

# **PERCEIVED CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON GIRL'S EDUCATION IN RWANDA: EVIDENCE FROM BUGESERA DISTRICT, RWANDA**

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## **Abstract**

*Much evidences have generally shown a huge consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on education sector and the young women or girls are among the vulnerable category of people. This paper intends to assess the perceived consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on girl's education in Bugesera District of Rwanda. Qualitative approach was employed to collect information related to this subject using both focus group discussion and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders including gender experts, district officials, high schools' officials (headmasters, headmistress, director of studies), women and girls' activists, leaders of girls' forums, Civil society representatives among others. Results of these consultations reveal that some of the COVID-19 related measures such as shutting down of schools and e-learning created not only inequality between boys and girls but exposure of girls to sexual abuse, bad behavior from peer pressure, increased childcare responsibilities and household chores and increased school dropout. These suggest prioritization of women and girls in COVID-19 response and recovery plans and enforcement of laws for child sexual abuse perpetrators.*

**Key words:** Pandemic Covid-19, Education, Girls, Bugesera, Rwanda

## **1. Introduction**

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak has been declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March 2020 as the worldwide spread of a new disease (WHO, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 incident was discovered in November 2019, in Wuhan, China.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge against women's socioeconomic development. Despite other Covid-19 socio-economic related effects noticed, women and girls have been loaded with multiple responsibilities for domestic work, and childcare compared to the counter parts men and boys respectively (Andrew et al, 2020) . Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of lockdowns and restricted movements, there has been an increase in reports of domestic violations and other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in countries most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak (AU, 2020) . One of the sectors that has been the most affected since the onset of the health emergency has been pre-primary, primary and secondary education. The prolonged closure of schools and educational centres, combined with the shock to the economy and the health of the population, has implications for children's present and future development, particularly those living in households that are more vulnerable. As a result of the crisis, girls are at greater risk of dropping out of school and of lagging behind in their studies, food insecurity, abuse, physical and emotional health problems, and, not least, loss of learning, with potentially devastating consequences for an entire generation.

Several countries in the region have implemented emergency measures to maintain some continuity in teaching and learning processes while schools remain closed. These range from using radio and television channels to deliver curricula to the use of mobile phones or virtual platforms. At the same time, countries are faced with uncertainty around how the pandemic might develop, which will determine the timings and conditions for reopening schools. Countries in the region were already facing a learning crisis and large educational gaps before the pandemic. Furthermore, the measures put in place so far to maintain distance learning are not necessarily suitable for all age groups, as they do not adequately address the respective needs of specific groups. For example, younger girls require close supervision, which they do not necessarily receive at home. Moreover, these strategies do not serve all students equally, as they depend on access to unevenly distributed resources for studying at home, such as Internet connectivity, electronic devices, space, and parental support. In light of this, and with the prolonged closure of schools, it is feared that the gaps in educational continuity and achievement will widen even further (Sandra,G. 2020)

Rwanda as others regional countries faced some of the structural challenges due to interruption of socio-economic activities. The pandemic has increased the level vulnerabilities among Rwandan people mainly female-headed households and girls in general. Recent national studies confirmed

that, although poverty levels have declined, female-headed households were more likely to be poor compared to male-headed households, with 39.5% of female-headed households being poor compared to 37.6% of male-headed households in 2016/17 (NISR, 2015; NISR, 2018).

This paper aims to assess the perceived consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on education sector, girls' education in particular. More specifically, the paper intends to examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls' education and suggest the possible solutions necessary to improve girls' education in Rwanda.

## **2. Literature review**

The girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded. If women are to be equal partners with men, in every aspect of life and development, now is the time to recognize the human dignity and worth of the girl child and to ensure the full enjoyment of her human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights assured by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (BPFA,1995)

Since the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, the number of children attending primary school in developing countries including Rwanda has increased by 50 million. The Jomtien Conference saw basic education not only as a human right but also as a pre-requisite for sustainable development of societies-both rich and poor (MINEDUC,2008)

Despite enormous gains, girls' participation in school still lags behind boys. The fact that many of the impediments to girls' enrolment and persistence in school are specific to girls and not to boys requires a concerted effort to increase educational opportunities for girls as a development imperative(Idem)

Barriers towards girls' access and retention in primary and secondary school are myriad in many developing countries. The secondary position of women in most patriarchal societies translates itself into viewing of education as not being as important for girls. Socio-economic and cultural factors play a part, and in some cases, families favor boys over girls for entrance into school, especially if access to quality education is not free (MINEDUC,2008)

In this era of uncertainty that has caused the biggest education disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Higher Education and Sustainability Initiative looks forward to working with others to address some of the most pressing questions, including how to redesign higher education in support of sustainable development, a green recovery, regenerative pathways for education while also

ensuring the quality of education, equity, and gender equality everywhere to build the world we want (HESI,2020).

