

## COVID-19 Presses Pause on Schools, Girls Get Affected the Most

by Ece Hasgül

COVID-19 forces children out of school in 185 countries for who knows how long, but girls from marginalized communities may not even be able to go back. For girls who live in less developed countries, going to school is not a new struggle. Already having lower rates of enrolment to secondary education compared to boys, it can be estimated that rates will drop down further, as families get affected economically as an outcome of coronavirus.

This is not the first time girls face the risk of dropping out of school completely, as “at the height of the Ebola epidemic, more than 10,000 schools, affecting nearly 5 million children, were closed in the African countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.”<sup>1</sup> And by the time that schools were re-opened following a health crisis, many young girls became the breadwinners at their houses. Enrollment rates after post-Ebola never met those of pre-Ebola, even in the case of girls re-enrolling in schools, their attendance could not be compared to before. Girls who barely finish their primary education dropped out at the time of closure to financially support their family and keep themselves alive.

As governments and experts advise social distancing and staying at homes to prevent the spread of coronavirus and ensure the safety of the public, home is not a safe place for everyone. The closure of schools means a spike in numbers of children brides and adolescent pregnancies. As women play a bigger role in the care of children and the household in those countries, girls will be forced to these “duties” as they are no longer at school throughout the day. Girls will be wedded off as they are seen as a financial burden or will become a part of child labor in agriculture.

A study<sup>2</sup> found, teenage pregnancy increased by up to 65% in some target communities due to the socio-economic conditions imposed by the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone. Being out of schools also meant being at higher risk for sexual and gender-based violence both for minors and adults. Schools provided an escape for girls who are already in danger of abuse and violence, as they become more vulnerable to it when they are closed off at homes. During the year 2014, recorded cases of sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence were higher than in years before in Sierra Leone.

Those experiences and the example of a similar case like Ebola, tell us that we need to do simply more than just re-opening schools online or in-person. Education is a lifeline that offers protection from violence and harassment for women and decision-makers should consider the facts while creating a new education plan as a response for Covid-19. As many of the children, regardless of their gender, do not have access to the requirements and needs of online education in marginalized countries, they must be provided with digital skills as well as equipment. Pregnant girls must be ensured to return to the schools when gates

open, as it was one of the primary causes of drop-out rates post-Ebola, giving them a chance to complete their education.

<sup>1</sup>Girls' Education and COVID-19, Malala Fun

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/library/crisis\\_prevention\\_and\\_recovery/assessing-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-during-the-ebola-cris.html](https://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/assessing-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-during-the-ebola-cris.html)

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/05/15/5-actions-to-help-bring-the-most-marginalized-girls-back-to-school-after-covid-19/>

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