

## Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescent Girls in East Africa

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### **Pre-Existing Conditions Worsened by Pandemic**

#### *Economic Hardship*

On March 16, 2020 Tanzania reported its first case of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Since then, there have been devastating socioeconomic effects on the country. GDP growth slowed down from 6.8% in 2019 to 2.1% in 2020 as a result of COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Due to loss of income and disruption of food systems, it is estimated that up to 2.1 million people may need food assistance in Tanzania.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally vulnerable populations tend to be hit the hardest by economic crises, especially women.<sup>4</sup> Women work lower-paying, informal jobs with less social protection measures and savings, making them more vulnerable to economic shocks. Even before the pandemic, 51% of Tanzanian women worked in the informal sector or running micro-enterprises.<sup>5</sup> They also work in sectors that were particularly hit hard by restrictions on movement. For example, tourism and cross-border trade.<sup>6</sup> The negative economic effects in East Africa have also exacerbated other gender inequalities, such as limitations on freedom of movement and the need to perform household duties.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Gender-Based Violence*

According to a study of rural adolescent girls in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda conducted by AMPLIFY, 70% had to pursue income-generating activities during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> In Nairobi, Kenya, 49% of young women reported increased dependence on transactional sex during COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the pandemic has heightened women and girls' risk to different forms of gender-based violence, "as many of the factors that trigger or perpetuate violence against women and girls are compounded by preventive confinement measures."<sup>10</sup> For example, stay-at-home measures and other restrictions have brought potential victims and perpetrators together in home settings.<sup>11</sup> On top of that, economic instability and stress may lead offenders to

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<sup>1</sup> Tarimo & Wu, 2020, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> African Development Bank, 2021

<sup>3</sup> World Food Programme, 2020, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> UN Women, 2020

<sup>5</sup> UNDP Tanzania, 2020, p. 53

<sup>6</sup> UNDP Tanzania, 2020, p. 53

<sup>7</sup> Kwauk et al., 2021

<sup>8</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. 34

<sup>9</sup> PMA Agile/Gender & ICRHK, 2020 as cited in Kwauk et al., 2021

<sup>10</sup> Vaeza, 2020

<sup>11</sup> Tesemma, 2020, p. 5

feel a loss of power, which in turn can exacerbate their abusive behavior.<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that there will be “7 to 10 million excess child marriages due to the pandemic if increased efforts are not taken to address COVID-specific drivers,” including death of a parent and interruption of education.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, female genital mutilation is on the rise in many parts of the continent where it was already a common practice, including Somalia and Kenya. This is because “community and government accountability systems are operating at minimum levels” as a result of the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Disruptions in efforts to combat FGM will set back progress towards ending FGM by 2030 by one-third.<sup>15</sup> In some countries such as Kenya, “facilities providing care and support services to survivors of violence are now operating at their lowest capacity.”<sup>16</sup> This includes clinics, shelters, and courts. Consequently, this situation “has not only created a sense of helplessness by victims or survivors but has also emboldened perpetrators by expanding the space for impunity.”<sup>17</sup>

## **Barriers to Girls Returning to Education**

### *Unplanned Pregnancy*

The primary driver of girls' dropout from school in East Africa during the pandemic is pregnancy, compounded by harsh economic conditions.<sup>18</sup> The main reason for this is the social barriers surrounding teen pregnancy and motherhood.<sup>19</sup> This includes not only social stigma from community members, but also toxic school cultures for pregnant girls and young mothers. The majority of school environments are unsupportive and do not offer property protections for their health including nutrition and lactation.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, there are also government policies that prevent pregnant teens from studying. Although the 2017 Tanzanian ban on teenage mothers returning to school has since been revoked, they are still excluded from attending while pregnant. According to Human Rights Watch, “asking girls to wait until after they deliver only pushes them further from getting an education.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Economic Hardship*

Economic hardship also acts as a barrier to adolescent girls' education in East Africa. Nine in ten girls in a Kenyan survey reported experiencing extreme financial vulnerability.<sup>22</sup> In AMPLIFY's study, 86% of focus group discussion participants reported financial barriers to returning to

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<sup>12</sup> Vaeza, 2020

<sup>13</sup> Yukich et al., 2021 as cited in Schmidt, 2021

<sup>14</sup> Tesemma, 2020, p. 22

<sup>15</sup> Tesemma, 2020, p. 22

<sup>16</sup> Tesemma, 2020, p. 11

<sup>17</sup> Tesemma, 2020, p. 11

<sup>18</sup> Kwauk et al., 2021

<sup>19</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. iii

<sup>20</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. 21

<sup>21</sup> McCool, 2021

<sup>22</sup> Shujaaz Inc, 2021, p. 5

school, such as lack of resources for school fees and books.<sup>23</sup> For some girls whose parents or guardians fell ill or died during the pandemic, they had to increase their household labor and/or search for work, taking them away from their schooling.<sup>24</sup>

### *Mental Health Challenges*

COVID-19 has also had a negative effect on girls' mental health and psychological wellbeing. Global School Leaders' survey of 11,667 educators from 24 countries found that 87% of school leaders are very concerned about the mental health of their students and 55% are worried that students are being left behind in curriculum.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, a study of girls ages 10-19 in Wajir, Kenya showed that older adolescent girls (15-19) were "less likely to be engaged in distance learning, less confident that they would return to school, and more likely to experience symptoms of depression than younger adolescent girls (10-14)".<sup>26</sup> Nearly all girls who had dropped out of school expressed negative feelings, including hopelessness, self-hate, and self-pity.<sup>27</sup>