The emerging literature shows how the pandemic had effects on sectors of the economy, different categories of people (men and women), different age categories (young and old age), people in urban and rural areas, employment categories (formal and informal sector) and between regions such as Europe, USA and Africa (Bizoza and Sibomana, 2020; Betron et al., 2020, Munayco et al., 2020, Gebhard et al. 2020) and some precaution measures were taken include lockdowns, wearing face masks, social distancing and using sanitizers.

Further, some literature and discourses are around gendered effects of COVID-19 where some argue for men to be the most affected while others argue for women to be much exposed to COVID-19 risks due to socio-cultural and Behavioral differences (Desmid and Neat, 2020 ). School closures and lockdown measures have resulted in significant educational disruptions in East Africa, negatively impacting girls' learning. This resulted in increasing girls' domestic workload because of worsening economic hardship, which impacted their ability to engage in learning (UKAID, 2020 ). Almost 90% of the world's countries have shut their schools in efforts to slow the transmission of COVID-19 (Malala Fund, 2020) .

At regional and international levels, the Government of Rwanda has adopted different conventions and protocols that promote gender equality and prohibit any form of violence against women. These include among others the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the African charter on human and peoples' rights on the rights of women in Africa (2003), and Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004), Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) in 2003, and Kampala Declaration on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (2011), Sustainable Development Goals: specifically goal 4,5 and 17 clarified the critical link between Education, gender equality and Partnership among others (GMO,2019).

The EAC vision 2050 also intends to remove the severe regional gender related disparities such girls' education, equality and equity in terms of political and economic participation as well as rural settings affecting gender equality (MIGEPROF, 2021).

Rwanda has achieved a stable gender parity in primary and secondary education with current girl's enrollment at 49.7% and 53.2% in 2018/27 respectively due to various initiatives promoting girls' education such as 12YBE and other affirmative actions.

Education of all children is important; it promotes economic growth, social development and democracy. The education of girls yields extremely high economic and social returns. Female literacy and schooling have been linked to development gains in both agricultural production and maternal and child health ( MINEDUC, 2008)

The Ministry of Education and Parliament passed a new education law in December 2020 and published it in February 2021, stipulating that primary education is free and compulsory up to the first 6 years of schooling. The legislation, however, does not provide for free and compulsory secondary education. Although Rwanda has adopted policies to implement fee-free 12 years basic education and compulsory education through age 16, the national education law states that education is compulsory only up to age 12 and does not provide for free basic education through the first 9 years of schooling. ((U.S.Embassy Report,2021)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed in March of 2020 and did not begin a phased reopening until November, with pre-primary and primary grades delayed until January of 2021. The government launched audio lessons via national radio in response to the pandemic, and monitoring data showed that over half of school-age children were utilizing the broadcasts while lack of radio access prevented some families from utilizing the resource (U.S.Embassy Report,2021))

Additionally, a sociological survey was conducted among students of the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation about their attitude to online learning in the context of a sharp change in the form of education and organization of personal life in the conditions of coronavirus infection found that 40.3% answered that it was convenient for them and they even liked the new format of education, about 30% indicated that it was convenient to study, but encountered minor difficulties. Among the problems that students had to face, most often were indicated (more than 40% of respondents):

- some get distracted and do not catch the material when watching lectures;
- there is no working atmosphere at home;
- it is inconvenient to use an online board for solving problems and illustrating graphs;
- a large amount of assigned materials.

Among the advantages of online learning, most students indicated:

- flexibility of the educational process (61.3%);
- the ability to combine work with study (50%).

15.3% of the respondents did not see any advantages in the new form of education.

Most of the surveyed students (61.3%) felt an increase in the study load when switching to the distance form (Olga et all 2020).

