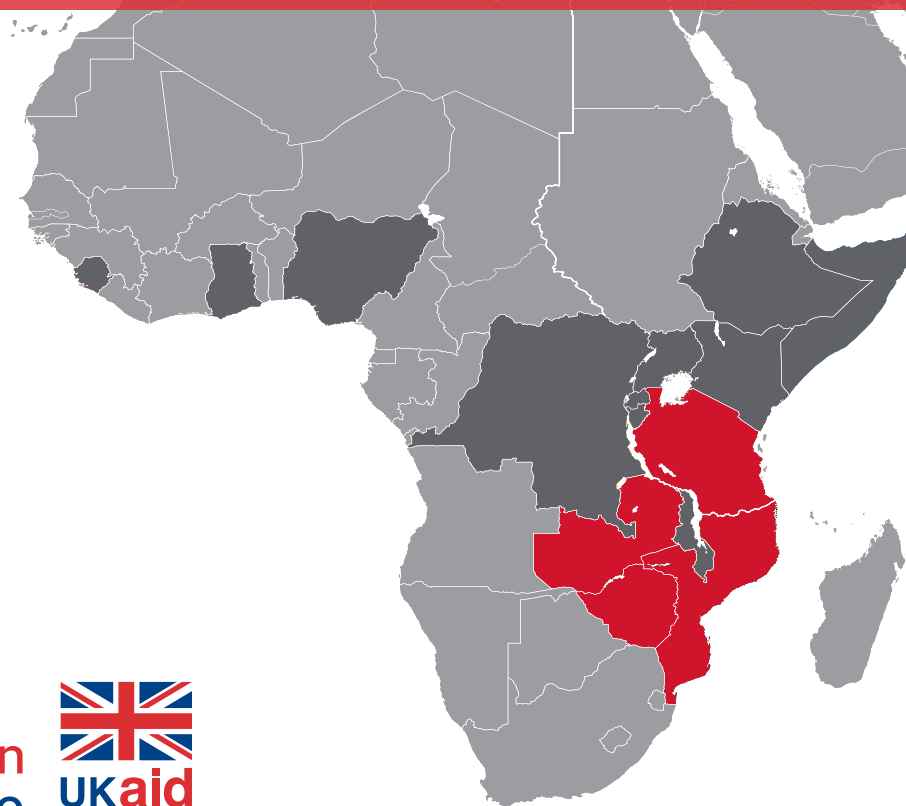# Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response

Focus on Southern Africa (Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe)

Girls'
Education
Challenge

UKaid
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Contents

This *Focus on Southern Africa* brief summarises emerging findings around the impact of COVID-19 on learning, wellbeing and return to school from Girls Education Challenge (GEC) projects in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Mozambique. It is one of a series of five regional *Emerging Findings* briefs which covers the time period from March 2020 to June 2021.
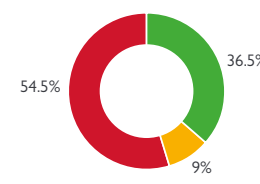
It is primarily aimed at Southern African national governments, INGOs and NGOs working in the region who are interested in understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on learning, wellbeing and return to school. This brief has continued relevance because of the ongoing uncertainty and continued impact on schools and, in some cases, school closures and learning. It outlines interventions that support the reopening of schools and the continuation of remote learning where schools remain closed.

Summary

The evidence presented in this paper around learning, wellbeing and return to school from the GEC projects in Southern Africa was collated from March 2020 to June 2021.

Schools closures | March 2020 to June 2021

| March 2020 | April 2020 | May 2020 | June 2020 | July 2020 | Aug 2020 | Sept 2020 | Oct 2020 | Nov 2020 | Dec 2020 | Jan 2021 | Feb 2021 | March 2021 | April 2021 | May 2020 | June 2021 |

