Every day I see young girls being around boys almost from morning to evening, and sometimes until late in the night, (Officer, Save the Children). "We feel so confined to one environment," (teenage girl during Focus Group Discussion by Save the Children).*



Many of these girls may never go back to school, because of the economic impact of COVID-19 on their families. In such instances, more girls than boys are likely to be affected as impoverished families usually prioritize educating the boys. The girls are expected to be married off. Keeping girls in school protected some from pregnancy and early marriages.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 response included closure of education institutions which has increased girls' vulnerability to various forms of violence and exposure to sexual abuse. This has led to increased teenage pregnancies and early marriages.

The girls may also not be benefitting from the home based learning as they are heavily engaged in household chores. To that effect, the chances of many girls returning to schools is dwindling. This is exacerbated by the loss of livelihoods for many households that will prioritize educating the boys.

As government seeks to alleviate the effects of lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasis should be placed on ensuring that systems that are supposed to protect girls and women from GBV are not compromised. If this is not done quickly, the country will have to deal with a number of psychosocial problems brought about by the lockdown. These issues have grave effects on prospects for girls' education and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education for all.

## Recommendations

- The Gender Unit in the MoES should:
  1. Continuously sensitize communities and parents on the importance of girls' education.
  2. Sensitize people against stigmatizing pregnant girls and young mothers who return to school.
  3. Collect more sex and gender disaggregated data to establish the impact of COVID-19 on both men and women/girls and boys in the education sector.
- The Judiciary and Police should enforce laws and ensure that all perpetrators of violence against children and domestic violence are prosecuted.

## References

1. Kabonesa C & Kindi F *Assessing the Relationship between GBV and COVID-19*, Kampala 2020.
2. Ministry of Education and Sports *Gender Eye Newsletter* April 2020.
3. Ministry of Education and Sports *Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic on Education* Kampala May, 2020
4. Save the Children *Uganda Youth Speak out on the Impact of COVID-19* (Kampala, May 2020)
5. UNICEF *Uganda COVID-19 Situation Report*, May 2020

### Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit

Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development

P.O. Box 8147, Kampala

[www.finance.go.ug](http://www.finance.go.ug)