According to the National Gender Policy in Basic Education, Government of Rwanda affirms education as its top priority, both as a right and as an instrument of development to address the wide gap of inequalities. Under the National Gender Policy, the education and professional training policies are:

- To ensure that boys and girls have equal access to educational opportunities in a manner that guaranties satisfactory performance and output in all fields of study.
- To promote girls' enrolment in Science and Technology.
- To increase the literacy rates of women and men with specific emphasis on women

The gender equality principle is essential in various plans for human development in the education sector. Thus, EICV includes analysis of the net attendance rate (NAR) in Rwanda indicates that nationwide, NAR for girls in 2016/2017 was moderately higher compared to boys' (88% and 87% respectively). However, this trend reverses in the urban area whereby boys possessed a higher NAR of 89.5% compared to girls' 85%. From a gender point of view, EICV5 results show that girls had the biggest proportion in terms of NAR in secondary school compared to boys (25% and 21% respectively). In addition, children from the richest households had a 43% secondary school net attendance rate while that of children from the poorest stood at 9%. When age is considered, the highest NAR in secondary school was registered among children aged between 17 and 18 (36% and 35 % respectively) (NISR, 2018).

Furthermore, school closures do not just mean that girls are taking on more chores at home, it could also lead to millions more girls dropping out of school before they complete their education, especially girls living in poverty, girls with disabilities or living in rural, isolated locations. Even before this pandemic, millions of girls were contending with poor quality education – and millions were not on course to meet minimum proficiency in basic reading and math, nor the secondary level skills, knowledge and opportunities they need for a productive and fulfilling life. Evidence from past epidemics shows that adolescent girls are at particular risk of drop out and not returning to school even after the crisis is over (UNICEF 2020).

One of the priority areas in the revised national gender policy is *Continuous promotion of gender equality and equity in education, health and social protection sectors* aiming at improving gender equality and equity in education, health and through social protection interventions (MIGEPROF,2021).

Furthermore, based on girls' education policy focused on importance of girls completing formal education and ensure girls' participation is not inhibited and avoid school drop out for socio-economic development of the country (MINEDUC, 2018)

Additionally, National Gender policy for education emphasized on special measures to improve girls' enrolment in the non-traditional fields of study particularly in Science and Technology, to increase their performance and to promote vocational skills and functional literacy for women and men taking into consideration gender roles and responsibilities.

Rwanda has achieved a stable gender parity in primary and secondary education with current girl's enrollment at 49.7% and 53.2% in 2018 respectively due to various initiatives promoting girls' education such as 12YBE and other affirmative actions. despite positive trends, female's representation in ICT Education (41.8% in 2017), tertiary education (38%), TVET program (43.8% in 2018) and the number of girls enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math

(STEM, 45.6% in 2018), remains relatively low compared to their male counterparts (GMO, 2019) while the second pillar of HeForShe commitment of Government of Rwanda is to Triple Girls enrolment in TVET to advance women's employment Opportunities by 2020(MIGEPROF,2015).

However, National data show that approximately 3.6 percent of all children in Rwanda are engaged in child labor, primarily in the agriculture and services sectors and industry (NISR, 2018). In 2020,Rwanda's National Commission for Human Rights released its "Analysis of Child Labor and Its Impact on Child Rights in Rwanda," a survey of working children between the ages of 15 and 17 from 11 districts in the country. Over half of the respondents indicated they performed some type of hazardous labor, including carrying heavy loads, working in construction and brick kilns, and mining. (NCHR,2020) , in this study, poverty was identified as the key factor contributing to child labor and teenage pregnancies which in turn contributed to school dropout.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a recession in many sectors, including education sector which has resulted in school closures, meaning that children spend all most 2 years at home; with this global situation, Rwanda is also significantly affected with a massive female children being out of school due to the COVID-19 (MINEDUC, 2021). The Rwandan educational system has not been prepared to handle this pandemic as limited provision and infrastructure for alternative teaching and learning that can take place at home. While this pandemic is a health emergency, it has affected girls and boys differently. This concurs with findings from recent report by UNESCO (2020), 89% of students are currently out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that 1.54 billion children and youths enrolled in schools or universities are out of schools and UNESCO (2020) also reported that more than half (51% representing 890.5 million) of the world learners are affected by COVID-19.