MOZAMBIQUE — 28% / 36% / 36%

TANZANIA — 8% / 23% / 69%

ZAMBIA — 8.5% / 16.5% / 75%

ZIMBABWE — 36.5% / 9% / 54.5%
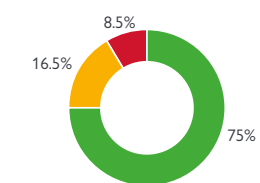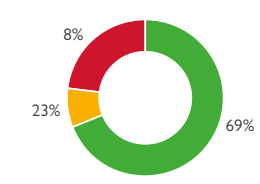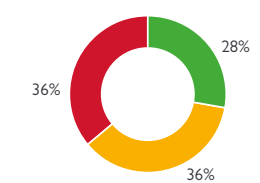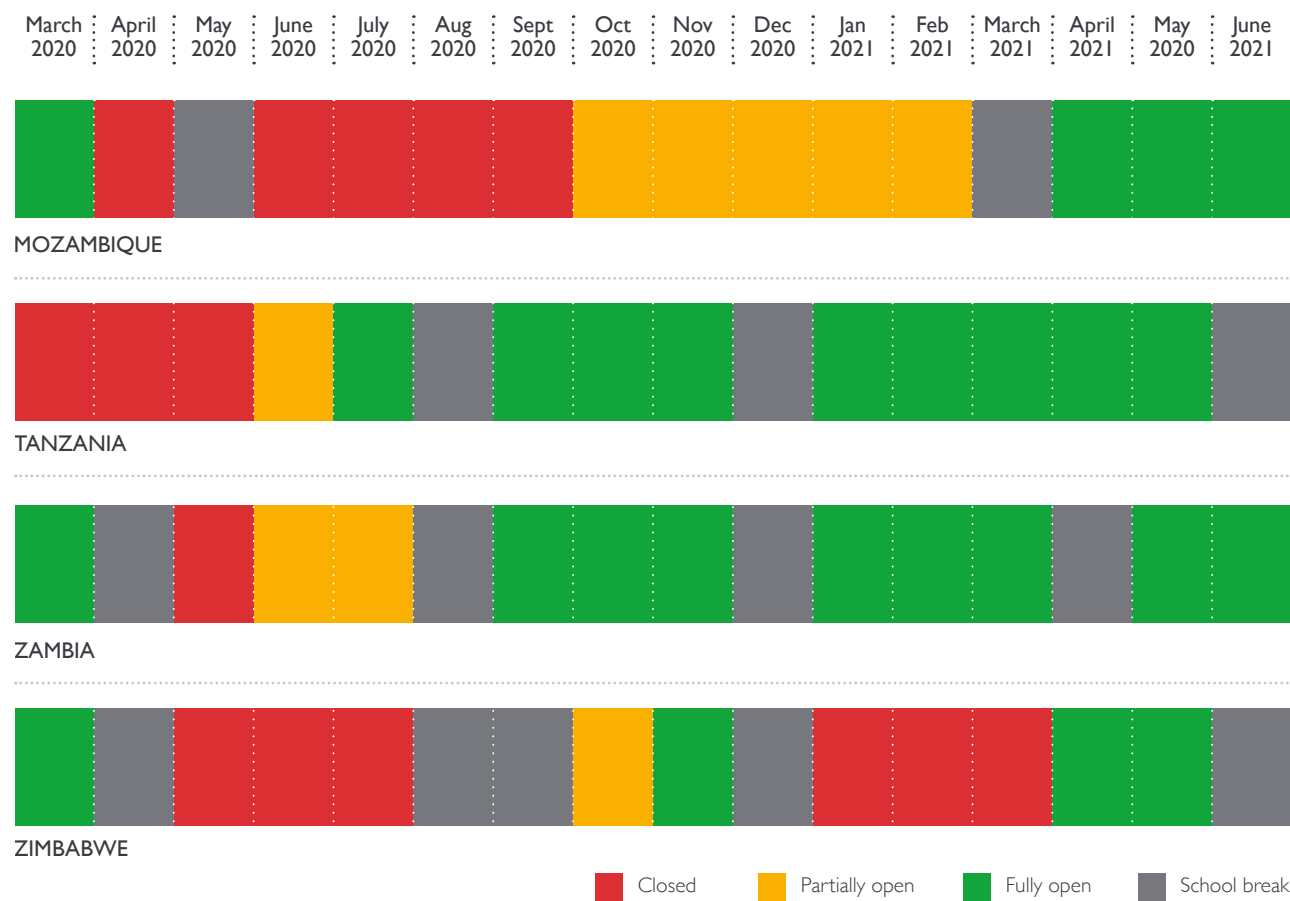
Legend: ⬛ Closed ⬛ Partially open ⬛ Fully open ⬛ School break

Summary

IMPACTS ON **GIRLS' LEARNING**

- Emerging evidence has shown that school closures have had a negative impact on learning. For example, in Tanzania, there are predictions of increases in non-readers. In Zimbabwe, the pass rate in Grade 7 exams dropped by almost 10%.

- Girls in Zimbabwe who have never been to school have experienced great difficulty with home-based learning.

- A lack of access to learning materials and remote learning modalities – such as online learning, mobile-internet, TV or radio – has negatively impacted GEC girls' ability to learn.

  Learners from the poorest households, from remote locations, and those with disabilities, refugees, and displaced groups were the least likely to access remote learning.

- Projects reported many issues with students' ability to learn when schools reopened. For example, in Zambia, an accelerated curriculum meant that there was little time for exam preparation. In addition, in Zimbabwe, teacher strikes limited children's ability to learn when schools reopened.

- Solutions: Project interventions included community learning groups, support for home learning and exam preparation, the distribution of learning materials, remote training for teachers and the delivery of educational radio programmes.

IMPACTS ON **GIRLS' SAFETY AND WELLBEING**

- Gender-based violence (GBV) and abuse has risen across Southern Africa due to COVID-19. In addition, there are concerns that suspended protection services and restricted mobility have resulted in women and girls not reporting cases of violence or getting the support they need.

- There have been reported increases in Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) during school closures in Tanzania and increases in teenage pregnancy in Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

- Across Zambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, the main reasons GEC girls reported feeling unsafe were: working on a farm; corporal punishment; forced labour; fear of sexual abuse; and forced marriage. In addition, it was found that increased economic pressure on households put girls at greater risk of early marriage.

- In Zimbabwe and Tanzania, many girls experienced a shortage of food when schools closed.

- **Solutions:** Project interventions included: individual follow-ups and home visits to vulnerable girls; moving reporting pathways from schools to communities; life skills sessions; community outreach; and the strengthening of local stakeholder networks for gender-based violence referrals.

IMPACTS ON **GIRLS' RETURN TO SCHOOL**

- While Tanzania has had high return rates to school, there are indications that there are some significant challenges in the other countries. For example, in Zimbabwe, many learners from poor and deprived households reported they were unlikely to return to school when they reopen.

- Many cohorts of GEC supported girls have had high rates of return to school: 100% in Tanzania, 97% in Zambia, 96% in Zimbabwe. (*Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of girls' education* project).

- Whilst reasons across countries for non-return vary, they included: school-related costs; concerns about 'getting back into school mode'; the need to contribute to household income or help at home; early pregnancy and marriage. In Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the need to migrate was also a factor, as was the worsening food insecurity in Zimbabwe.

- In Zimbabwe, the lack of teachers in schools was a disincentive for many to return.

- **Solutions:** Project interventions included: back-to-school campaigns and community outreach; the provision of bursaries and learning materials; support for blended learning; support to ensure schools are safe and COVID-19 transmission is limited.

Introduction

During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted 188 countries to enforce national school closures and lockdowns, impacting approximately 98.5% of the world's student population.[1] As the year progressed, studies and reports began to note how these school closures and lockdowns disproportionately affected women and girls, particularly the most marginalised.[2] Several tools were developed to track the educational effects of the pandemic. However, most did not include extensive information on girls' education.[3] This brief presents the work carried out with projects to provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on girls' educational opportunities and life chances, particularly in the 17 countries in which the GEC operates.

