

Rapid Assessment On Status of Girls Who Dropped Out of School During Covid-19

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1. OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Zimbabwe, like any other country in the world was not spared by Covid-19 and its devastating effects. As of 06 June 2022, Zimbabwe had 253 508 confirmed cases, including 245 373 recoveries and 5 513 casualties because of the pandemic, according to the Zimbabwe Ministry of Health and Child Care. Covid-19 came with stringent lockdowns that limited the right to movement, right to participate in public and limited people's access to services such as health services. Covid-19 has affected every person in the country, but the effects have been huge on women, especially women living in rural communities and women with disabilities.

Access to quality education was denied to girls living in rural areas due to lack of technological gadgets, lack of access to adequate stationery and lack of technical expertise to navigate through online learning platforms. The most affected learners were students that reside in rural areas as they were not attending any lessons as compared to their fellow counterparts who were in urban areas who could attend classes online. There was and still is no proper infrastructure and basic resources that could enable students living in rural areas to participate in online learning. The situation was even worse for some educators with workplaces in rural communities that had no electrical power. In addition, some of the educators whose duty station was in rural areas reported that they had received few computers from the government for computer studies and improving computer literacy.

However, they did not receive the education on how to make use of the digital gadgets as they were still to receive a teacher knowledgeable in the area of ICT¹ and they did not have adequate infrastructure to house such equipment. According to Ndoro (2020)² figures indicate that 290 children left school because of various illnesses while 5331 dropped out due to marriage. Pregnancy led to the dropout of 4 676 children, bringing the total of dropouts countrywide to 10 297 for that year during Covid-19 in Zimbabwe. In Murewa and Shamva District alone there has been a recorded increase in child marriages at district level with Shamva having 50% and Murewa 45% rate of child marriages.³ Girls have become victims of exploitation during the lockdowns with many girls and women having been sexually abused, physically abused, verbally abused and this has amounted to emotional abuse amongst these girls and women. Covid-19 has escalated the prevalence of Domestic Violence cases and most of these cases.

Have gone unreported due to limitations in movements during the lockdowns. Centers for accessing justice like courts, police and customary law courts were either closed or had limited access due to the lockdowns measures that were stipulated by the government to

¹ Zinyemba, L., Nhongo, K. and Zinyemba, A. (2021). COVID-19 induced online learning: the Zimbabwean experience. *African Journal of Social Work*, 11(4), 223-230

² Ndoro, 2020

³ According to the report by DAAC Shamva for 2021

curb the escalation of the pandemic. Rozaria Memorial Trust has been working in Murewa since 2008 and Shamva District since 2017. Cases of child marriage have been high in the districts and the highest numbers being in Shamva which are attributed to the economic activities which are dominant in the district such as gold mining and tobacco farming. This has been the case prior to the emergence of Covid-19 but the situation has worsened since the Covid-19 era because children were denied access to education due to

school closure and other extra curricula activities such as community clubs and sport playing. The lockdown measures exacerbated the levels of household poverty, and this led to many girls seeking economic benefits from the mining areas and farms. This exposed them to early transactional sex and early pregnancy resulting in early unplanned marriages. School closures during times of crisis can result in girls spending more time with men and boys than they would if they were to be in school, leading to greater likelihood of engagement in risky sexual behavior and increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation.⁴

The coming of Covid-19 worsened the situation since all interventions to empower girls and keep them in school that were established by CSOs and the local government stakeholders were affected by the effects of Covid-19, to name a few:

- Rozaria Memorial Trust spearheads in-school and community Nhangas (clubs) which impart SRHR knowledge on girls. This single gender space educates girls on the importance of education and marrying at after an education career.
- The District AIDS Council also spearheads the SASA project whose focus is to protect children from SGBV.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education spear heads tracing programmes for children who drop out of school, but this is not enough.

