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## Gendered effects of COVID-19 school closures: Kenya case study

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## GIRL Center Research Brief

No. 11 March 2022

# GENDERED EFFECTS OF COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES: KENYA CASE STUDY



BANGLADESH



INDIA



KENYA



PAKISTAN

### AT A GLANCE

In Kenya, COVID-19 school closures escalated education inequalities especially for girls and young people in rural areas. These closures exacerbated adolescent mental health issues, food and economic insecurity, and experiences of violence. COVID-19 response programs implemented by both the Government of Kenya and non-state actors were not able to fully mitigate the impacts of school closures for adolescents, teachers, or schools. Continued efforts to understand the implications of school closures and to support vulnerable students are needed.

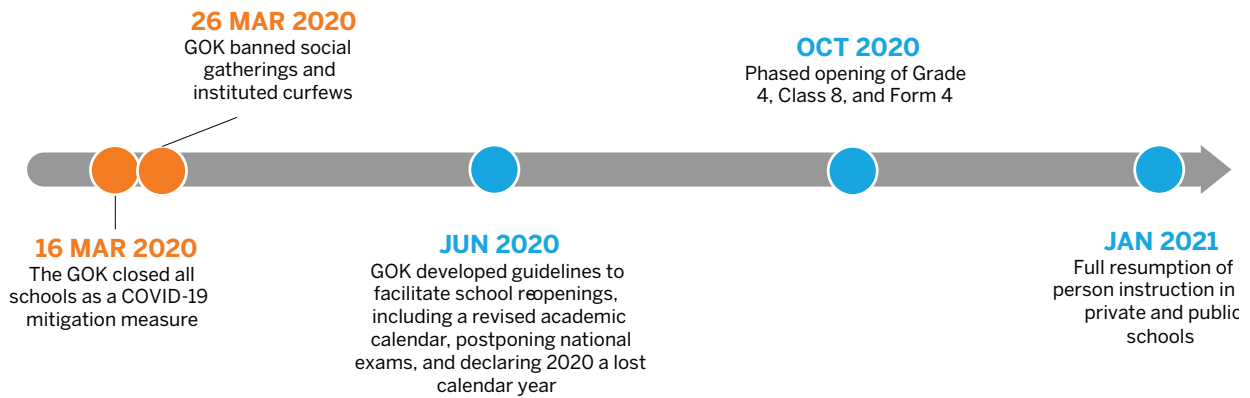
### BACKGROUND

Population Council's GIRL Center was commissioned by UNESCO's Global Education's Gender Flagship to conduct a [global study](#) on the gendered impact of COVID-19 school closures, based on our review of published research and a large-scale survey of organizations focused on gender equality in education, as well as data from local communities in Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali, and Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> Informed by this evidence, the study outlines three main pathways to adverse education, health and protection outcomes and widening gender inequalities: 1) pre-existing gender expectations, disparities, and limitations, 2) gender restrictions and risks, and 3) loss of gender-specific protection. This brief summarizes the Kenya case study.

### Education in Kenya Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

- **School system:** Currently both the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) under a 2-6-3-3-3 system (2 years of pre-primary, 6 years primary school, 3 years junior secondary school, 3 years senior secondary school, 3 years of university) and 8-4-4 system (8 years of primary school, 4 years of secondary school, and 4 years of university) are in place while phasing out the latter.<sup>2,3</sup>
- **Government Education Initiatives:** free public primary education (2003), subsidized secondary education (2008), government sponsored school feeding programs (2008).<sup>4,5</sup>
- **Student Population:** 95% of learners who complete primary school matriculate to secondary (2018-2019), in part due to the government's 100% transition policy, however there is significant variation at the sub-national level.<sup>6</sup> A million school aged children,

**FIGURE 1. TIMELINE OF SCHOOL CLOSURES AND RE-OPENINGS IN KENYA DURING COVID-19**



mostly living in Arid and Semi-Arid counties, are out of school.<sup>7</sup>

- **Gender Equity in Education:** Despite improvements in student gender parity, inequalities in education access, engagement, performance, and sustained enrollment persist in some classes and marginalized counties. Economic constraints, teenage pregnancy and early marriage continue to restrict access to and sustained enrollment in school for young women and girls.<sup>8,9</sup>

### COVID-19 School Closures

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Kenya (GOK) launched numerous initiatives to curb the spread of COVID-19, including limiting in-person school instruction, revising academic calendars, and postponing national examinations. The GOK created health and safety guidelines for school re-openings and sponsored remote and technology-mediated learning tools and programming.