This paper focuses on the Southern Africa region, specifically Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.[4] It is part of a series of regional papers[5] that provide a comprehensive review[6] and analysis of 90 studies, articles and reports produced on or within the 17 GEC countries regarding the impact of school closures and lockdowns on girls' learning, safety, wellbeing and return to school. The review also includes analyses of COVID-19 impacts specifically on GEC girls, drawn from GEC projects' quarterly reports.[7] GEC projects further validated and elaborated upon these findings and analyses during two workshops and reviews of an initial paper conducted in March and April 2021.[8] These workshops also explored and discussed GEC project activities and interventions that have shown promise with regard to addressing COVID-19 impacts on girls.
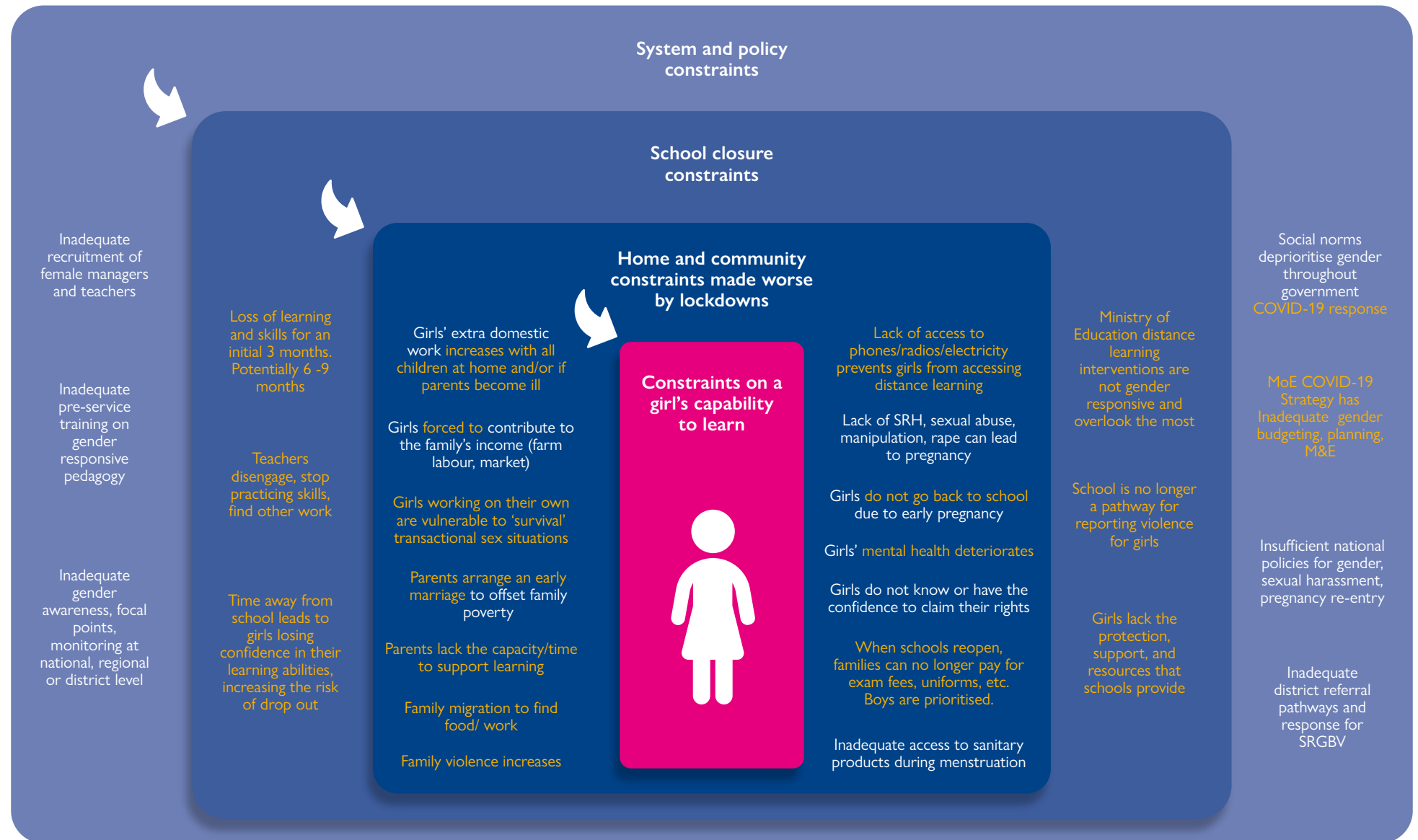
Emerging findings

Overall, the types and degrees of COVID-19 impacts on girls varied across countries and contexts within individual countries (e.g. rural or urban locations). However, a common theme emerged, irrespective of country or context, that COVID-19 exacerbated existing constraints and created new ones on girls' educational opportunities and life chances. For example, school and community education centre closures and lockdowns increased girls' vulnerability to sexual violence and increased their domestic chore burden as they cared for siblings and sick relatives. Girls who lacked access to mobile phones, radios or electricity *before* COVID-19 were disadvantaged even further during COVID-19, as this access was needed to participate in most distance learning activities. Subgroups, such as girls with disabilities, also faced increased stigma, discrimination and safeguarding risks.

Figure 1 provides examples of the many new or exacerbated constraints (noted in yellow) experienced by girls in most GEC countries and contexts, including the girls served by projects in Southern Africa.[9] These constraints are located within the different levels of the education system: the home and community level, school (closure) level, and system and policy levels.

The following sections summarise the impact of COVID-19 on girls' learning, safety, wellbeing and school return in the Southern Africa region (Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and provide an overview of the GEC activities and interventions that address adverse impacts.