All these programmes were negatively affected by the effects of Covid-19 because the lockdown guidelines prohibited gatherings, minimized the ability to travel. This also affected the ability to conduct exchange and learning programmes amongst stakeholders. Pursuant to this, Rozaria Memorial Trust decided to conduct a rapid assessment on the status of girls who have dropped out of school in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic and establish existing interventions and gaps to inform regional policy advocacy work. This study focuses on young girls of school going age in Zimbabwe, their parents or guardians, Child Care Workers and seeks to find out their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic to understand the challenges and to gather their reflections on young girls' access to education. Data will be gathered through Focus Group Discussions which will be conducted following the Rozaria Memorial Trust Nhangas model to break power dynamics and to enhance participation.

The FGDs will focus on parents/ guardians with girl children of school going age who

⁴ https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/2020-08-21-%20Aftershocks%20Education%20final2_3.pdf

dropped out of school. The research used storytelling, journey mapping and participatory techniques through Focus Group Discussion and use of Key Informants to unpack girls historical and current experiences to understand the journey they have taken in their lives. This study is a piece of research to ‘inform’ regional advocacy work for girls and aims to contribute new knowledge and inform understanding of girls and access to justice as told from their perspective. This will therefore be of interest to stakeholders working with girls in Zimbabwe and globally.

1.1 Justification of the Research

The research can be used by all stakeholders working on girls at district, national, regional, and global levels. The findings from this research will inform advocacy at all levels. The assessment’s importance is based on the position that girls will tell their stories, share their experiences from the perspective of their own understanding. The recommendations from this research will inform policy advocacy and assist the local government together with other local and regional actors to make innovative interventions to facilitate girls’ reentry into schools. Furthermore, Covid-19 has been an emerging phenomenon in these last two years and its effects have affected young women and girls in a way that no other pandemic has done in a long time. It has affected the whole planet and the data from this research will be important in assisting other jurisdiction with comparative analysis on the effects of Covid-19 on girls living in rural areas.

1.2 OVERALL RESEARCH AIMS

1. To explore and map the possible interventions and gaps to access to education for girls who dropped out of school and understand the milestones, challenges and building blocks.
2. To collect detailed life stories/biographies of girls in Zimbabwe (roughly 10-18 years old who dropped out of school to have a good understanding of the underlying reasons for dropping out of school.

Pursuant to these overall research aims the outcome of the research will create possible recommendations from the girls themselves to inform policy frameworks in advocacy work on national, regional, and global spaces. This will provide starting points on understanding real issues that affects girls’ situations in relation to Covid-19.

1.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research was an in-depth study utilizing qualitative and participatory methods to understand the complexities of girls’ lives. It was an interactive and open process – where researcher and participants could return to earlier discussions and where data was collected through a natural process. Key Informant Interviews were used to enable participants to guide the research process. Interviews (focused on storytelling and journey mapping) were conducted with 6 participants (3 in Murewa and 3 in Shamva) as key informants to record direct personal experiences of girls and other stakeholders. 4 Focus

group discussions of about 10 participants each were held with parents, guardians, and community care workers (CCWs).

CCWs each reach out to 50 households and engaging 10 CCWs for a focus group discussion gives us reach to information from approximately 500 households and they have the know-how on why certain girls within their respective areas of operations dropped out of school. Parents were engaged in Focus Group Discussions as they have knowledge on why their children or those of their neighbors dropped out of school and recommendations.

The Ministry of Education were interviewed as key informants to inquire statistics on the rates of girls' dropouts in schools and major reasons as to why girls were leaving school before completion. A community elders were key Informants, and these were the Mentors of community girls' clubs (Tete vemu Nhangas). Nhangas are safe spaces for young girls, and some may have confided in the elders on reasons why they dropped out.

1.4 RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data – building up ideas from across the data. The research questions and lines of enquiry in this document will inform this, and there will be space for new ideas to emerge from the data itself. The approach will be open and iterative going between the data and the findings looking for commonalities and contradictions in the data. The findings will not be representative of the girl's population in Zimbabwe but provide a rich picture of the complexity of young girls and their lives.