### Case Study

To study the impacts and gendered dimensions of COVID-19 related school closures, mobile phone surveys were conducted with adolescents and adults in their households from across five urban slums in Nairobi, in the city of Kisumu, and in the rural communities of Kilifi and Wajir counties, who had participated in other

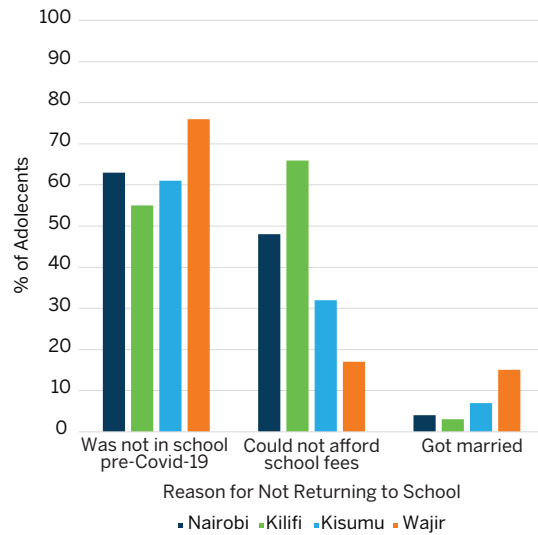
Population Council, Kenya studies<sup>10,11,12,13</sup>. In-depth interviews were also conducted with adolescents, parents, program implementers, community stakeholders and policy makers and additional development partners.

## KEY FINDINGS: GENDERED AND GENERAL EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES ON EDUCATION OUTCOMES AND THE KENYAN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

### Pre-existing Gender Expectations, Disparities and Limitations

- **Limited access to learning resources** was greater in rural and mobile communities, **especially for girls**. Most common method of remote learning was books not supplied by schools, while less than 5% of students learned on computers.
- **Inequitable access to online learning technologies** across the country posed a greater challenge in rural areas and for girls who had less access to technology compared to boys.
- **Girls' time use was disproportionately affected by school closures**, as they were assigned more household chores than boys. According to adolescents, **most girls were required to prioritize chores over remote learning**. Gender and education actors also

**FIGURE 2. ADOLESCENTS' REASONS FOR NOT RETURNING TO SCHOOL BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE**



stressed that girls in mobile communities were especially disadvantaged both in time use and access to learning materials.

- **Significantly more boys than girls reported carrying out income earning activities** across all counties. In all counties except Wajir, **15-19-year-olds were more likely to earn an income than 10-14-year-olds**. While some parents supported adolescent income earning, others were concerned it would be difficult for working adolescents to go back to school.
- **Not being able to pay school fees was the primary barrier** for 47% of girls and 21% of boys in the school reenrollment process. **Girls also mentioned pregnancy (10%) and marriage (5%) as challenges to reenrollment while boys mentioned work (14%)**. In Wajir, 15% of adolescents reported not going back to school because of being married.

### Gender restrictions and risks

- **Signs of major depression were more prominent among boys than girls** during school closures (20% vs. 13% in Nairobi, 6% vs. 1% in Wajir), and were highest in Nairobi

at 14% and lowest in Wajir at 3%. These signs of major depression have decreased since schools have reopened among those that re-enrolled.

- **9% of adolescents experienced emotional violence, 6% experienced physical violence, and 2% experienced sexual abuse** during school closures. All adolescents surviving any kind of violence reported an **increased abuse during the pandemic**.
- **Boys were more likely to experience emotional violence** compared to girls in Kilifi and Kisumu, and more boys compared to girls were likely to experience physical violence in Nairobi. **Increased instances of sexual and gender-based violence targeting girls and women** was also reported by implementers, stakeholders, and female survivors across all counties.
- While **teenage pregnancy** was a critical issue prior to the pandemic, the data **did not indicate an increase during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic**. According to majority of parents and community stakeholders, **additional unsupervised time out of school contributed to early sexual debut among adolescents**.

### Loss of gender-specific protection

- Other reasons for teenage pregnancies cited by some respondents included **rape, transactional sex, poverty, early marriage, peer influence, and lack of youth-friendly health services**. Some girls reported engaging in **transactional sex to afford sanitary products** which were no longer accessible in schools.
- While early marriage was a concern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data does not indicate an increase in the first year of the pandemic. Nevertheless, **school closures might have exacerbated circumstances that lead to early marriage in the medium-term**. Among married girls, 92% of girls reported getting married based on their own choice, 51% reported that it was their parent's decision, and **15% reported**



Photo credit: Population Council.