Figure 1: *New and exacerbated constraints on girls' access to education[10]*

System and policy constraints

School closure constraints

Home and community constraints made worse by lockdowns

Constraints on a girl's capability to learn

Inadequate recruitment of female managers and teachers

Inadequate pre-service training on gender responsive pedagogy

Inadequate gender awareness, focal points, monitoring at national, regional or district level

Loss of learning and skills for an initial 3 months. Potentially 6 -9 months

Teachers disengage, stop practicing skills, find other work

Time away from school leads to girls losing confidence in their learning abilities, increasing the risk of drop out

Girls' extra domestic work increases with all children at home and/or if parents become ill

Girls forced to contribute to the family's income (farm labour, market)

Girls working on their own are vulnerable to 'survival' transactional sex situations

Parents arrange an early marriage to offset family poverty

Parents lack the capacity/time to support learning

Family migration to find food/ work

Family violence increases

Lack of access to phones/radios/electricity prevents girls from accessing distance learning

Lack of SRH, sexual abuse, manipulation, rape can lead to pregnancy

Girls do not go back to school due to early pregnancy

Girls' mental health deteriorates

Girls do not know or have the confidence to claim their rights

When schools reopen, families can no longer pay for exam fees, uniforms, etc. Boys are prioritised.

Inadequate access to sanitary products during menstruation

Ministry of Education distance learning interventions are not gender responsive and overlook the most

School is no longer a pathway for reporting violence for girls

Girls lack the protection, support, and resources that schools provide

Social norms deprioritise gender throughout government COVID-19 response

MoE COVID-19 Strategy has Inadequate gender budgeting, planning, M&E

Insufficient national policies for gender, sexual harassment, pregnancy re-entry

Inadequate district referral pathways and response for SRGBV

Impacts on **girls' learning**

School closures across this region have negatively impacted girls learning. Whilst Tanzania experienced 15 weeks of school closures; the other three countries experienced longer lockdowns. For example, the UNESCO global monitoring of school closures shows that Zambia experienced 20 weeks, Zimbabwe 34 weeks and Mozambique 45 weeks (as of July 2021). While the full extent of the impact on learning outcomes is unknown, there is some emerging evidence. For example, in Zimbabwe, the pass rate in Grade 7 exams dropped by almost 10%,[11] and in Tanzania, there are predictions that there will be an increase in non-readers.[12]

Early in the pandemic, projects realised that most children in their communities did not have household access to remote learning modalities such as online learning, mobile-internet, television or radio. Across the four countries, the inability to access distance learning negatively impacted girls' ability to learn. For example, the Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education project (Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia) reported that a lack of materials, support and higher expectations to contribute to household chores or farm work were all limiting girls' time for study. Project monitoring also showed that only 38% of households own a radio and only 24% of girls have access to a smartphone. In Mozambique, most children lack access to distance learning. 74% live without electricity, only 2% have access to the Internet, 35% to radio and 22% have access to a television.[13] SAGE (Zimbabwe) also found that access to a phone did not necessarily equate to access in practice for girls. With the onset of COVID-19, 52% of girls reported being reachable by mobile phones, hence allowing for remote support and learning. However, within the following four months, only 23% of the total cohort or 45%

of these reachable girls were able to participate in learning conversations, due to issues linked to connectivity, accessibility of phone as a secondary user and household demands.

All projects found that those from remote locations and those with limited means were the most likely to have limited access. In Zimbabwe, for example, remote learning efforts have not met the needs of all learners, especially children with disabilities, those living in remote areas without access to radio signals or phone connectivity and those from poor households.[14] In Zambia, a lack of infrastructure and electricity coverage in rural districts has limited access to virtual lessons.[15] In Mozambique, many children do not have conducive learning environments at home, particularly refugees and displaced groups and those in lower-income neighbourhoods.[16]

In Zambia, the three-term school year was compressed into two terms, meaning that the exam season was maintained but without the additional time to prepare once schools reopened. Zimbabwe experienced teachers' strikes due to low pay and lack of COVID provision, which limited children's ability to learn when schools reopened. IGATE (Zimbabwe) reported industrial action among teachers in 48% of project supported schools.

Project interventions included community learning groups, support to home learning (for example, via phone), exam preparation, and the distribution of learning materials. In addition, several projects continued to train and support teachers' professional development online and via WhatsApp groups. Others worked alongside government agencies to develop radio programme content. For example, STAR-G (Mozambique) helped create literacy, numeracy and life skills radio programmes.

Before the pandemic, IGATE (Zimbabwe) had worked extensively in communities and so were able to leverage their community support networks to run learning circles and provide psychosocial support to girls during school closures. The project trained Learning Champions to run small learning groups. Their professional development focused on ensuring girls' well-being, and on the creation of safe and nurturing learning environments. In these small groups, teachers were able to provide a more individualistic and holistic teaching approach. Research has shown that they were able to act as mentors as well as teachers and build girls' self-esteem and confidence in their ability to learn.

Tanzania

Literature review findings:

Minimal learning loss was reported as schools were only closed for 17 weeks. However, predictions are that there will increase in non-readers (Cummiskey et al., 2021).

Project findings:

Girls Learn, Succeed and Lead reported that access to government-led distance learning was limited. For example, only 31% of students had access to a television (10% in rural areas) and 44% had access to a radio (32% in rural areas). In addition, 70% of students reported that a lack of books or materials limited their ability to revise.

Core interventions:

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project distributed education materials, including exercise books, stationery, CAMFED study guides and past examination papers, and facilitated access to school library books. These activities were facilitated by CAMFED learner guides, Teacher Mentors and CAMFED Association members. In addition, radio programmes taught functional literacy, numeracy and life skills (My Better World), exam preparation, COVID-19 prevention awareness-raising and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) promotion.

Mozambique

Literature review findings:

Most children lack access to distance learning. For example, 74% live without electricity, only 2% have access to the Internet, 35% to radio and 22% to television. Access to information is even more limited for rural children (UNICEF Mozambique 2020). In addition, many children do not have conducive learning environments at home, particularly those in lower-income neighbourhoods and among refugees and displaced groups (OCHA 2020d).

Project findings:

STAR-G reported that 76% of girls surveyed continued learning at home compared to 85% of boys, and most married girls did not continue learning during the COVID-19 period. Access to distance learning through radio eas low, with some provinces reporting that only 25% of students had radios in their homes.