1.5 Use of the data/research

The data provided by the participants will only be used for the purposes of this research. This will include several written research reports and pieces (such as PowerPoint presentations). They will be distributed by RMT to their audience where there is interest – both in hard copy form and through email and online. If and when any of the data will be used as part of another research project (such as a comparison to girls in another country) or non-research purposes such as some photographs or profiles of the participants for fundraising materials additional consent will be sought from the participant. In addition to this, participants were asked if they would like to take part in some post research activities to support the distribution of the research findings such as a series of blog posts from the participants but again interest in this and consent for it will be sought separately.

2. ETHICAL APPROACH/CONSENT/CONFIDENTIALITY

2.1 Confidentiality

In this research data includes photos, audio and the participants' thoughts, ideas, and discussions. Specific data will not be able to be associated with a particular participant. In line with this pseudo names/no name will be used when discussing the data. In addition to this, participants had the option of whether they want their photograph used or their

name associated with the research. Data was recorded in notebooks and audio files which will be password protected by RMT and on the completion of the research who will hold the data in accordance with our data protection policy.

2.2 Consent

At the start of the research process consent and confidentiality was discussed with the participants including how the data would be used and where it will be distributed and who would be the likely audience (see next paragraph). Participants were offered the choice of (1) whether they wished for their names to be associated with the overall research or not (2) whether they were comfortable with photos of themselves being used or not and (3) whether they were happy for their voice to be heard on the audio or not. These different levels of consent were discussed with each participant at the start of the research process, and they were asked to sign a consent form indicating their choices. As some of the participants were below 18 years old consent was sought from their parents who signed the consent forms.

2.3 Fulfilling a duty of care to the participants.

The research questions and lines of enquiry in this research sometimes touched on sensitive issues for the participants. It was therefore important to be aware of participants changing emotions during the interviews and for the researcher to react to this and provide support to the participants. Alongside this a referral system was established (by Rozaria Memorial Trust) in case any participants require support post the interview. As part of this approach the researcher was to remain sensitive to the participants and their emotions during the discussions and where a discussion becomes emotional for the participant the researcher would decide whether to end that part of the conversation or not. The researcher would also check in with the participant at the start and end of the interview to see how they are feeling and ensure that the interview is closed on a positive note.

3. PRIMARY DATA

3.1 Outlined Causes of School Dropouts.

Mining areas and farming areas

Mining areas have attracted a lot of girls in the Shamva district. Prior to Covid-19 the extent to which girls who frequented these areas was lower than what it became after the beginning of Covid-19. Girls became family support units since lockdowns brought poverty to the families due to the position that most informal businesses were closed and where they were opened the number of customers was reduced. In that time every member of the family was forced to contribute towards the family basket. Girls ventured into vending supporting their parents in places like the roadsides, shopping centers and mining areas. In doing so, they were preyed upon by eagle eyed makorokozas (gold panners) who were in possession of money. In the end the girls were influenced to engage in transactional sex.

In doing so they earned more money and brought it home. In certain instances, the family

ended up supporting these practices as highlighted by a Child Care Worker. *“Pamba ipapo vanotomirira mwana kuti auye nechimari kubva kumakorokoza. Vachinyatsoziva kuti mwana arikutengesa muviri wake. Mhuri yese yavekutochengetwa nemwana iyeye. Amai vake ibofu babavake vakatetereka nenyika. Ndiye baba ndiye mai. Ndakatomuti dzokera kuchikoro tokuisa mubeam iye akandipindura kuti imi munechikoro muneyi basa racho hamushande asikuswera muchitsiura vana vevamwe* (At the homestead they wait for the child to bring money from the mining claims. Her mother is blind her father just left and never came back so she is the bread winner at that homestead. I told the girl to go back to school so that we could facilitate for her to get fees assistance from BEAM which was already supporting her before she dropped out and her response was, despite me being a qualified teacher I was unemployed. She claimed she was better than me with my education”)