An article entitled a lost year – Covid's impact on school going children, the authors found that Nearly 1.5 millions schools were shut in India for 315 days, a significant part of 2020 and early 2021, due to the pandemic impacting about 250 million children. With the second wave now gripping the country, most schools are closed once again, with year-end exams cancelled or postponed. The pandemic has exacerbated concerns of equity and equality in several aspects of life, access to education being a significant one. Thus, a significant third of the world population was unable to access remote learning due to unstable internet connection and low broadband penetration in semi-urban and rural areas impacted digital learning opportunities. The adoption of digital technology was smoother among private schools in India, but government schools and the bulk of lower end schools were not able to take that digital leap seamlessly. In Brazil, for instance, 95% of the children from privileged families had computers at home, while only 14% of the students from low-income families had computers at home. In the USA, 100% of students from affluent families had computers at home, while only 25% from poor families did ( Amir and Nahia 2021).

Other assessments carried out by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) with emerging consideration of COVID-19 impacts in its regular collection of statistics on different thematic areas. For example, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) of May 2020 provides evidence of increased unemployment rate by 9.1 percentage points (from 13% to 22.1%), and women are more likely to be unemployed (25%) than men (19.6%) (NISR, 2020). Also, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in the urban area has increased from 3.1% to 8.9% in the corresponding period of September 2019 and September 2020. This study provides guidance to the policy-makers and all stakeholders involved in the education sector on how to effectively respond to measures for any infectious diseases such as COVID-19, reduce barriers to the education and ultimately improve girl's education and enable learning to continue uninterrupted for most especially those in the rural areas in the post COVID-19 era.

Finally, The UNFPA report 2022 titled “seeing the unseen shows that an estimated 121 millions per year are unintended mainly for teenage and that it is an unseen crisis. In Rwanda, teen pregnancy increased by 23% from 19,701 in 2020 to 23,000 in 2021 which call for actions to support women and girls to gain hope for the future and empower them to make informed choices and strengthen their capacities and decision-making, lowering the risk of unintended pregnancies

Literature confirm that the effects vary based on the risk of exposure and biological susceptibility to infection as well as the robustness of prevailing socio-economic and political resilience to the shocks imposed by the pandemic(Norman, 2020 ; Bali et al., 2020 ; Gausman and Langer, 2020 ).

### **3. Methodology**

The study analysed how COVID-19 affected Girls' education in Rwanda, evidence from Bugesera District. The following methods and techniques were used to collect and analyze the data.

#### **3.1.Study approach and design**

This research is guided by understanding on how COVID-19 pandemic has affected girls' education. In this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative research design. Due to the nature of data needed, the analysis mainly resorted to qualitative approach, whereby qualitative methods (desk review, in-depth interviews with individuals and Focus Group Discussion) were used to collect views, perceptions, and consequences on Girls' education in Rwanda.

#### **3.2.Study Population and sampling**

The study population was drawn from Bugesera District schools, Eastern Province in Rwanda. This research considers students and teachers from 4 Secondary schools which are Nyamata High School, APEBU Nyamata ( TVET), Maranyundo Girls School ( Single School), Group Scolaire Kanzenze (12 Year Basic education) and les colombe primary school in Bugesera District and targeted broadly other members of CSOs and Government Institutions working in promoting



women's rights, gender equality and women empowerment such as Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF), and Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), Rwanda Education for All Coalition (*REFAC*), Profemmes Twese Hamwe (FTH), Rwanda women Network , Rwanda Girl Guide, Girls Leaders Forum Rwanda members (students and graduates), Poor Rural women Network, Coalition Umwana ku Isonga were involved in the study to have a broader overview of the effects of COVID-19 on Girls' education in Rwanda.

This study used cluster sampling to randomly select a number of schools to consider during data collection. From each school, purposive sampling was used to select participants of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). It was participatory and consultative in its nature. It also involved the participation and consultations of School administration, students, CSOs members and other relevant stakeholders pertaining to the working with Girls and education in Rwanda.

Further, the study considers a total number 40 students (28 Girls and 12boys ) selected for 4 FGDs students from above 5 schools and 24 key informant interviewers from different institutions study include students, teachers, leaders, parents, and representatives of national and local organizations were selected purposely. Therefore, the total schools and institutions from which the population was drawn were 14 with 64 respondents.

### **3.3 Data collection**

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources using Desk Review, Focus Group Discussion ,Key Informant Interviews and Observation . Two different guiding questions for KIIs and FGDs were developed and shared with head teachers and KIIs.

