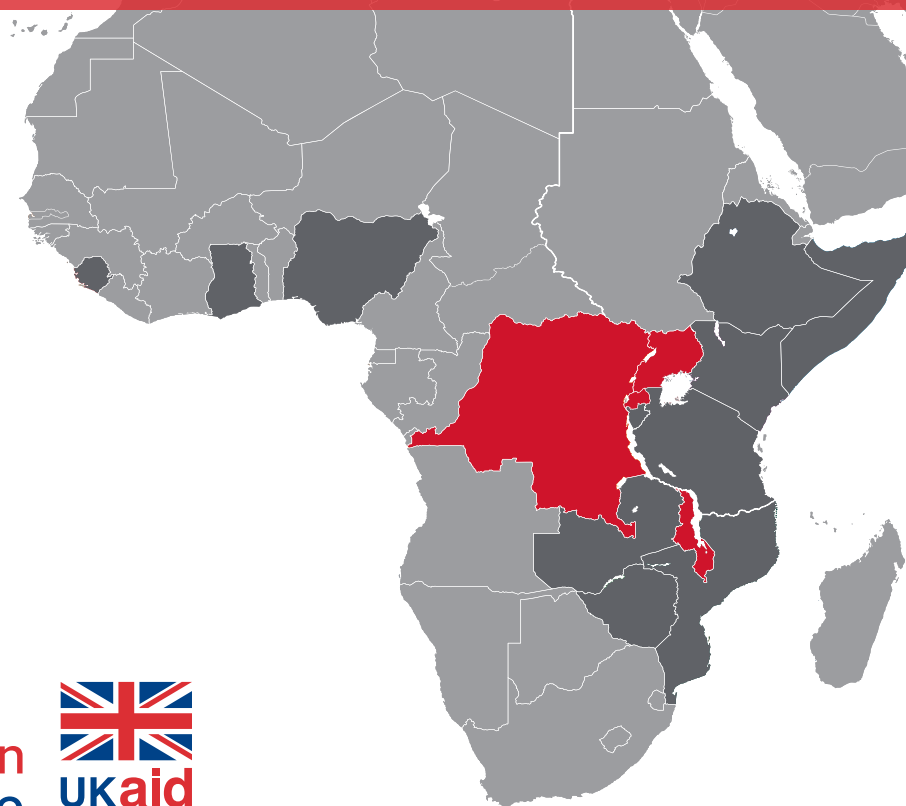


Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response

Focus on Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda)



Girls'
Education
Challenge



Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	5
Emerging findings	5
Impacts on girls' learning	7
Impacts on girls' safety and wellbeing	9
Impacts on girls' return to school	11
What next?	13
Annexes	14
A: GEC Central Africa Project Glossary	14
B: Collation of findings	15
Endnotes	16

This *Focus on Central 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 Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda. 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 Central 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

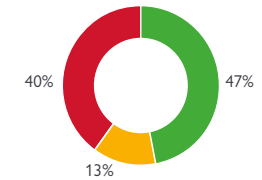
The evidence presented in this paper around learning, wellbeing and return to school from the GEC projects in Central Africa was collated from March 2020 to June 2021.

Schools closures | March 2020 to June 2021

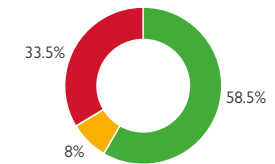
March 2020 | April 2020 | May 2020 | June 2020 | July 2020 | Aug 2020 | Sept 2020 | Oct 2020 | Nov 2020 | Dec 2020 | Jan 2021 | Feb 2021 | March 2021 | April 2021 | May 2021 | June 2021



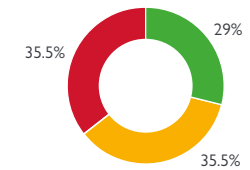
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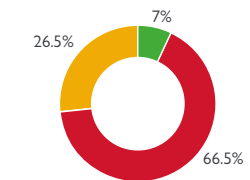
MALAWI



RWANDA



UGANDA



■ Closed
 ■ Partially open
 ■ Fully open
 ■ School break

Summary

IMPACTS ON GIRLS' LEARNING

- School closures and lockdown measures have resulted in substantial educational disruptions in Central Africa, which have negatively impacted girls' ability to learn.
- Many girls across the four countries were unable to access distance learning due to a lack of electricity, internet access and not owning (or having access to) a TV, radio or smartphone. In addition, increased housework and caring responsibilities also impeded girls' ability to learn.
- Learners from the poorest households, the remotest areas, learners with disabilities and learners affected by conflict were the least likely to be engaged in remote learning.
- **Solutions:** Project interventions included producing and distributing learning packs, mentoring parents to create a safe learning environment through phone calls and home visits, and running small group classes. Projects worked alongside the government to create content for TV and radio programmes and established small learning circles.