These men lured these girls with money and these desperate vulnerable girls who will be hungry are left with no choice than to sell their bodies for as less as one united states dollar. The money she gets is so little that it will even be insufficient to provide for their health needs should they suffer from STI's. Unprotected sex is what pays more. The makorokozas (illegal miners) request unprotected sex from these young girls and they will be willing to pay them as much as 5 united states dollars. This often end up in them acquiring Sexual Transmitted Infections. According to the District AIDS Coordinator in Murewa, Mr. Zanzhamwe, *“the socio-economic background of these areas is that it relies on small scale mining. Most of the HIV hotspots are in the Southern parts of the district. The high prevalence of sexual violence, which mainly perpetrates on a girl child is contributing on the increase in the number of STI's cases. We have a problem of HIV, but the major is STI's.”*



Girls are defenseless against these small-scale miners demands for sex and at times they are raped, and the cases go unreported because of fear of being punished by these makorokozas gangs. Some got married, some got pregnant and feared returning to school. At the advent of Covid-19, girls stayed home to work in fields. It was in these moments that some parents started to view education negatively. They viewed the work that was being done by girls in

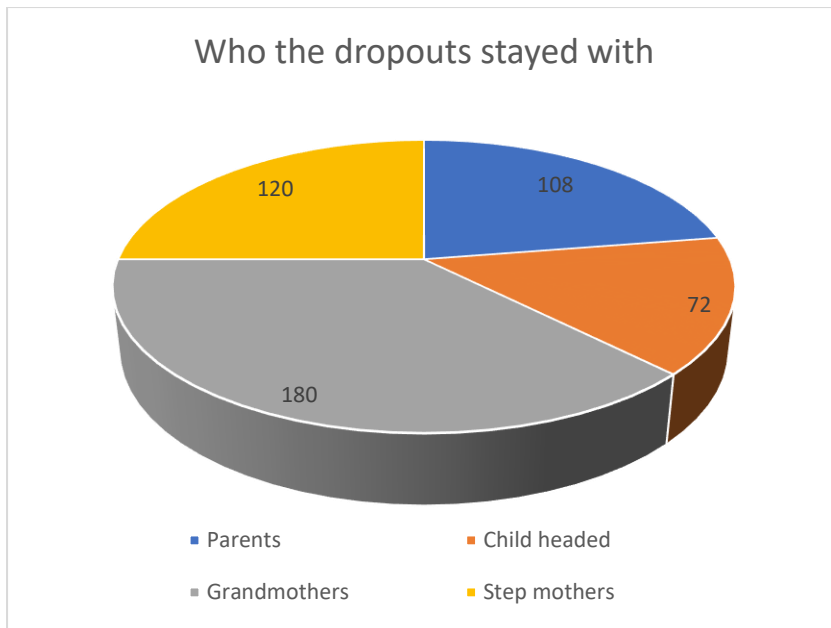
the fields positively as compared to going to school. Girls were cooking for the families in the fields and at times they also came to assist in the fields. According to an eye witness to this experience, she said that, “*musikana aibikira vanhu vari kumunda tikabvunza amaikuti seyi mwana musisamudzosere kuchikoro zvazvavhurwa kudai* (the girl was cooking for the workers in the fields and we asked why the parent was not sending the girl to school after the schools opened.) and the reason provided by the parents was that it was better for the young girl to contribute towards the filling of the family basket since there was nothing that she could benefit from school.

The parents had told the participant that the girl was dump and sending her to school was wasting their resources. The community was also worried about the limitations in the school curriculum to provide for other field of learning like sports and art. They laid a blame on the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education for failing to institute variety of learning fields that catered for all children including those that were not good in the classrooms. The participants highlighted that the long closure of schools affected slow learners and in some instances the learners forgot about what they had learnt after 9 months of school closure.

Who the school dropouts stayed with

The Child Care Workers also noted that most girls who dropped out of school were being influenced by the who they stayed with. They supported the fact that family dynamics had great influence on the likelihood of one dropping out. According to the CCWs it was highlighted that of the children they knew who had dropped out of school 50% of them were staying with their grandmothers. In an inquiry to identify the reason behind this we posed the question to the parents and guardian focus group, and they justified this position saying that grandmothers were failing to afford fees and money to feed these girls and girls had to make choices that provided them with meals at home.