#### **3.3.1 Desk review**

This study extensively resorted to desk review to learn from the existing reports, academic publications, technical literature reviews and studies related to the consequences of covid-19 on women and girls. Both national and international perspectives were used. Particularly, the consultant reviewed relevant documents including the Rwanda National Gender Policy, Girls and Education policies International treaties and other relevant documentation and studies related to covid-19 and education.

#### **3.3.2 Key Informants Interviews**

In addition, this work used also interviews with key informants which were identified purposively from relevant Institutions/organizations that directly or indirectly support or work closely with girls. It is envisaged that the following stakeholders were contacted for a conversation aimed at helping the researcher to gather relevant information pertaining to the subject under analysis. These were selected among CSOs, public institutions pertaining to women empowerment and gender equality as well as education, head of schools and Parents.

### **3.3.3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**

A focus group discussion is a qualitative data collection method that engages 6 to 12 people—with shared characteristics pertinent to the specific discussion topic and is led by a trained facilitator. The shared characteristics may relate to a particular problem, livelihoods occupation, age, social group, place of residence, experience of adopting or not adopting a specific behavior promoted by a project (Dummett et al 2013),

According to Stewart,( 2007) Focus Group Discussion allows direct interaction with participants, they can support or disagree with one another, and it saves time and money compared to individual interview; however, there are some limitation of FGD, it is difficult to manage a group rather than an individual interview; unexpected conflict may arise in a group which may inhibit discussion and shy persons may be dominated by more assertive persons (Stewart et al., 2007).

In the selected schools, girl students have been grouped into one FGD, another FGD for boys only, and another mixed FGD for girls and boys . Overall, 4 FGDs composed of 8 to 10 participants that have been recruited purposively in consultation with school administration comprised each FGD that engaged in discussions for around 1 hour from Nyamata High School, APEBU Nyamata, Maranyundo Girl School and GS Kanzenze have been conducted to identify the challenges of COVID-19 on girls' education and propose strategies to address them.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

After collecting the data on the field, data from interviews and Focus Group Discussion were edited for completion reliability and then analyzed in relation with questions asked the respondents.

By analyzing interviews together with the FGD data, the researcher wrote ideas in a summary of the data and grouped them in a table according to their similarities then, coded and labelled them into themes to indicate some thematic ideas. Coding helped the researcher to retrieve and collect together all the text and other data that she associated with some thematic ideas so that they can be analysed and reported together.

The researcher transcribed the qualitative data during the data collection phase and ensure proper archiving of the transcribed datasets. Moreover, the triangulation method has been used for complementing the findings from various sources such as desk reviews, KIIs, and FGDs to enable a strong analysis of the findings on consequences of COVID-19on Girls' education.

#### 4. Key Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings on perceived consequences of COVID-19 on girls' education in the study area.

Results show that COVID-19 related restrictions such as total and partial lockdowns have created a space for discussion or communication between husband and spouses and between children and parents as well as valuing domestic unpaid care work for some men.

Despite positive consequences observed, respondents mentioned negative consequences for students, especially faces by girls since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them are follows:

**4.1.Exposure to sexual abuse and Teenage pregnancies:** Girls being out of schools where they can constantly be guided and occupied, can become more exposed to sexual abuse which has led to unwanted pregnancies, thereby affecting their education as a result of stigmatization and drop out and failure among other factors. Officials confirmed that the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the level of teenage pregnancies among girls, in Bugesera District more than 200 girls got pregnant in 2020/21, because they had been at home for a long period of time without knowing when they will be back to school and due to poverty in many families, some girls have been deceived and given what they needed by men in the name of helping them to improve their livelihoods as a result they impregnated and reject them which is a big challenge to the country. This is consistent with what the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion ( MIGEPROF) reported that 23,111 girls under 18 years old got pregnancies in 2021; 23,628 in 2019 and 17,337 in 2017). It is also evidenced that single mothers and their children were enormously negatively affected during the pandemic period. This statement was also emphasized by one of gender activists who added that *“there are deeper fundamental issues on teenage pregnancy, some girls have low aspirations, dreams especially girls from poor families. They don't see the reason to be in school, it is very true when you do not have purpose driven life everything can take you. I think parents and teachers really need to inspire girls to dream big and to have high aspirations for life which will help them to overcome challenges and temptations”*.