IMPACTS ON GIRLS' SAFETY AND WELLBEING

- There were increases in the cases of gender-based violence (GBV) reported across the four countries. In addition, in both Malawi and Uganda, the number of forced or early marriages increased and Uganda also saw an increase in the reported teenage pregnancy rates.
- Lockdowns also impacted girls' mental health negatively. For example, in DR Congo, 14 to 20% of girls surveyed were experiencing poor mood, lack of calm and energy more than half of the time. In addition, *TEAM* (Malawi) found that 21% of girls reported increased anxiety since schools closed.
- **Solutions:** Project interventions focused on awareness-raising through radio spots, psychosocial counselling and lessons and working directly with the community to strengthen safeguarding capacity. Projects in Uganda used the same telephone structures set up for learning to check on safety and wellbeing.

IMPACTS ON GIRLS' RETURN TO SCHOOL

- COVID-19 has impacted the rate at which learners returned to school, particularly for girls.
- Costs related to schooling was a common reason for non-return. For example, *TEAM* reported relocation was a factor in Malawi, either for standalone reasons or marriage. Early marriage and pregnancy during school closures also impacted dropouts across the region. For example, in Uganda, some parents were reluctant to invest in their girls' education due to the high risks of getting pregnant and dropping out of school.
- Teacher strikes in Malawi and DR Congo and overcrowded classrooms in DR Congo due to the free fees policy also served as a disincentive for parents to return girls to school.
- **Solutions:** Project interventions included: outreach and follow up with learners that had not returned; working with schools to ensure minimum COVID-19 transmissions; support to overcome economic barriers; and training teachers on how to address COVID-19 and safe return to school.

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 marginalised². 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, 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 Central Africa region, specifically [DR Congo](#), [Malawi](#), [Rwanda](#) and [Uganda](#),⁴ and is part of a series of regional papers⁵ that provide a comprehensive review⁶ 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.