Moreover, it was held that grandmothers were less strict than parents. Grandmothers were found to have a habit of allowing children’s boy friends at home and they encouraged marriage since most of them failed to comprehend the importance of education. Girls living with stepmothers were also the most affected as their living conditions were a push factor for them to leave the household. Some reported cases of physical abuse of girls and these contributed greatly to girls leaving the household during covid 19 lockdowns since these girls were being forced to spend most of their time at home with their stepmothers. The girls in child headed families were the most vulnerable, but their rate was low because they were a few groups in the community.



3.2 Impact of Covid-19 on school dropouts/ Education Covid-19 Effects to Children

Covid-19 disrupted the way of life of children as children were under Covid-19 lockdown restrictions which restricted their going to school. This meant that children were now spending their time at home instead of the usual time they used to be in school where it is a guarded and guided environment with universal rules and code of conduct. Even though deviants are also found in school, the school setup deprives children to have too much time of their own to experiment on bad behaviors according to the parents focus group and the Ministry of education key informants. Children are interactive beings, and they make each environment they are in as interactive as possible, their senses are conditioned by their environment and if the environment is not controlled it will trigger unwanted behavior.

The lockdown meant that girls had to explore in a different environment which is not school. Girls indulged in the pleasures of the world and others were making an income through employment as sex workers, domestic workers, vending, casual labor which some did for sustaining their families. The village head key informant highlighted that he acknowledged that girls are having sex and most of the times were using condoms, but the lockdown denied these children of access to these contraceptives. Girls' concentration diverted from school which resulted in some dropping out of school when schools finally opened, most girls pass rate decreased as this also cause some girls to dropout after failing their exams straight from lockdown which contributed to discouragement to stay in school.

Covid-19 restrictions which included lockdowns and school closure meant that children and parents spent more time together. Time spent at home meant that the children were focusing on household responsibilities and duties with little concentration on reading their books. Some parents were unable to afford their children education as they had lost their hustle and jobs. Children were not going to school for a long period of time, and this affected their education. They became a nuisance being at home all the time. Once children were taught

about Covid and the preventive measures they have become more alert than the adults. They remind others to wear masks, cover mouth when coughing, they wash their hands thoroughly. Children are more responsible on the preventive methods that include going back home to get a mask when they forget.

From one of the key informant's (who was a school dropout) perspective covid affected girls to drop out of school more than boys. She viewed that girls are more protected when they are at school than when they are staying home as when they are home, they are vulnerable to doing errands and engaging with perpetrators. The community elder key informant reviewed that the transition of children going back to school after being out of school for a long time really affected girls' attention from school negatively. They had got so used to staying at home and roaming around in the community that their concentration with school had negatively shifted and some preferred dropping out of school to continue with their community lifestyle.

3.3 Interventions to keep girls in school and Gaps.

RMT supports with school assistance for orphans and vulnerable children which include school fees payment, school uniforms and books. The program has a gap as it only supports a small number of children in the community due to their limited funding. Civil Society Organization's women's empowerment programs like the Nhang, RMT PRIBIS program and Sister to Sister are some of the interventions that are helping to curb school dropouts' problem. The key informant school dropout has seen positive impact of the Nhang and encourages girls to behave ubuntu; and parents to utilize the space to prevent school dropouts. The Ministry of Primary and Higher Tertiary Education has interventions in place to curb the problem of school dropouts which include roping in everyone to act and be a part in keeping the girls in schools, increase the number of beneficiaries to BEAM school fees assistance program. The ministry has also increased awareness raising for a girl child to pursue her education.

3.4 Parents responsibility to prevent children from dropping out.

- There was consensus from the key informant to the focus groups conducted that parent should get empowered through some interventions available like Nhang, sister to sister etc.
- Parents should motivate and encourage their children to stay in school and get educated beyond O' levels. Parents should give attention to their children school needs.
- Parents should motivate each other to work for their children education and prioritize education.
- If a child is not willing to go back to school the key informant recommends that there should be some courses offered in Beauty, Agriculture projects etc.