Core interventions:

STAR-G used community radio lessons and distributed government workbooks for the most marginalised girls. Throughout school closures, the project continued with online teacher training facilitated by project staff.

Zambia

Literature review findings:

Research highlights that a lack of infrastructure and electricity coverage in rural districts and power outages in urban areas affected access to virtual lessons and exorbitant airtime costs for radio programmes and limited access (OCHA 2020b).

Project findings:

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project reported that many girls struggled to keep up with learning without access to books or school resources and expressed anxiety about their ability to return to school and sit exams. Learners in rural or remote communities had limited access to government-led distance learning (37% have access to a radio and 19% to a television). In addition, the poorest had to cope with competing pressures on their time (e.g., household chores, farm work). The three-term school year was compressed into two terms and the exam season, so there was no additional time to prepare once schools reopened.

Core interventions:

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project used small community study groups facilitated by community learner guides, motivated teachers and CAMA members (CAMFED graduates now in university). The content taught included functional literacy, numeracy and life skills ('My Better World'), exam preparation, and awareness-raising of COVID-19 prevention. In addition, the 'My Better World' life skills curriculum was adapted into a part-animated video series and broadcast on TV through a partnership with the Ministry of Education. The radio version also aired with an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 people listening in.

Zimbabwe

Literature review findings:

Teachers' unions called for mass strikes citing incapacitation. As a result, the learning needs of all children have not been met (OCHA 2020c) and almost a 10% drop in the number of children passing national Grade 7 exams was reported (Chingono 2021).

Project findings:

IGATE reported that fewer than 25% of learners accessed no alternative learning since school closure. While alternative learning has improved some basic literacy skills despite these school closures, numeracy skills particularly suffered. In addition, there was no evidence of teaching and learning in October 2020 among the reopened examination classes due to industrial action among teachers in 48% of project-supported schools.

SAGE reported high rates of migration. Girls who have never been to school and are from an ethnic minority were more likely to be non-attenders (44% and 57%, respectively). In addition, girls who had never been to school experienced more significant difficulties with home-based learning. Of the 105 girls surveyed, they reported that the critical reasons for missing lessons included problems with phones (27.3%), too many chores (22.7%), sickness (22.7%) and childcare (9.1%).

Core interventions:

IGATE used small community learning circles facilitated by community volunteers and older girls and peers. Extra activities included creating WhatsApp groups amongst teachers, headteachers, facilitators and peer leaders to strengthen alternative learning options. Content included functional literacy, numeracy and life skills. However, lessons focused primarily on literacy and numeracy rather than covering the entire curriculum as learning relied on community champions rather than professional teachers.

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project used remedial study sessions facilitated by learner guides and transition guides. The content taught exam preparedness – both academically and psychologically. Extra activities included the coordination of printing and distribution to students of 'green books', collated past exam papers and study group guides.

SAGE implemented accelerated learning programmes through community-based learning hubs, using remote and community-based modalities facilitated by community volunteers. Training for community educators and life skills facilitators was shifted to a WhatsApp-based training model. Accelerated learning and life skills modules were compressed and adapted for delivery by phone, household and small group modalities. Accelerated Learning materials, established in line with the existing government curricula for use in a non-formal education setting, were approved by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) for use within their national catch-up strategy. This supported pupils in lower grades of formal schools in communities and schools during COVID-19 and when returning to school. These materials were launched by MoPSE's Permanent Secretary in April 2021 and uploaded to the Ministry's website. In addition, screening tests were adapted and administered through different modalities (e.g., telephone learning, small groups and face to face) to enable the ongoing enrolment of new girls.

Impacts on girls' safety and wellbeing

A report by Amnesty International found increases in gender-based violence and abuse across Southern Africa. COVID-19 restrictions are trapping girls with abusive family members and they have fewer options to report or escape danger.[17] Although both Zambia and Tanzania saw a decrease in the number of officially reported cases of gender-based violence, this most likely indicates that survivors of abuse were unable to access protection services and reporting mechanisms. In Tanzania, for example, the suspension of essential protection services for women and restrictions on mobility, lack of information, and increased isolation and fear resulted in a dramatic drop in the number of reported cases of violence against women and girls.[18] There have been reported increases in FGM during school closures in Tanzania[19] and teenage pregnancy in Mozambique.[20]

Across the Southern Africa GEC portfolio, projects also found that lockdowns resulted in an increased risk to the safety and wellbeing of girls. In Zambia and Zimbabwe, projects reported that girls are at greater risk of gender-based violence. Across Zambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, the main reasons girls reported feeling unsafe were (in descending order of prevalence): working on a farm, corporal punishment, forced labour, fear of sexual abuse and forced marriage. In addition, increased economic pressure on households put girls at greater risk of early marriage in all three countries. In Zimbabwe and Tanzania, the onset of COVID-19 exacerbated existing dire food security and economic insecurity and prevented access to school-based interventions. Many girls experienced a shortage of food since schools closed, with parents struggling to feed their children due to the rise in prices of basic food commodities and poor harvest.

Project interventions included individual follow-up and home visits to vulnerable girls. For example, the *Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education* project ensured that child protection referrals were pivoted to learner guides working in the communities (instead of via teacher mentors in school). Projects also conducted life skills sessions through community learning circles and supported radio life skill sessions to increase awareness on protection issues, sexual and reproductive health, wellbeing and COVID-19 prevention. Projects also conducted community outreach. For example, in Zambia, learner guides visited girls vulnerable to early marriage, spoke to parents and chiefs about protection issues and supported referrals for gender-based violence to social welfare officers and nurses. The *IGATE* and *SAGE* projects in Zimbabwe strengthened local stakeholder networks for gender-based violence referrals.

SAGE has been running a life skills programme which also incorporated community sessions which instigated inter-generational dialogues and male engagement clubs aimed at challenging negative gender norms.