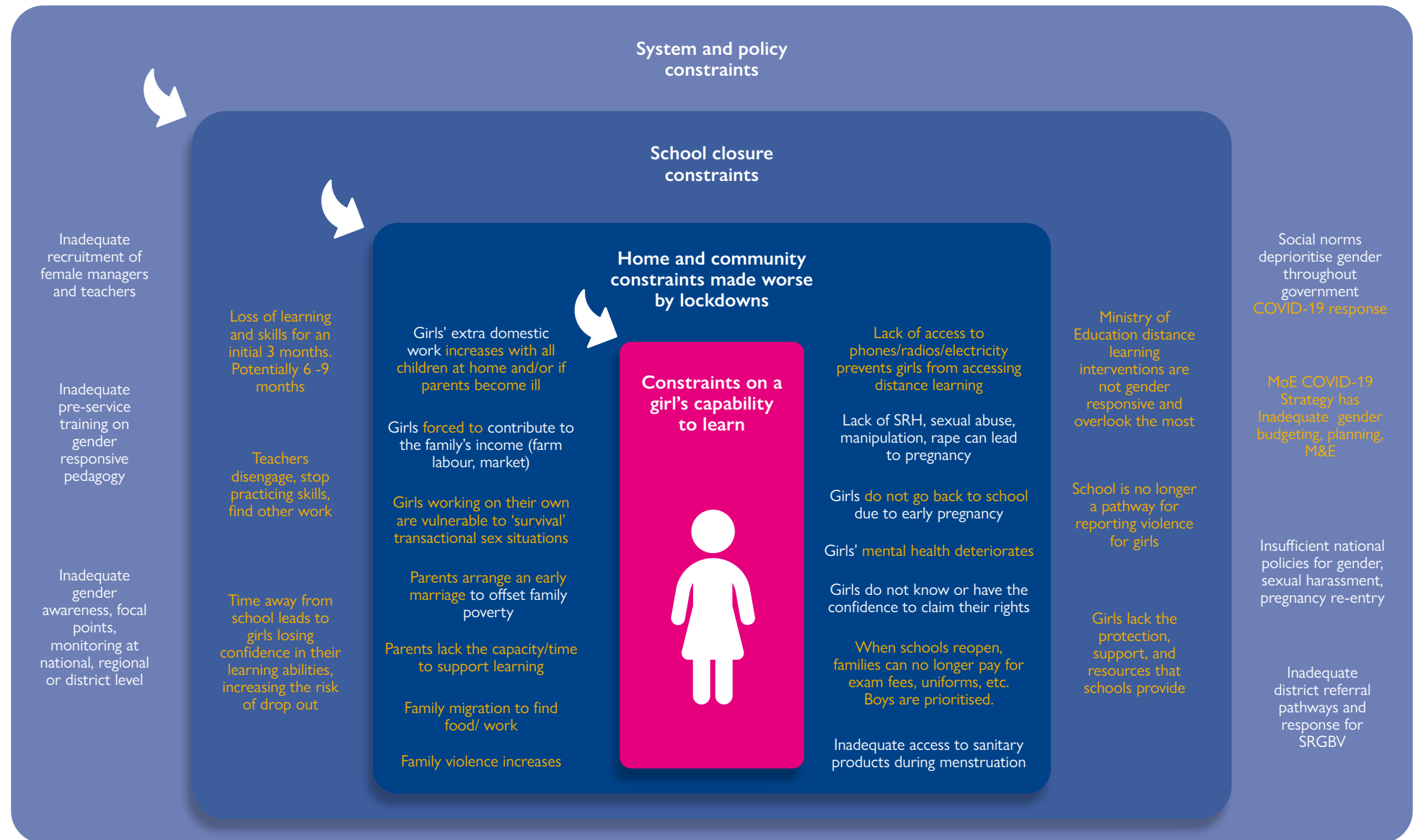
Emerging findings

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 those served by projects in Central 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 Central Africa region (DR Congo, Rwanda, Malawi and Uganda) and provide an overview of the GEC activities and interventions that address adverse impacts.

Figure 1: New and exacerbated constraints on girls' access to education¹⁰



Impacts on girls' learning

School closures and lockdown measures have resulted in substantial educational disruptions in Central Africa, negatively impacting girls' ability to learn. Whilst schools are open across the four countries, [UNESCO's global monitoring of school closures](#) shows that Malawi experienced 26 weeks of school closures, DR Congo 33 weeks, Rwanda 47 weeks and Uganda 64 weeks (as of July 2021). While the full extent of the impact of learning outcomes is yet unknown, there is some emerging evidence of girls' disengagement from learning projects.

Many girls across the four countries were unable to access distance learning. In DR Congo, many households do not have access to distance learning modalities as only 8% of households have internet access. While the government organised TV programmes, not all areas are covered by the electric grid.¹¹ In Rwanda, 74% of households own a radio, 10% own a TV, 3% own a computer and 27% have continuous electricity.¹² [TEAM](#) found a lack of access to mobile phones, radio or internet technology an issue for most learners. They also noted that while there may be a radio in a household, it does not mean that girls will necessarily be allowed to access it. In Uganda, parents often took their radios to the fields when they worked.

Those most disadvantaged before COVID-19 are even more marginalised due to school closures and non-access to learning opportunities. There is evidence across the four countries that those from the poorest households, the remotest areas and learners with disabilities are the least likely to be engaged in remote learning.¹³ In addition,

learners affected by conflict (e.g., children in the northeast of DR Congo and refugees in Uganda) are more likely to experience difficulties accessing remote learning.¹⁴

Projects in DR Congo and Uganda found that girls experienced increased household chores that prevented them from learning. For example, [GEARR](#) (Uganda) found that housework and caring for family members were cited as the most common reasons for limiting time for study at home (Housework: 89% girls, 75% boys; Caring duties: 30% girls, 10% boys).

Project interventions included the production and distribution of learning packs, mentoring parents to create a safe learning environment through phone calls and home visits, and running small group classes. [Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh](#) (Uganda) accompanied SMS and radio lesson delivery with a telephone tree structure to connect with and educate learners. They also worked alongside the government to create content for TV and radio programmes. [GEARR](#) (Uganda) prioritised keeping teachers engaged and financially supported throughout lockdown by carving out roles for them as part of the distance learning programmes (e.g., scripting radio lessons, presenting radio shows, having telephone conversations with students and connecting with caregivers).

Because of limited access to remote learning modalities, [TEAM](#) (Malawi) established small study circles (groups of 15) which met at locations within the community that were easily accessible. The focus was on core subjects. The project team has reflected that this method of teaching smaller groups – which are located closer to learners' home – has likely improved accessibility, group cohesion, and learner-teacher relationships, making it a more effective approach to learning for marginalised adolescents overall.