3.5. Case Study

3.5.1 Key Informant- school dropout personal stories

Anonymous K.I.D.18 years

She had the opportunity to be sent to the city from the village where she resides with her family for assistance on school during the Covid-19 lockdown. She was accompanied by a family trusted male who changed the route of where she was supposed to be dropped and went with her to his house where he forced himself on her and raped her. She reported to the police where the perpetrator absconded in the third hearing and is currently at large. She became pregnant and now has a child who is 1 year old. She wishes to go back to school and have a career, but she does not have funding as her parents' income are now transferred to taking care of the baby.

3.5.2 Anonymous K.I.D. Girl with disability

In this research, we had an opportunity to interview a girl with a disability. She highlighted that before speaking of Covid-19 as a hindrance to her education, the schools were not friendly to her education prior to Covid-19. The advent of Covid-19 brought more complications to her. She highlighted that she had to drop out of school due to the limitations of movement since she was attending a day school. The cost of living and the ability of her to access her medication was highly affected negatively. She highlighted how at one point she defaulted her HIV medication because she could not access the clinic due to the high cost of transport fares especially considering her disability. The economic problems that came as a result of Covid-19 greatly affected her.

Her parents who rely on vending as an economic base could not sell her wares anymore. At one point, she explained, that her mother's wares were confiscated when she tried to sell breaching the lockdown regulations. She reported that she stopped going to school on the 24th of March 2020 when the government announced the lockdown. She highlighted that Covid-19 had greatly affected her education and she had lost time and all her efforts were greatly affected by Covid-19. Although she is now back in school doing a bridging program at Madziwa Teachers College she blames Covid-19 for her education delays.

4. DISCUSSIONS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 In-depth discussions and analysis of primary data

BEAM which is a government program for school assistance to vulnerable children supports some children with school fees. The program has a gap as the school fees is paid late whilst schools turn away the beneficiaries from attending classes – legally schools are not allowed to send students away for school fees. It does not always give school uniforms and that it concentrates on a criterion of children forgetting that children who have special attention for example experienced violence also need assistance. Key informant school dropout recommends that Beam should consider the girls that are willing to re-enter back to school.

4.2 Comparison and Analysis of Primary Data to Secondary Data

The research we sought to identify on whether there were any interventions that were being done by any other stakeholders within the district and we enquired on whether these interventions were enough. The Secondary data showed that there were some government and civil society organizations interventions like Beam whilst the Primary Data brought

consensus from the interviewees was that the intervention being offered were not enough as there has been a very high number of dropouts during Covid-19.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

5.1a Recommendations to civil society organizations

- Increase awareness to rights holders on the importance of school through conducting consistent Nhangas.
- Spearhead programmes targeting grandmothers living with girls of school going age.
- Continued capacity building training on duty bearers and rights holders
- Strengthen knowledge and utilization of Sexual Reproductive Health Rights
- Urgently ensure continued learning for marginalized learners while schools are closed.
- Communicate clear plans to renew the hope of girls and communities in education,
- Provide re-entry support to girls who dropped out including pregnant girls and young mothers to return to school.
- Provide non-formal pathways for girls who do drop-out to achieve skills and qualifications.

5.1b Recommendations to Government

- Government schools to prioritize doing follow-ups when children seem not to be attending classes.
- Governments to prioritize free education for girls especially in rural areas as well build more schools to reduce the distance from home to school and back.
- Investment in infrastructure that allows for internet access and connectivity in rural areas is a necessity to ensure access to education by girls in rural areas.

Conclusion

The rapid assessment brought in a lot of insights that are overlooked when it comes to access to education by girls living in rural, marginalized areas. The Covid-19 pandemic amplified the gaps in access to education and access to technology between students in rural areas and those in urban areas, as those who did not have technological access could not access education. This increased the likelihood of girls dropping out of schools. Moreover, due to being idle and not having safe protection systems for girls who were in the lockdown, an increase in teenage pregnancy was seen and in turn increased the level of school dropouts within rural and urban communities. Since the research was more of a rapid assessment, the participant pool was small and thereby having a greater chance of not covering all critical aspects which influenced the dropout of girls during the Covid-19 pandemic.