An initial assessment conducted in May 2020 reported 81% of girls knew who they could speak to for support if feeling unsafe. SAGE also prioritised increasing the awareness of safeguarding protocols and how to access local protection services for girls, volunteers and communities. The project invested in the development and distribution of referral service mapping documents, disseminated bulk SMS's, revised safeguarding protocols, and integrated safeguarding, wellbeing and health messaging into sessions and training. Project monitoring found that there was an increase in women and adolescent girls reporting that they would seek help if they encountered gender-based violence. Some of the noted services sought include the health facilities and police victim-friendly unit.

Mozambique

Literature review findings:

There were reports of increases in teenage pregnancy (World Vision, 2020) and domestic violence cases (Amnesty International 2021).

Project findings:

STAR-G reported that only 12.5% of girls had safe learning spaces, 50.8% reported having safe playing spaces, 88.3% reported feeling safe at home, and 6.2% of girls witnessed violence.

Core interventions:

STAR-G implemented safeguarding messaging via radio and teacher training and door to door messaging via community core groups.

Tanzania

Literature review findings:

The suspension of essential protection services for women, as well as restrictions on mobility, lack of information, and increased isolation and fear, resulting in a dramatic drop in the number of reported cases of violence against women and girls (IRC 2020) and an increased in FGM during the period of school closures (Grant 2020).

Project findings:

Girls Learn, Succeed and Lead saw increased pressures on already vulnerable households, increasing the pressure on girls to enter into early marriage. For example, a household survey found that 38% of girls had experienced a shortage of food since schools closed, with parents struggling to feed their children due to the rise in prices of essential food commodities during the pandemic. In addition, 4% of girls reported they did not feel safe at home, citing reasons such as poor quality housing, domestic duties and food shortages.

Core interventions:

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project used life skills via study groups and child protection referrals via learner guides (instead of teacher mentors in school). In addition, learner guides visited girls vulnerable to early marriage, spoke to parents and chiefs, and supported referrals for GBV to social welfare officers and nurses. Folk Development Colleges offered a valuable alternative education route for girls who became pregnant, including providing free childcare.

Zambia

Literature review findings:

Zambian official police statistics show a slight decrease in recorded GBV cases during school closures, reflecting that women could not call for help. However, the Young Women's Christian Association increased sexual violence cases (Amnesty International 2021).

Project findings:

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project reported increased pressure on the household resulted in girls and young women being at greater risk of GBV and early marriage. In addition, 6% of girls reported they did not feel safe during school closures due to working on farms, corporal punishment, forced labour and fear of forced marriage.

Core interventions:

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project implemented life skills via study groups and child protection referrals via learner guides (instead of teacher mentors in school). In addition, learner guides visited girls vulnerable to early marriage. They spoke to parents and chiefs, supported referrals for GBV to social welfare officers and nurses, and participated in community outreach. Radio broadcasts targeted girls and their families with messages on child protection and preventing the transmission of COVID-19.

Zimbabwe

Literature review findings:

Statistics show an increase in GBV cases in Zimbabwe during school closures (Amnesty International 2021).

Project findings:

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project reported that increased pressure on the household during school closures and economic downturns resulted in girls and young women being at greater risk of gender-based violence and early marriage. Girls and families also reported shortages of food and concerns about COVID-19 transmission.

Core interventions:

IGATE implemented Life skills via community learning circles and strengthened local stakeholder networks for GBV referrals.

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project activities included individual follow-up and home visits to vulnerable girls, conducted by locally embedded CAMFED Association members, Mother Support Group members and learner guides, supporting referrals to social welfare officers. In addition, radio broadcasts, delivered in partnership with health professionals and government officials, covered child safeguarding, SRH promotion and wellbeing.

SAGE focused on life skills, psychosocial support, safeguarding information disseminated in person and by phone, and strengthen networks for GBV referrals.

Impacts on **girls' return to school**

The impact of COVID-19 on the return to school varied across the four countries. For example, the national return rate was high at 97% in Tanzania – presumably because school closures were much shorter than elsewhere. Whilst it is still too early to have a clear picture of national return-to-school rates in the other countries, there are indications that there are some significant challenges. For example, in a recent study in Zimbabwe, a significant proportion of learners from poor and deprived households, where labour shortage is an issue, reported that they were unlikely to return to school when schools reopened. Challenges included a lack of school fees, concerns about 'getting back into school mode', concerns about disentangling from 'new roles' such as caring for sick relatives and children, helping on the family farm, and participating in various income-generating activities. In addition, the worsening food insecurity in most poor households represents a significant challenge, potentially contributing to dropout.[21]

The *Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education* project reported high back-to-school rates of supported girls – 100% in Tanzania, 97% in Zambia and 96% in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, reasons are given for dropout related to early marriage, pregnancy and migration – with the economic situation forcing girls to seek economic opportunities in other areas of Zimbabwe or neighbouring countries such as South Africa and Mozambique. Return to school was also impacted by teachers' reluctance to return and the reclosure of schools that occurred just a few weeks after reopening. SAGE monitoring picked up on low teacher morale and high rates of teacher absenteeism in project

schools. They also found that not all teachers are teaching when present. In Mozambique, 2% of girls spoken to were not planning to return to school, with cost cited as the main reason.

Higher work burdens and a lack of access to remote learning opportunities have led many girls to disengage from education. This has led to a decrease in confidence in their academic abilities, which is a factor in not wanting to return to school. *Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education's* monitoring revealed that many girls are anxious about their ability to return to school and sit exams. Similarly, in Mozambique, dropout was attributed to low engagement with learning and demotivation to learn due to a lack of engagement and support.

Project interventions included back-to-school campaigns and community outreach. Some projects reached out to girls who had not returned to school, provided messaging via radio, and backed up with phone calls and door to door visits. In many cases, students were also provided with bursaries and learning materials. Across the region, there has been closing and reopening of schools and projects have supported a blended approach to learning as needed. For example, *IGATE* (Zimbabwe) continued to support community learning circles when schools could not accommodate all students due to COVID-19 guidelines or when teachers did not return. In Tanzania, schools were supported to improve hygiene measures (e.g., water tanks) to limit COVID-19 transmission when students returned.