DR Congo

Literature review findings:

During COVID-19, 22 of 26 provinces in DR Congo were covered by some form of distance learning programmes (e.g. radio, television), but only 8% of households had internet access. In Ituri province, Education Cluster partners distributed exercise books to children in displacement camps (however, this was limited to the province's capital). In Kasai province, the education minister organised television courses, but as the electric grid did not cover some areas, not all students could follow courses. In addition, cluster partners distributed workbooks (11 provinces) and solar-powered radios (17 provinces) to children of vulnerable households. However, it is unclear what support children in other provinces received ([ACAPS 2020](#)).

Project findings:

REALISE's rapid assessment of girls' wellbeing (November to December 2020) found that almost two-thirds (66%) of girls said they found it difficult when exams were cancelled and over half said they did not adapt at all to school closures (57%). In addition, more than half of respondents perceived increases in overloading girls with housework (67%).

Core interventions:

REALISE worked with the Ministry of Education (MoE) and UNICEF to produce and distribute 1,988 learning packs to help students prepare for exams and distributed self-study guides to teachers and headteachers. Learning club sessions were reinstated alongside teacher professional development for facilitators. Teachers, facilitators and some parents helped students review their workbooks which used MoE material.

Malawi

Literature review findings:

There is anticipated learning loss due to technological and economic issues ([ECLT Foundation 2021](#)).

Project findings:

TEAM reported learning progress and risk of dropout as serious concerns.

Core interventions:

TEAM developed home learning materials and ran small group classes. The project redesigned the curriculum, reducing it from seven subjects to four to reinforce core subjects (e.g. numeracy, literacy and life skills). The MoE reflected this approach in their community-based education centres. After one year of disrupted learning, over a quarter of girls tested had gained functional literacy skills and around 15% had gained functional numeracy skills.

Rwanda

Literature review findings:

Remote learning was challenging due to access to the internet and electricity supply. For example, 74% of households own a radio, 10% own a TV, 3% own a computer and only 27% of households have a continuous supply of electricity, most of which (85%) are located in urban areas. Only 17% of households (usually in urban areas) have internet access ([Ngabonzima et al. 2020](#)). In addition, 43% of teachers reported supporting students with remote learning during school closures ([Laterite 2021](#)).

The last remaining GEC project closed in August 2020.

Uganda

Literature review findings:

By July, millions of children had not yet received learning packs, including 57% refugee children who were previously enrolled in primary school. In addition, 80% of families in rural northern Uganda did not have radios. When parents did have radios, they were often taken to the fields or work

([Save The Children International 2020b](#)). Furthermore, children with disabilities (over 2.5 million) were largely left out of the government's remote learning programmes ([Fund for Global Human Rights, 2020](#)).

Project findings:

GEARR reported that housework and caring for family members were cited as the most common reasons for limiting time for study at home (housework was done by 89% of girls and 75% of boys and caring duties fell to 30% of girls and 10% of boys).

Building Girls to Leave, Learn, Laugh saw that migration of families to more rural areas affected the project's ability to support and track girls increasing the likelihood of learning loss. Essays written by project girls to describe lockdown challenges included domestic work preventing lesson attendance. There are positive comments on the new learning methods and many mentions of difficulties (e.g., timing of broadcasts, cost of subscriptions, availability of electricity, and family arguments over what to listen to or watch). The essays also mention the lack of phones as a problem.

Core interventions:

GEARR used a four-stage telephone tree structure (connect, protect, inform and educate learners) alongside SMS (question, hint and answer), radio lesson delivery, and distribution of learning packs facilitated by teachers and project staff. The content taught included curriculum-aligned radio lessons and learning packs developed by the MoE.

Building Girls to Leave, Learn, Laugh used mentoring of parents through phone calls and home visits to support them to create a safe learning environment facilitated by mentors. The content included supporting learning at home, managing stress and keeping COVID-19 safe. In addition, provision of teaching and learning packs developed by the National Curriculum Development Centre (primary: science, social studies, English and maths and secondary: biology, physics, chemistry, English and maths).