**4.2. Bad behavior from peer pressure:** Teachers from different schools confirmed that during the pandemic, girls become vulnerable and victims of peer pressure from their friends and social media which lead to sex for money or gifts, smoking, drug abuse, watch pornography movies ,exchange of wrong ideas and information especially in the absence of the parents which negatively impacted their performance and exposed to adventure like slaying and prostitution

School children especially girls are vulnerable and can be desperate to fit in, so they tend to give in to many peer-pressure temptations and negative peer influence which may lead to sex-for-

money or gifts/smoking, drug abuse exchange of wrong ideas and information especially in the absence of the parents. Findings confirmed by respondents, some of them said *“staying at home was too boring, sometimes, when parents are absent, we go out of home to see our friends, from that peer pressure, we learn bad behavior like drug abuse, and some girls became prostitute due to poverty and bad behavior from peer pressure.”*

To deal with this, respondents suggest that Parents should promote dialogue and positive parenting by focusing on interaction between parents and children as well as building friendship, openly talk about sexual education and role of education in their future instead of just being sponsors.

**4.3. Increase in child labour:** During the pandemic parents were obliged to hunt for means of survival, which lead some girls to join their parents in raising income to support the family. This has considerably increased child labour (Bugesera district official, 2022). Because of school closures, the number of girls and boys who joined child labour on daily basis has increased greatly. This may affect the number of girls that may likely return to school based on their exposure to money-making initiatives during the pandemic period. Supporting this narrative, Plan international (2020) states that where limited social protection measures are in place, economic hardship caused effects on families for costs of educating their daughters.

According to the International Labor Organization's analysis of statistics from Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey, Children in Rwanda are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in forced domestic work, sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Children also perform dangerous tasks in mining, including carrying heavy loads.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 has amplified some of the structural challenges faced by African countries due to disruption in demand and supply chains. These comprise low per capita income, increased number of persons under the poverty line, deficit in trade balance, under and unemployment, affected informal supplies like jobs and other livelihood options , worsened status of food and nutrition security, changes in lifestyles from social and psychological behaviors, increase in social protection cases (Bizoza and Sibomana, 2020; Bukuluki et al., 2020; Renzaho, 2020).

**4.4. Increase in the burden of girls' household chores:** Girls usually are the ones who do most house chores. This poses a big challenge for girls, especially those in transitional classes, making it difficult for them to study and prepare for assessments. With school closures, the burden of girls' domestic work may increase, as other family members go out to work, or if family members become sick from the virus. When school resumes, girls' academic performance may be affected due to increased domestic chores. The shame of repeating classes or low performance may lead to dropping out of schools which then increases the population of out-of-school girls in the country and even globally (Interviewers APEBU Nyamata)

This is consistent with another study conducted in India, which shows that the completion rate at secondary stage for girls in 2016-17 was 65.8 per cent, a decrease from the previous years, 2015-16 (72.9%) and 2014-15 (81.1%) (NIEPA, 2017). As per the National Sample Survey (NSS) 30.2 per cent girls reported that they discontinued education due to their engagement in domestic activities. This was higher in rural (31.9%) than urban (26.7%) areas (MOSPI, 2019). Due to the lockdown and economic recessions in households, it is likely that household responsibilities on girls will increase and even those enrolled in schools will dropout. (Kundu,2020)

Respondents emphasized that even though, the Government of Rwanda have tried to support different people in covid-19 economic recovery plan, should cater women and girls' education in a special way because they have been affected the most, for example, girls were many in failure in national exams due to unpaid care work, no time to revise their studies compared to their male counterpart, some missed exams due to teenage pregnancies, they have been affected in all corners.

**4.5.Increased technology gap between girls and boys:** Presently, there is a technology gap between girls and boys (Plan International, 2020). Hence, the emergence of COVID-19 is now increasing this gap. This implies that an average boy has better access to technological tools compared to a girl child since boys have always been given priority, making it very difficult to have more girls on online platforms than boys, thus affecting their ability to continue with their academics during the pandemic (Interviewer Nyamata High School).