### *Reintegration into School*

In addition to dropping out of school, some girls had trouble reintegrating back. When learning shifted remotely, limited digital infrastructure and electricity exacerbated inequalities in educational access for girls living in rural communities.<sup>28</sup> There were also unfavorable learning environments, including noisy backgrounds and lack of dedicated physical space for learning.<sup>29</sup> A study by the Population Council found that 97% of adolescents surveyed in Kenya reported that despite attempting remote learning, they were faced with multiple challenges.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, girls were less likely than boys to access resources for remote and online learning.<sup>31</sup> According to previous research "girls are more likely to drop out than boys as a result of weak school performance, so the impact of COVID learning loss is likely to be especially severe for girls."<sup>32</sup>

## **Kitenga**

Despite the impact of COVID-19 on rural Tanzania, The Kitenga Girls Secondary School (KGSS) has been able to keep girls in school. To date, COVID-19 has not caused any student not to return to school. How was it that Kitenga defied the trends?

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<sup>23</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. 34

<sup>24</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. 35

<sup>25</sup> Global School Leaders, 2021 as cited in Schmidt, 2021

<sup>26</sup> Population Council, 2020 as cited in Kwauk et al., 2021

<sup>27</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. 24

<sup>28</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. 29

<sup>29</sup> Oulo et al., 2021, p. 30

<sup>30</sup> Population Council, 2021, p. 12

<sup>31</sup> Population Council, 2021, p. 12

<sup>32</sup> Kuépié et al., 2021 as cited in Schmidt, 2021

### *Leadership*

The Kitenga Girls Secondary School (KGSS) is Girls Education Collaborative (GEC)'s first partnership and the intent is to support, enhance, and accelerate the work and vision already being generated by the school's founders, the Immaculate Heart Sisters of Africa. In January 2017 KGSS was opened, and today, there are 160 girls on campus finding new pathways for themselves.

At the onset of the pandemic, the school had only 24 hours to close under government orders. Since Kitenga students come from many communities both near and far, the school did not have the capability to distribute learning materials the way some schools were able to during closure. Despite this setback, teachers and Sisters stayed in contact via phone calls, SMS, and WhatsApp. They checked in with the girls, called their families, and encouraged them to do all the learning they could and keep their spirits up.

### *Preparation*

In the meantime back on campus, the school worked on addressing health and safety vulnerabilities on the campus in light of living in a pandemic. They installed handwashing stations at multiple building entrances in preparation for girls returning. GEC did an emergency fundraising campaign (Kesho Fund) to fund the emerging priorities and while the school was shuttered, the campus roads were improved to get girls or staff members quickly to a health facility if needed. Similarly, an on-site student health clinic with a dedicated nurse was created to ensure 24/7 student access to healthcare.

### *Financial Support*

Under the assumption that because of economic hardship some girls would no longer be able to pay their school fees, the Kesho Fund also provided scholarship support for an extra four girls. Not only did the entire student body return, but there were no indications of teen pregnancy.

### *Whole Girl Approach*

Although it is still an unfolding story, Kitenga gives us some early indication about how critical it is for a holistic, whole girl approach. Students had the tools to protect themselves and navigate their lives during the pandemic, which helped them create a pathway to return to school and their education. For example, embedded in their school experience, they spend time building personal efficacy through debate teams, athletic teams, and leadership roles on campus, such as running the school store. They learn problem-solving mechanisms by working together to find solutions to problems affecting the student body. In regard to teen pregnancy, they are informed by sexual health and reproductive education.

### *Academics*

A combination of an environment that helps support self-efficacy in hand with a rigorous academic program led to 100% of the Form 4 class scoring top grades in the country's critical national exams, despite the school being shuttered for 3 months. Their exemplary performance led to this young school being ranked #1 in the top two divisions of the Standard Four National Assessment (SFNA), placing them as the number one small school in the district, and 11th in the nation.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, the COVID-19 pandemic had a variety of socio-economic effects that exacerbated existing gender inequalities. This prevented many East African girls from returning to their education as a result of economic hardship, teen pregnancy, and other challenges involved with reintegrating back into school, such as a lack of remote learning tools. Notwithstanding this trend, all students at The Kitenga Girls Secondary School returned to school. Although we can not say for certain, the combination of strong leadership by school staff, financial support, and agency developed by girls all supported their return.

### *What Next?*

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique context, past emergencies can show us how to safeguard girls education during vulnerable situations. To begin with, by including girls in planning efforts. Involving girls in the planning, design and M&E stages of programming can help promote girls' learning outcomes in emergency settings by addressing the barriers that may prevent them from continuing in school.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the Malala Fund highlights the importance of implementing flexible solutions to help ensure that girls can keep learning during school closures. For example, during the Ebola outbreak radio lessons were a popular approach for distance learning for marginalized populations where online learning would not be plausible.<sup>34</sup> Both of these strategies require working at the grassroots level to gain local knowledge and mobilize the communities most impacted. On a practical note, lifting financial barriers that prevent girls from returning to school is also vital. Examples include waiving school and examination fees as well as cash transfers to families.<sup>35</sup> Cooperation between governments, schools, and other local stakeholders, NGOs, and international funding agencies is necessary to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on girls' education

In conclusion, COVID-19 highlights the importance of foresight in preparing girls to navigate the unexpected. Kitenga embodies this lesson. By equipping girls with tools to manage emergencies at hand along with breaking down additional barriers such as financial hardship, the school was able to mitigate some of the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>33</sup> UNICEF, 2021, p. 49

<sup>34</sup> Malala Fund, p. 8

<sup>35</sup> Jenkins & Winthrop, 2020

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