Impacts on girls' safety and wellbeing

Reporting data in all four GEC countries in Central Africa showed an increase in the number of cases of gender-based violence.¹⁵ In both Malawi and Uganda, the number of forced or early marriages increased. Uganda also saw an increase in the reported teenage pregnancy rates. In DR Congo, violence in the North Kivu Province increased by 99%.¹⁶

The GEC projects echoed these contextual findings. In a rapid assessment of girls' wellbeing, *REALISE* (DR Congo) found that more than half of respondents perceived an increase in early pregnancy and exploitation of girls, and more than a third felt there had been an increase in early marriage sexual violence and physical violence. In the essays written by *Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh* (Uganda) girls, they describe lockdown challenges. There were frequent mentions of threats of abuse, violence (including sexual violence) and the risk of pregnancy. A rapid assessment by *TEAM* (Malawi) found that girls perceived increases in safeguarding issues due to COVID-19. 8% perceived increased risk of sexual violence, 7% perceived increased risk of domestic violence and 7% perceived increased risk of early marriage. *GEARR* (Uganda) also noted that girls were engaged in non-academic activities outside the home, especially for economic reasons. There was a concern that girls were exposed to all forms of abuse without the protective role of schools.

Lockdowns are also impacting girls' mental health negatively. *REALISE* (DR Congo) found that 14-20% of girls surveyed were experiencing poor mood, lack of calm or lack of

energy more than half of the time, and 37% were anxious about not being prepared for exams. *TEAM* (Malawi) found that 21% of girls reported increased anxiety since schools closed.

Project interventions focused on awareness-raising through radio spots, psychosocial counselling and lessons and working directly with the community to strengthen safeguarding capacity. For example, *TEAM* (Malawi) created and strengthened a network of trusted adults within communities for girls and boys to report safeguarding concerns. Additional routes for reporting concerns to the safeguarding team were developed, and follow-up and psychosocial counselling was provided. Projects in Uganda used the same telephone structures set up for learning to check on safety and wellbeing.

In response to reported high cases of child abuse in the western region, *GEARR* (Uganda) scaled up their radio talk shows which focused on positive discipline for the learners, messages on combating sexual abuse and early childhood marriages, and encouraged learners and care givers to re-enrol back into school as schools reopened.



DR Congo

Literature review findings:

Violence increased by 99% in North Kivu Province ([UN Women 2020](#)); Médecins du Monde reported double the number of cases of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) received in its health centres in Kinshasa between April and June ([Carter & Moncrieff 2020](#)).

Project findings:

REALISE's rapid assessment of girls' wellbeing (November to December 2020) found that more than half of respondents perceived increases in early pregnancy (59%) and economic exploitation of girls (53%). More than a third of girls felt there had been increases in early marriage (40%), sexual violence (46%), and physical violence (35%). A small but significant proportion of girls experienced poor mood, lack of calm and energy more than half of the time (14-20%).

Core interventions:

REALISE worked on awareness-raising through radio spots on child safeguarding, COVID-19, early marriage, protection against sexual exploitation and abuse and reporting mechanism via a hotline. Additional activities included parents' information sessions on sexual reproductive health (SRH) and gender. Continued strengthening of community structures, including safeguarding, referral and GBV training.

Malawi

Literature review findings:

Forced marriage increased by 83% from March to May in 2020 compared to 2019 and rape increased by 151% ([Grant 2020](#)). In addition, Malawi was experiencing widespread child marriage before the pandemic, with about half of girls wed before the age of 18 ([Bhalla 2020b](#)).

Project findings:

TEAM asked girls which risks they had experienced. The most frequently cited were COVID-19 (30%), sexual violence (14%) and lack of safe spaces (12%).

Core interventions:

TEAM developed a network of trusted adults in communities to report safeguarding concerns. Additional activities included psychosocial counselling activities over the phone, home visits where possible, radio broadcasts on safeguarding issues and combined communication of protection messaging with food distribution to minimise the number of direct physical contact 'moments'. In addition, facilitators continued to work directly with the girls and the community resulting in a solid capacity to identify safety and wellbeing issues.

Rwanda

Literature review findings:

There were reports of state-sanctioned violence against women by those enforcing social distancing and lockdown measures ([Human Rights Watch 2020](#)).

The last remaining GEC project closed in August 2020.

Uganda

Literature review findings:

Literature reported a 13-fold increase in calls to the Uganda Child Helpline between 10 and 26 April 2020. A child protection rapid survey found that 80% of parents were reported to have used violence ([Serwanja et al., 2021](#)). In the Nwoya district, police and Ministry of Health figures show that teenage pregnancy and child marriage cases doubled, and child labour rates tripled between April and June 2020 ([Save the Children International 2021](#)).

Project findings:

Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh collected 650 essays written by girls as part of a creative competition to describe lockdown challenges. These have frequent mentions of the threats of abuse and violence. The dangers include sex and sexual violence and the risk of pregnancy. In addition, getting involved with dangerous groups appears very frequently.

GEARR anecdotally reported that parents were more likely to keep girls home out of concern for their safety.