On the other hand , Twesigye & Gasheja (2021) have also found that there are various challenges that affect students while studying online during the covid-19 pandemic. These included lack of computers, lack of enough skills to study online, poor internet connections, lack of internet data, lack of learning from peers through group discussions, lack of face-to-face clarification, insufficient learning infrastructures like virtual laboratories and poor home learning environment. Furthermore, the findings revealed that rural and poor girls have been greatly disadvantaged in terms of access to education, limited provision of infrastructure to ensure learning is taking place at home through Radio and Television as planned by the Ministry of Education. For some girls in rural areas, it was difficult to have access to e-learning programs due to household work and limited in access basic digital infrastructure, including electricity, devices like TVs, smartphones computers, and internet connectivity which created disparities between students who accessed e-learning, radio and TV programs as opposed to those who did not access ,generally learning environment was not favorable.

During the focus group discussions, participants confirmed that boys access technology devices than girls due to different levels of curiosity and domestic work on side of girls. one boy added that, " *when we are at home in free time, my sisters are less curious, they spent their time in watching movies and sleep but for me I have to borrow my parent's telephone or laptop to do different research or learning on youtube or google which increased my knowledge and skills in technology*". some girl students supported this but they mentioned that there are some parents who think that domestic works should be performed by girls only instead of equal redistribution between men and women, boys and girls, as a result, during the holidays, girls occupied almost all domestic work while their brothers are free to revise their studies and play different games and practice technological devices.

Moreover, the gender divide in access and ability to use digital infrastructure is also stark. Only 33 percent women had access to internet, while this figure is 67 per cent for men. This disparity is more prominent in rural India where 72 per cent men and only 28 per cent women had access to internet (Kundu, 2020a). Thus, girls are more likely to miss out on online education and this will lead to an increase in learning gaps (Kundu, 2020).

In this regard, the government of Rwanda through HeforShe campaign is committed to bridge the gender digital divide and attain parity in ICT access, usage and innovation by increasing high quality of ICT skills leveraging knowledge based economy, promote girls in ICT Initiatives, and support ICT start-ups, Innovators and Entrepreneurs as well as promoting youth talents (MIGEPROF,2020).

**4.6.Increase school dropout :** Research respondents revealed that many girls who dropped out caused by early marriage, lack of school fees and others find jobs. COVID-19 disrupted early learning, formal education, and livelihoods. The lives of girls, their families and communities face extreme stress from health and economic burdens, crowding and isolation.

One head teacher said " *due to poverty and covid-19 effects, there is a shortage of scholastic materials and burden of school feeding fees , today every girl and boy in 9 & 12 years has to pay 6000Frw per term for School feeding. Imagine parents who have 3-5 children , it is very hard to afford it, some decide to let them out of school*".

In Bugesera District, 1778 students in primary school dropped out of school but recently 1342 students brought back, 435 are still out of schools and majority are girls; in secondary schools, 442 students dropped out ,335 brought back, It means that 107students are still out of school, In total 342 are still out of schools; Additionally, the COVID-19 Vaccination exercise revealed that in rural areas of Bugesera, in Rweru, Kamabuye, Mwogo and Shyara sectors, around 4000 children

are out of school in 2021-2022 (Bugesera District administrative data,2022).MINEDUC reported that Bugesera district primary drop out rate is 8.42 % and 9.02% in secondary (Statistical year book, 2020/2021);

This is very related to other findings show that women are the most affected by COVID-19 in terms of their economic activities and income sources: Due to restrictions of movements and the fact that women are the majority in the informal sector and unsecured jobs, their business have been adversely affected than that of men during COVID 19 times thus resulting in loss of income, Findings reveal significant gendered differences in COVID-19 impacts. Majority of 54.6% women (have closed their businesses compared to 49% men ( (MIGEPROF, 2021). From these data, losing jobs and closure of parents' business worsened children' education especially girls as they have special needs like menstruation hygiene materials, school fees and other materials.

One of the respondent said “ *Role of parents, guardians in parenting is questionable, some parents are not supportive so some girls haven't returned to school but also they have a multitude and complex of issues.*

Women's education affect their children education's either positively or negatively which contributed directly to reduce or increase poverty. The families should raise healthy and productive individuals who will contribute meaningfully to the Rwandan society. This can be achieved through the education of the girl child who is a mother tomorrow.

The National Human Right Commission research in 2020, shows that children performed some type of hazardous labor, including carrying heavy loads, working in construction and brick kilns, and mining. in this study, poverty was identified as the key factor contributing to child labor, which in turn contributed to school dropout.

