

Op-Ed: Covid-19 and Remote Education: Girls' rights in peril.

What is happening to girls' rights during the Covid-19 crisis?

By Stanley Ndambakuwa & Gillian Brand



Tsungai Mugari helped her mother with work at home before being able to return to school. She received a scholarship from the African Community Fund for Education for her studies.

While it may be uncomfortable to think about abuse, it's something we must do. Whether it's sexual, domestic, or gender-based discrimination and violence, or increased risk of transmitting HIV/AIDS or being trafficked, Covid-19 has created an environment in Africa that can enable girls' abuse. The United Nations (UN) [reported](#) that there could be a surge in cases related to domestic violence and pregnancies. According to [Leah Rodrigues at the Global Citizen](#), this may be because "teen pregnancies are likely to [increase](#) in the wake of the pandemic because adolescent girls are more likely to be sexually exploited in crisis-affected areas."

One less recognizable form of abuse that can lead to these other, more recognizable forms has to do with the abuse of girls' right to education. Girls face threats to their educational rights that their male counterparts do not. Most girls live in patriarchal dominated societies; some even fall prey to gender-biased cultures that encourage early child marriages and motherhood. In remote communities, many families favor boys' education over girls or only send their boys to school when they do not have enough money to send all their children to school.

Nonprofit organizations, such as Plan International and the [African Community Fund for Education \(ACFE Group\)](#), have been working to protect girls. They have realized successes by creating access to education for girls, teaching girls about their rights, and making sure they stay at school and away from their potential abusers. Unfortunately, during Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, organizations like ACFE Group have not reached girls who live in rural communities where there is no electricity or access to the internet. Most girls are confined to their homes because of lockdown restrictions, potentially exposing them to domestic violence and unwanted pregnancies.

In January of this year, I spent three weeks in Zimbabwe's remote communities and had time to speak to young girls who are being supported by the ACFE Group through academic scholarships. Menia Musiiwa and Angela Chirinda led an initiative to build a hut at school to avoid walking long distances to the school, which for them was up to 40km (25 miles) round trip every day. They told me that being in school helps them escape the risks that young girls face in the community, including rape and child labor issues. In countries like Zimbabwe, girls in remote rural communities automatically lose their right to education when they fall pregnant, as the schools turn them away.

In Zimbabwe, girls are denied school access in some communities and cultures, while some religions even force girls to marry as young as 12 years old. A gender crisis has developed from the lack of recognition by policymakers of these problems, women, and girls face. As so many girls are denied education, there are fewer women in government and policy positions to help change these laws. Zimbabwe women still represent a low percentage of the labor force, and most of them are confined to rural areas practicing agriculture while men work in the industry. In 2019, the World Bank [revealed](#) that 70% of females represent the agriculture workforce in Zimbabwe compared to 63.1% of males, and only 1.9% of females work in the industry compared to 11.4% of males.

Zimbabwe schools closed at an unprecedented rate during the Covid-19 lockdown. Though, most schools reopened. Since March, girls had not been to school. Moreover, remote education is not working as a solution for them, given that most girls in these communities do not have digital devices and access to the internet.

When girls are in school, they can sometimes escape the abuse they might otherwise be subjected to. Additionally, as more women become educated, they realize the harms that practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) bring to women. A [study](#) by the Australian National University reveals that FGM can lead to adverse birth outcomes in women. As for unintended pregnancies, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) [estimated](#) up to 325,000 unintended pregnancies because of the changes in daily life the pandemic has brought about. In Zimbabwe, unintended pregnancies for young girls will lead to forced school dropouts, stigmatization, and discrimination in the form of labeling.

Many nations are now going through a "second wave" of the virus, and cases are rising again. Lockdown restrictions are being renewed differently in different countries, and I question how the extended quarantine will impact girls' rights. The right to education for

girls seems to be losing its grip as girls are already committed to household responsibilities that will make it difficult for them to return to school post-pandemic.

There is an urgent need to keep our girls safe. One proven measure is to keep girls in school, give them the same opportunities as boys, and uphold girl's rights to education. As the education gap widens, poverty accelerates while deteriorating the already dilapidated living standards for girls in remote communities. Covid-19 is, in short, catastrophic for the future of girls. We need to act now. Our best option is to put-in-place urgent measures to keep schools safe from the virus and allow girls to continue with their studies uninterrupted.

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