Core interventions:

GEARR used a four-stage telephone tree structure (connect, protect, inform and educate learners) to check for learning, safety and wellbeing. Additional activities included safeguarding messages to parents and girls through SMS (including topics on positive discipline and combatting sexual abuse and child marriage) and mobile speakers. Radio talk shows focused on general wellbeing, encouraging learners and caregivers to re-enrol back into school.

Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh used phone mentoring of parents and girls, including calls to look after mental health and resilience, safety and violence prevention at home. Additional activities included community activities to address discrimination and social stigma issues teenage and pregnant mothers, and work continued on the child reporting hotline. A scheme of work for psychosocial lessons to be used on school reopening was developed. The focus was on addressing issues around wellbeing and resilience.

Impacts on girls' return to school

Emerging evidence from across the four countries indicates that COVID-19 has impacted the rate at which learners returned to school. As in other world regions, school disengagement follows gender patterns that disadvantage girls.¹⁷ For example, in DR Congo, there has been a reduction in the number of children returning to school, with reductions in attendance more pronounced for girls than boys.¹⁸ Despite some schools reopening in Uganda, more than 13 million children remain out of school, including 600,000 refugee children.¹⁹

In DR Congo, most low-cost private schools increased fees to make up for lost revenue, which many households can no longer afford due to loss of income. Nationwide, teacher strikes and overcrowding in public schools has also disincentivised parents to send children back to public schools.²⁰ Teacher strikes are also a reason for non-return to school in Malawi, along with early marriage and pregnancy during school closures which have impacted dropout levels across the region.²¹ In Rwanda, headteachers and teachers believed worsening student performance, students dropping out, and teenage pregnancy would be the most common challenges when schools reopened, with girls and poor students among the groups of students that were most likely to drop out.²²

Projects reported similar reasons for girls being at risk of dropout, including not having sufficient funds to return to school. In Malawi, relocation was a factor for not returning – either as a standalone reason or due to marriage. *TEAM* Malawi was also concerned that the longer

Learning Centres stayed closed, the more at-risk girls were of permanent dropout, becoming pregnant or getting married due to pressures on family income created by the pandemic.

GEC girls in both Malawi and DR Congo expressed anxiety about missed learning and their ability to catch up. For example, in DR Congo, 37% of girls surveyed were worried about being prepared for exams. In Uganda, some girls were worried about contracting COVID-19 if they returned with parents saying they were likely to keep girls home out of concern for their safety. [In addition, empowering Girls with Disabilities in Uganda through Education](#) (Uganda) found that some parents were reluctant to invest in their girls' education due to the high risks of getting pregnant and dropping out of school.

Project interventions included outreach and follow up with learners that had not returned to school or had low attendance and helping to ensure that schools were safe and COVID-19 transmissions were limited – for example, by providing soap and handwashing stations.

In DR Congo, *REALISE* supported girls to overcome economic barriers through Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and *TEAM* linked low-income families with cash transfer programmes.

REALISE (DR Congo) piloted a remote teacher training support system while schools were closed to continue teachers' professional development, which pivoted to small groups as restrictions eased. Modules were adapted to the changing contexts of COVID-19 and larger class sizes (as a result of the abolition of school fees). Content on teacher well-being and stress, gender and inclusion, addressing fears of COVID-19 and supporting the safe return to school was integrated throughout the modules.



DR Congo

Literature review findings:

A November 2020 rapid assessment found that average attendance had dropped by a third since reopening in October. For example, in South Kivu, 35% of secondary school teachers reported the number of girls aged 12 to 17 attending school had decreased, compared to 13% who said that the number of boys aged 12 to 17 attending school had decreased. The main reason provided by teachers for adolescent girls leaving school was that they were married during the school closure period ([Carter & Moncrieff 2020](#)).

Project findings:

REALISE's rapid assessment of girls' wellbeing (November to December 2020) found several concerns relevant in the context of school reopening. More than half of girls were worried about food or other changes in household income due to COVID-19 (62%) and learning at home (52%). A third or more girls were worried about attending school (32%) or preparing for exams (37%).

Core interventions:

REALISE provided handwashing stations, storage containers and soap to all schools and accelerated education programmes. As well, VSLAs were used to address economic barriers to return to school. Additional activities included teacher professional development, completed in all provinces, including COVID-19 safe return to school and a gender and inclusion module. Results are not yet clear, but mid-point analysis found that nearly 100% of girls and 100% of teachers were planning to return when schools reopened. However, among those who did express concerns, the most frequently cited concern (by both girls and their caretakers) was having sufficient funds to pay for school.