One of the respondent added” *the community leaders should go down and look for all the children who dropped out and bring them back to school by organizing campaign that encourages children to go back to school and its benefits, and also to focus on what the children want to study rather than just taking them to school. In rural areas, there are places where schools are far away from children and they have to travel long distances, while others do not have key infrastructure facilities like electricity and clean water, which help them to attend schools regularly and revise their studies.*

Furthmore, respondents mentioned that they have found that girls who are 16-18 years old who were slow in education during the lockdown get married, others came back to school without scholastic materials , among 165 girls in one of visited schools, 3 of them dropped out where by 2 get early marriage and 1 joined business. In another school visited 30 students shifted from private to public school and 5 of them dropped out due to financial constraints on parents' side.

During this research, the researcher found a case of poor family of 5 children, in Bugesera District, Nyamata Sector, their first born got pregnant at 17 years and other 3 remaining children (1 boy and 2 girls) who were in Primary school in of visited school dropped out due to lack school materials uniforms, shoes, notebooks and pens. The mother said “ *I am not educated to find a decent job, my husband left us and married another woman, due to temptations and insignificant gifts my first daughter face teenage pregnancy issue, I was doing causal work at least to feed this big family which stopped by COVID-19, I am struggling to feed them hardly, I can't manage alone to find school materials, I decided to let them at home due to extreme poverty and covid-19 effects.* Her daughter added “ *Because of being at home for a long time, we were not able to meet the basic needs as we wanted which made it easy for the abusers to find time to deceive and impregnated me, unfortunately, he do not support me to raise our kid*”

The findings show that COVID-19 especially lockdown have negative impact on children's learning outcomes and their mental health because of the lack of peer support that children used to have at school. Gender based violence and Family conflicts between spouses also increased which affected children's education School dropout has been increased and girls affected the most. When girls are out of school, they struggle to access social support structures and essential services such as sexual and reproductive health services and early marriage.

Based on above findings a big call out to all actors but mainly MINEDUC, is to prioritize Girls' Education in its entirety and continuous awareness raising on importance of girls' education and some incentives for best academic performers not only for finalist but from Primary up to senior six in order to motivate children at all levels for better future.

## **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

The COVID19 pandemic has forced the government of Rwanda to take drastic measures that seek to contain infection rates and protect the lives of millions of Rwandans. While these measures were necessary in the short term to address the health emergency, it is important to restore the long-term vision with regard to the cost's measures may carry for future generations. The closure of schools, combined with the lockdown and economic crisis, had negative impact on the current and future development of girls by increasing bad behavior from peer pressure, Exposure to sexual abuse and Teenage pregnancies, school dropout, child labour and technology gap between girls and boys. While government have made efforts to sustain student learning and ensure their well-



being, strategies have not reached students equally, in part due to pre-existing inequities in accessing resources, such as internet connection, device availability and enabling environments for growth and learning.

The study analysed the perceived consequences of covid – 19 on girls' education , the findings revealed that COVID-19 affected girls 'education in particular way, my big call out to all actors is to prioritize Girls' Education in its entirety and make schools gender responsive.

Based on high political will and policy framework available to promote girls' education in Rwanda, there is a need of continuous awareness raising on importance of education and some incentives for best academic performers not only for finalist but from Primary up to senior six in order to motivate girls toward school completion,as we empower women and girls, we will realize a better future for all.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

Based on identified COVID-19 consequences on girls' education, the researcher propose the following recommendations

- MINEDUC and MIGEPROF in collaboration with Schools should organize regular public talk to inspire students and discuss on different topics likes Gender equality, GBV, Self-reliance , Resilience, goal setting, decision making and Sexual Reproductive health & Rights
- Schools need to have a counselor who will help students to discourage bad behavior, peer pressure, depression, stress management and school dropout.
- Government and CSOs should provide financial support for girls from poor families who are not able to cover school fees, school feeding fees and scholastic materials, multiply their efforts to bring back student who dropped out , fight against teenage pregnancies and support teen mothers to continue their studies
- Existing Legal and policy frameworks to fight against child labour and child defilement should be implemented effectively
- Parents and schools should take care on mental health and psychological needs, because depression is real in order to avoid suicide, drug abuse , teenage pregnancies among young people for better future of the nation.
- MINEDUC and its stakeholders should conduct a countrywide study on effects of COVID-19 on education
- Digital literacy and ICT support facilities are needed, in the economic recovery process, the Government of Rwanda should put more efforts in supporting women and girls to access digital platforms

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