**getting married because of the pandemic. Pregnancy-related marriages also increased during school closures.**

*“There are those girls who married out of their own volition because they heard that since the schools were closed... students will have to repeat a class to catch up. [To] them that is a waste of time hence the alternative is to get married.” (Adolescent girl 14 years, Wajir)*

## **GENERAL EFFECTS**

- **Learning loss was clear but difficult to quantify**— the difficulties of learning remotely was reflected in reports from Ministry of Education stakeholders about inconsistent student performance upon returning to school when schools resumed.

*“Overall, they are lagging so behind. If a class eight pupil can't read, she/he has completely forgotten how to read... none of them could answer questions even with notes on the board.” (Stakeholder, Kilifi)*

- **Environmental factors made remote learning challenging**, including home environments that were inconducive for learning, as well as lack of student guidance and supervision.

- While school re-enrollment was successful due to the government's efforts and executive order, most respondents noted that schools were not prepared to reopen due to **lack of infrastructure to support COVID-19 mitigation measures and lack of preparation for teachers to accommodate lost time.**
- Most respondents reported **negative impact on young peoples' mental health**, especially for those whose schools provided a safe space. Stakeholders and parents mentioned that the uncertainties of COVID-19 caused immense anxiety and stress.
- While school closures did not impact food security in agriculturally productive counties, **arid counties and informal urban settlements experienced intensified food insecurity during the pandemic.** Across both genders, almost 65% of adolescents in Nairobi and 80% in Kilifi and Kisumu reported **skipping meals more frequently during the pandemic**, and nearly half reported skipping a meal every day or a couple times a week. Education stakeholders also reported that **school closures increased food insecurity and household economic stress**, given that school meals stopped being provided.



## EVALUATION OF INTERVENTIONS

### National and County Level Government

Though the government implemented economic and social service assistance measures, it was still unable to fully understand gendered gaps in school re-enrollment due to the lack of access to data on teenage pregnancy and early marriage. According to education stakeholders, **government measures did not mitigate the impact of school closures for adolescents, teachers, or schools.** While the government provided some guidance, **government interventions lacked coordinated support for schools to return to in-person instruction.** In addition, **government funding for COVID-19 protection measures has not reached schools yet,** leaving educators waiting for support from development partners. Stakeholders also mentioned that the national education scholarship fund did not meet increased need due to household income loss.

### Non-State Actors

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and business responses to COVID-19 were effective at meeting increased needs for **water access, sanitation supplies, and gender-based violence, maternal, and mental health resources.** Some also provided students with radios and batteries, revision papers, and digital **education resources.** NGOs also worked with schools to improve water access and sanitation through provision of water tanks, hand washing stations, and Personal Protection Equipment materials. However, these **interventions had minimal impact on mitigating the effects of school closures.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO MITIGATE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES

The following are recommended measures to address impacts of COVID-19 related school closures from the GOK and non-state actors:

1. **Implement a needs assessment** to understand how pregnant and married girls, children with disabilities, and youth

experiencing financial insecurity can be best supported to return to school.

2. **Create more robust school re-entry policies** to encourage pregnant, parenting, and married students to return to school.
3. **Redirect resources currently allocated to COVID-19 response measures to vulnerable students,** including supporting stronger bursary, scholarship, and school feeding programs.
4. **Assemble gender-disaggregated data to inform recommendations** and policies, including a county-specific analysis of access to online learning and the consequences of school closures.
5. **Provide psychosocial and emotional support** to students and educators, especially female teachers, as they overcome the impacts of COVID-19.
6. **Allow NGOs to reenter schools** and continue their programs for adolescents.

These are recommended measures to address challenges that existed in the gender and education sector pre-COVID-19:

1. **Provide gender-sensitive support to older adolescents to re-enroll in school** – for pregnant, parenting and/or married adolescents, as well as in ways that accommodate engagement in income generating activities and household economic resilience. In addition, provide alternative education pathways and livelihood skills to young people who cannot go back to school.
2. **Provide gender-sensitive support to young people navigating harmful coping mechanisms** developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, including offering guidance on safe internet use, and strengthening adolescent programming and mentorship.
3. **Address the sexual and reproductive health and rights gap** at school and community levels by ensuring adolescents understand their bodies and sexual intercourse.

4. **Prioritize ICT infrastructure in public schools** to improve gender equitable digital resource and remote learning access at the county level.

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The Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center is a global research center that generates, synthesizes, and translates evidence to transform the lives of adolescent girls. Through rigorous research about what works — and what doesn't — we can better direct limited resources to support evidence-based solutions that improve girls' lives.

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