Malawi

Literature review findings:

It is too early to have data on return to school rates, but it

is worth noting that teacher strikes and student protests will have affected the return to school situation ([BBC 2021](#)).

Project findings:

TEAM report that learning progress and risk of dropout is a serious concern.

Core interventions:

TEAM strengthened non-attendance follow up and community engagement activities. In addition, TEAM linked low-income families to government cash transfer programmes. Emerging results align with expectations – 208 dropouts after the first lockdown, representing 9% of cohort 1 enrolment. The primary reasons for dropout were relocation (as a standalone reason or due to marriage and work) or 'no longer interested'. Subgroup analysis did not see any significant trends with regards to disability, pregnancy, childcare or marriage. However, challenges continue around the second school closure period and getting learners back for the second time – particularly given the mainstream teacher strike.

Rwanda

Literature review findings:

Headteachers and teachers believed worsening student performance, students dropping out, and teenage pregnancy would be the most common challenges when schools reopened, with girls and poor students among the groups of students that were most likely to drop out ([Laterite 2021](#)).

Uganda

Literature review findings:

More than 13 million children remain out of school despite some schools reopening, including 600,000 refugee children. ([Save the Children 2021](#)). In addition, it is anticipated that thousands of girls will not return to school, having become pregnant or married during school closure ([Grant et al., 2021](#)).

Project findings:

Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh found that 4% of project girls interviewed do not feel safe to return to school because of fear of contracting COVID-19, while 21% are not sure.

Empowering Girls with Disabilities in Uganda through Education reports parents' fear of investing in girls due to the high risks of getting pregnant and dropping out of school.

Core interventions:

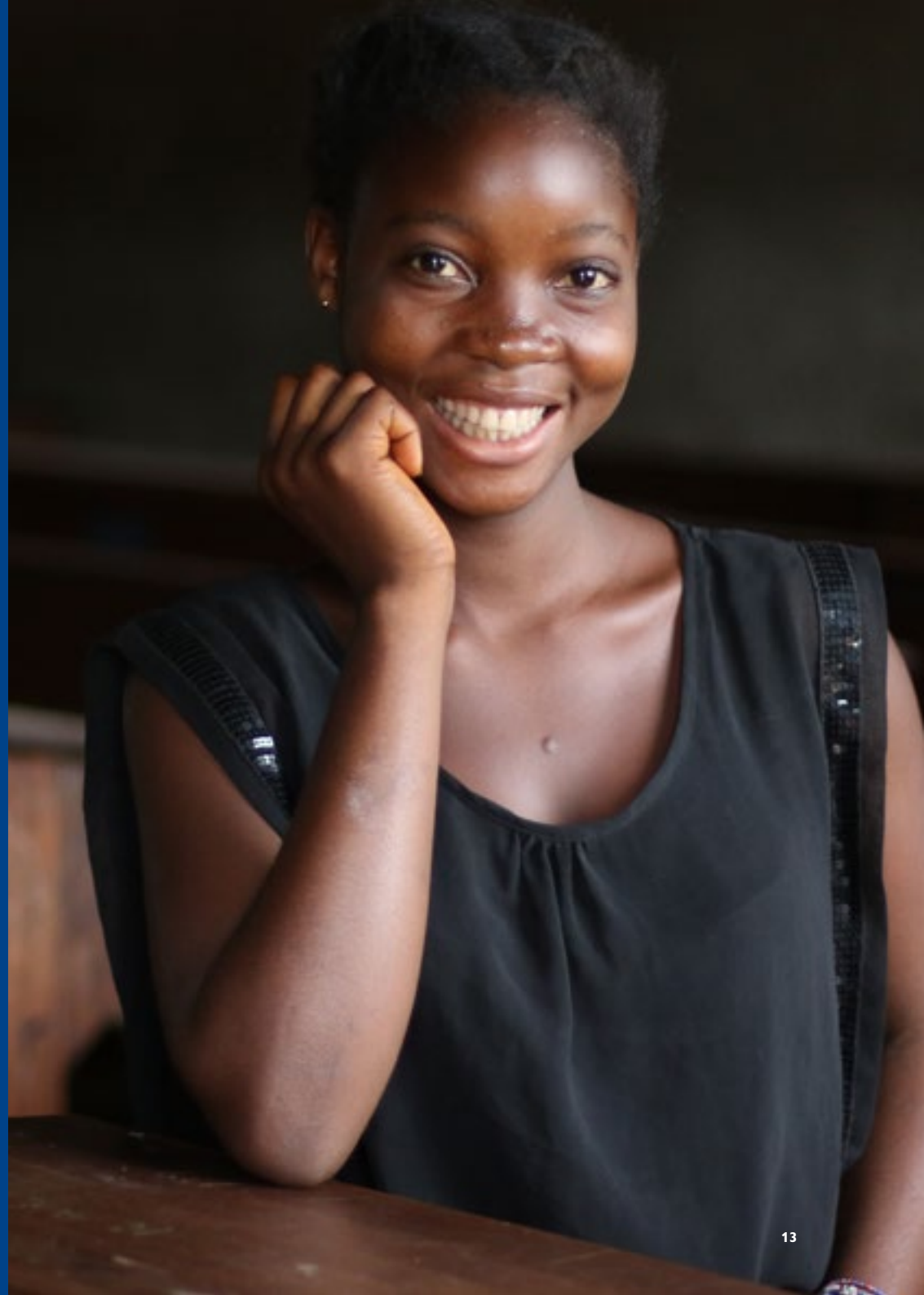
GEARR gathered student and caregiver contact details when setting up the telephone tree, which meant that teachers could follow up with girls who had not reported to the school. Extra activities included using the radio for re-enrolment drives. The priority throughout school closure has been to keep teachers engaged and financially supported. Teachers' roles in scripting radio lessons, presenting radio shows, having telephone conversations with students and connecting with caregivers has been a source of professional development. Initial findings show that 92% of girls in PEAS exam classes enrolled in March 2020 had returned to their school by December 2020. The number of girls enrolled in exam classes in December 2020 was 96% of the number in March 2020. The number of girls enrolled in April 2021 is 92% of the number enrolled in March 2020, and 48% of enrolled students in April 2021 are girls (this relates to the four upper classes of secondary, as schools have not yet opened for all classes). In addition, girls who had accessed at least one form of remote learning on average reported feeling over six times more supported than those who had accessed none (December 2020 PEAS telephone survey).