In Zimbabwe, the *SAGE* project supports girls with low (or no) education to attend a non-formal education programme. As COVID-19 has kept girls out of classrooms, the project has established other remote learning modalities, supporting learning through phone calls, home visits and small groups. During stricter restrictions, only phone calls have been possible. As restrictions ease, the project has used home visits and small group learning where possible. Continuously engaging with girls increases the chances that they will stay motivated and return to learning centres when they re-open.

Mozambique

Literature review findings:
Schools reopened in March 2021, so it is too early to have data on return to school rates.

Project findings:
STAR-G reported that fewer than 2% of girls currently out of school are not planning to return when schools reopen, with cost cited as the main reason. In addition, distance learning centre managers believe that dropouts are related to slow or non-completion of the modules, a lack of COVID-19 WASH prevention materials, change of residence and cross border migration by girls, a lack of interest and demotivation, and early marriages and pregnancies.

Core interventions:
STAR-G used radio, backed up by door-to-door messaging via community core groups and tailors produced masks to address parental fears.

Tanzania

Literature review findings:
Literature shows that national return rates in primary and lower secondary by the end of September 2020 are 97% ([UNICEF Tanzania 2021](#)).

Project findings:
The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project saw that 100% of GEC supported upper secondary students and 99.7% of GEC junior secondary students have returned to school.

Core interventions:
The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project used messaging for reassurance via radio, backed up with phone and door-to-door visits by learner guides. Teacher mentors identified those who had not returned after schools reopened and learner guides followed up with parents to reassure them that bursaries would continue. In addition, schools were supported through

Planning for School Excellence structures to improve hygiene measures to limit COVID-19 transmission by, for example, ensuring water tanks were in place. Results show that Form 6 students passed their A-Level examinations and the Form 4 examination pass rate for supported girls was 90%, above the national average of 85.7%. In Form 2, the pass rate of supported girls was 93%, above the national pass rate for girls of 91.4%.

Zambia

Project findings:
The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project partner schools supported the return to school of girls who had become pregnant during the school closures.

Core interventions:
The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project used messaging and reassurance via radio, backed up with phone and door-to-door visits by learner guides. Teacher mentors identified those who had not returned after schools reopened, learner guides followed up with parents to reassure them that bursaries would continue. In addition, students were provided with self-study kits to supplement in-school learning. Results show that 95% of Grade 8 and 12 GEC supported students returned to school.

Zimbabwe

Literature review findings:
Many teachers were unwilling to return to teaching over low pay and lack of sanitation, as well as fears about COVID-19 ([Chingono 2020](#)). In addition, the worsening food insecurity in most poor households represented a significant challenge, which contributed to dropping out of school ([OCHA 2020c](#)).

Project findings:
IGATE reported that the primary reasons for dropping out of school include migration (44%), marriage (37%) and pregnancy (34%). In addition, the economic situation forced girls to seek economic opportunities in other areas of Zimbabwe or neighbouring countries such as South Africa

and Mozambique. The project reported that 11.5% of girls transitioned or re-entered formal schools, with 15.4% citing no further interest in the programme.

SAGE found return to learning varied across the seven sub-groups of girls with which they work. Since the onset of COVID-19, 88% of girls have returned to learning. Of these, the three groups least likely to return are those from ethnic minorities (87% return rate), girls engaged in labour (89% return rate) and Apostolic girls (89% return rate).

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project noted that partner schools supported the return to school of girls who had become pregnant during the school closures.

Core interventions:
IGATE ensured that community learning circles continued as a 'safety net' for reopened schools that could not seat everyone, especially in schools where not all teachers returned.

The **Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** project used messaging and reassurance via radio, backed up with phone and door-to-door visits by learner guides. Teacher mentors identified those who had not returned after schools reopened. Learner guides followed up with parents to reassure them that bursaries would continue. Students were provided with self-study kits to supplement in-school learning. In addition, schools introduced residential academic camps to make up for lost learning time. This meant that 95% of supported students returned to school and 90% supported Form 4 students sat their O-Level examinations.

SAGE frecognised early on that returning to education and retention was a challenge and addressed this by reaching out to and following up with girls and calling parents (and husbands in the case of married girls) via their community volunteers and programme staff. Furthermore, they engaged Hub Development Committees (HDCs) to engage parents and husbands of the learners through door to door visitations and mobilised support from community leadership (traditional and religious). The combination of mobilisation and encouraging learners to continue access learning interventions even in strict lockdown periods has enabled learning to continue through phone calls, door-to-door support and small group learning where possible.

What next?

This paper has reported the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls' learning, wellbeing and return to school. Projects have reported what they did in response to COVID-19, the activities they implemented and the pivots they made to programming. As we move into the next phase of COVID-19, where at the time of writing, COVID-19 case rates are rising in some places and schools are re-closing (e.g., Mozambique), the need to continue to collect evidence and document the evolving challenges faced by girls and what interventions are successful or not is crucial.

The evidence reported here will be revisited in 2021 through projects' discussion and reporting, resulting in an updated paper. The intention is to find out and document, as schools reopen, evolving challenges faced by girls, what interventions were successful and why, using project data, assessment data and reporting.

Annexes

A: GEC Southern Africa project glossary

Project Lead Organisation	Project name (linked to GEC website project page)	Country	Funding window[22]
Campaign for Female Education International (CAMFED International)	The Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education	Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia	GEC-T
Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED International)	Girls Learn, Succeed and Lead	Tanzania	GEC-T
Plan International	Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE)	Zimbabwe	LNGB
Save the Children (StC)	STAR-G	Mozambique	GEC-T
World Vision	Improving Girls' Access through Transforming Education (IGATE)	Zimbabwe	GEC-T

B. Collation of findings

This paper brings together two types of data and information regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on girls' learning, safety, wellbeing and return to school:

1. Contextual findings for the Southern Africa region, including information and data at the national level or a particular area or city.
2. GEC project findings, entailing information and data about project beneficiaries.