Building Girls to Live, Learn, Laugh paid some school fees, made home visits to urge children to go back to school, used radio and TV adverts to encourage children to return, called girls, and talked to parents directly. Results show a staggered return to school as per the government calendar, but those who had direct support and contact with teachers and mentors throughout lockdown appear to be returning in more significant numbers than those who did not have such support.

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 COVID-19 case rates are rising in some places, the need to continue collecting evidence and documenting the evolving challenges girls face and what interventions are needed 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 Central Africa project glossary

Project Lead Organisation	Project name (linked to GEC website project page)	Country	Funding window ²³
Cheshire Services Uganda (CSU)	Empowering Girls with Disabilities in Uganda through Education	Uganda	GEC-T
Health Poverty Action (HPA)	Rwandan Girls' Education and Advancement Programme 2 (REAP2)	Rwanda	GEC-T
Link Education	TEAM Girl Malawi (TEAM)	Malawi	LNGB
Opportunity International	Empowerment for Girls' Education (EGE)	Uganda	GEC-T
Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS)	Girls' Enrolment, Attendance, Retention and Results (GEARR)	Uganda	GEC-T
Save the Children (StC)	StC DR Congo: REALISE	DR Congo	GEC-T
CRANE-Viva	Building girls to Live, Learn, Laugh and SCHIP in Strong, Creative, Holistic, Inclusive, Protective, Quality Education	Uganda	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 Central 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.²⁴ 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 2016²⁵ or on emerging evidence from countries with reporting systems in place.²⁶ 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, 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.²⁷ 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 See [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 Central 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 South Asia.
- 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 [ACAPS 2020](#).
- 12 [Ngabonzima et al. 2020](#).
- 13 See [Fund for Global Human Rights, 2020](#), [Carter & Moncrieff 2020](#) and [UNWomen 2020](#).
- 14 See [Save the Children 2020](#) and [ACAPS 2020](#).
- 15 [Human Rights Watch 2020](#).
- 16 [UN Women 2020](#).
- 17 [UNESCO 2021](#).
- 18 [CASS 2021](#).
- 19 [Save the Children 2021](#).
- 20 [CASS 2021](#).
- 21 See [Grant et al. 2021](#), and [CASS 2021](#).
- 22 [Laterite 2021](#).
- 23 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.
- 24 [Rafaeli & Hutchinson 2020](#).
- 25 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.
- 26 For example, in some countries with robust reporting systems in place, reported cases of violence against women have doubled ([UN 2020](#)).
- 27 The GEC FM incident reporting system used primarily for safeguarding and fraud cases.



Find out more: learningteam@girlseducationchallenge.org | www.girlseducationchallenge.org

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