Both these sets of findings have their limitations. Based on the GEC review of country-level research and data at the time, it became apparent that there is a shortage of rigorous research conducted on the impacts of COVID-19, particularly regarding adolescent girls. This can be attributed to several factors, including the recentness of the pandemic, the limited systematic focus of response efforts and research on adolescent girls and the lack of gender-disaggregated data.[23] Most global, country or regional-level reports based their predictions or estimates of effects mainly on data from previous crises such as the Ebola outbreak in 2016[24] or on emerging evidence from countries with reporting systems in place.[25] This UNESCO paper (2021) provides a snapshot of predicted patterns of dropout across Africa. No comprehensive or rigorous research has been conducted on the impacts of COVID-19 on adolescent girls in Global South countries. Information and data presented in this paper should, therefore, generally be viewed as indicative.

At the GEC project level, the rigour of findings varies from project to project. Reports of COVID-19 effects on girls span a wide range, including anecdotal findings from project Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and results from robust surveys or assessments. Given the different types of data reported and the differing sizes of projects, sample sizes for this GEC project information and data vary. This is understandable and not necessarily problematic, as this paper aims to provide an understanding of what we know

and do not know via the collation of information at project and country levels (with further validation from workshops).

The following sections present this collation of information on the impacts of COVID-19 via three thematic areas:

1. Impacts on learning (i.e., loss or gains and why these occurred)
2. Impacts on safety and wellbeing (particularly regarding pregnancy, early marriage, gender-based violence (GBV) and mental health)
3. Impacts on girls' return to school

For each theme, country and context, data are presented with GEC project-level data for comparative purposes.

It should be noted that the findings presented, particularly with regard to learning, highlight the impacts on girls' *opportunities* to learn as opposed to the actual *achievements* in this area. There are several reasons for this:

1. National exams for many countries have been delayed or cancelled due to school closures (exam data are also limited to students in exam grades, which applies to a relatively small proportion of GEC girls)
2. No comprehensive or rigorous assessment of learning achievements has been conducted in GEC countries (that has been published or is in the public domain), generally due to the difficulties of inter and intranational travel
3. GEC projects have conducted only a very limited number of learning assessments for similar reasons. However, the assessments that have been conducted are certainly noted in the findings.

With regard to girls' safety, it is only possible to understand levels of 'negative achievement' via reports of violence, marriages, pregnancies, FGM etc. Unfortunately, reporting systems on these incidents at district or national levels before COVID-19 were patchy at best in many countries. However, GEC projects actively pick up these incidents regarding their beneficiaries due to increased capacity development in safeguarding and the Fund Manager's SHE

system.[26] That said, wellbeing is a much more nuanced and complex area to report systematically. However, projects have reported on cases they have noted.

Finally, reporting on achievements in girls' return to school is the most straightforward area to track and measure and, as such, many projects and countries have been able to report on this.

As discussed, the limitations in both global and GEC data make it difficult to draw any hard and fast conclusions about the impacts of COVID-19 on girls. Hence, this paper aims to more broadly provide an understanding of what we know and do not know at this point. However, our growing understanding of COVID-19's impacts on girls' opportunities to learn, be safe and return to school will prepare us for when robust data on achievements (or lack thereof) is produced. More importantly, it has already allowed GEC projects to develop strategies to improve girls' *opportunities* in the face of school closures and lockdowns and will continue to do so.

Endnotes

1 UNICEF 2021

2 See de Paz et al. 2020 and UN Women 2020

3 Education tracker tools are summarised here: https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/8-tracking-tools-covid-19-data-education

4 The countries listed here are not meant to represent Southern Africa as a region, rather they are the projects included in the GEC in this geographical area.

5 There are 5 Emerging Findings briefs that cover South Asia, Southern Africa, Central Africa, West Africa and East Africa. Click here to access the GEC website resources page.

6 Literature was collected via a wide online search and included documents produced from March 2020- March 2021. All documents cited in this paper are listed in the bibliography where links are available.

7 Annex A provides a list of all Girls' Education Challenge Transition (GEC-T) and Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects in Southern Africa.

8 These workshops initiated the GEC's broader strategic refresh, which aims to set the direction of the GEC from 2021–2025. Please note that not all GEC projects were represented at each workshop; hence, additional validation was gleaned through circulation of this draft report.

9 It should be noted that the figure does not unpack additional constraints due to intersections with disability, ethnicity and other forms of marginalisation.

10 It should also be noted that under normal circumstances (prior to COVID), there are also numerous constraints at the school/classroom level.

11 Chingono 2021

12 Cummiskey et al, 2021

13 UNICEF Mozambique 2020

14 Zimbabwe (Discontinued as of 31 Dec 2020) | Situation Reports (unocha.org)

15 OCHA 2020b

16 OCHA 2020d

17 Amnesty International 2021

18 IRC 2020

19 Grant 2020

20 World Vision, 2020

21 OCHA 2020c

22 The GEC has two funding windows GEC-T and LNGB. Projects funded through the GEC-Transition window primarily reach girls in the formal education system and projects in the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) window focus on reaching out-of-school girls primarily through community-based education initiatives.

23 Rafaeli & Hutchinson 2020.

24 For example, the Malala Fund 2020a draws on data from the Ebola epidemic and estimates that approximately 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school after the crisis has passed, if dropouts increase by the same rate. Other estimates/predictions include: Save The Children International 2020a estimates that 9.7 million children may never return to school post-COVID-19 and that an additional 2.5 million girls are at risk of child marriage and adolescent pregnancies are expected to rise by up to 1 million in 2020. World Vision International 2020 estimates that as many as one million girls across sub-Saharan Africa may be blocked from returning to school due to pregnancy during COVID-19 school closures. UNESCO 2020 estimates that about 24 million students (from pre-primary to tertiary) will be at risk of not returning to education. UNFPRA 2020 estimates a one-third reduction in progress towards ending GBV by 2030, including FGM and child marriage.

25 For example, in some countries with robust reporting systems in place, reported cases of violence against women have doubled (UN 2020)

26 The GEC FM incident reporting system used primarily for safeguarding and fraud cases.

Girls' Education Challenge

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