PROGRAMME PÉDAGOGIQUE AU FÉMININ

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

The Impact of COVID-19 on girls' education in schools across Africa: Educators' perspectives

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Abstract

The emergence of COVID-19 during 2020 disrupted society, with educators across Africa seeking to explore the barriers to students' full return to school at the end of 2021. Students also face challenges within their communities, with girls in particular at risk of dropping out of education. The Africa Code Week (ACW) Women's Empowerment Program (WEP) provides professional development to female educators seeking to deepen leadership expertise and address barriers impacting women and girls accessing health, technology, and education services in their communities. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic called for a redesign of the ACW WEP program, with offerings moving online, and participants using Zoom and WhatsApp to attend co-moderated sessions to continue their professional development. The closure of workplaces forced changes in practice, with educators and students making the transition from in-person to online learning, raising uncertainty in return rates, and generating the need for research to explore barriers impacting girls returning to full-time education. This paper reports on results from the administration of an online mixed-methods questionnaire to a self-selecting sample of n = 55 ACW WEP program Alumnae from n = 8 countries in Africa to understand what barriers impact girls returning to education after COVID-19. The findings provide new insights into the barriers impacting girls during school closure, with solutions for encouraging and supporting girls back into full time education provided. Recommendations include: (1) developing health services and vocational training to support girls continue their education; (2) building career paths for girls impacted by staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic; and supporting (3) educators develop strategies for encouraging girls' return to school through the ACW WEP program.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Education, Barriers for Girls, Africa, Africa Code Week (ACW) Womens Empowerment Program (WEP).*

1. Context

The emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 disrupted economies across the world, with countries across Africa applying measures to protect health services (Ahmad Lone and Aijaz Ahmad, 2020) and adapt

business models so that they can continue to trade (Namatovu and Larsen, 2021). Educational systems are further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with educators, students, and their families involved in developing new strategies for engaging in remote and online forms of teaching, working, and learning (Nnama-Okechukwu et al, 2020). While the gradual roll-out of vaccination programs has enabled governments to explore reopening society, educators still face the challenge of moving from remote and online teaching to models of in-class and on-site learning (ADEA, AU/CIEFFA, and APHRC, 2021). Furthermore, a return to full time education is further impacted by a lack of clarity on the numbers of students returning to the classroom and it is estimated that "*more than 635 million students remain affected by full or partial school closures*'' (UNICEF, 2022). In Africa, it is estimated that "*40 percent of children in Eastern and Southern Africa are not in school*" (UNESCO, 2021a), thus it is imperative to provide professional development to in-service educators to identify the barriers impacting students returning to the classroom after periods of lock-down as well as reach out to students at risk of losing access to their education.

The Africa Code Week (ACW) Women's Empowerment Program (WEP) provides professional development to female educators across Africa seeking to deepen leadership expertise to enhance teaching and learning in a 21st century context. The ACW WEP program provides events and workshops designed to support women working across educational organisations addressing barriers impacting women and girls accessing health, technology, and education services in their communities. Educators can register for a single session or workshop series which are accessed through referral or direct application. The program supports professional progression with Alumnae encouraged to return to facilitate new sessions, and facilitators encouraged to move into presentation, co-moderator and Country Host roles. All offerings support French, and English language participation with online tools used to complete activities and social media used to share project information.

The COVID-19 pandemic halted attendance of in-person professional development sessions, with the ACW WEP program responding to this challenge through moving single session events as well as complete workshop series online during 2020. Today, the ACW WEP program continues to provide online professional development learning experiences which follow an unique activity model which combines musical performance and dance with wellbeing activities, panellist discussions, teachers' corner and projects covering topics on leadership and professional practice. Projects within the workshop series follow a five stage Design Thinking approach (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, 2022) with participants from different countries working together in small groups to problem solve and design campaigns to address barriers impacting women and girls linked to three United Nations (UN) Special Development Goals (SDG's): 3 (Health); 4 (Education); and 5 (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment). One key issue identified during discussion in the most recent workshop series was the need for research to understand the barriers impacting girls' during school closure to inform the development of pathways to support their return to education.

2. Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt education (Bergerson and Coon 2022), with educators seeking online professional development programs to develop expertise to support colleagues and students working from home (Jackson & Schad, 2022). One problem shared by educators in a global context is the uncertainty of knowing how many students will return to school as well as what are the reasons for leaving full-time education (UNESCO, 2020a). Further analysis has revealed four barriers impacting students in their return to full time education - these include: (1) an increase in household chores (2) technology inequality at home; (3) a lack of data on return rates and funding pathway for students returning to school; and (4) lack of access to mental health and wellbeing services for students during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021b). Furthermore, girls are identified as being at particular risk of failing to return to full-time education, and it is estimated that '*over 11 million girls may not go back to school after the COVID-19 crisis*' (UNESCO, 2020b). Professional development programs play a critical role in equipping educators with the knowledge and expertise to explore these challenges in context, and create the opportunity to share strategies to support girls returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1 Context in Africa

New and continued waves of COVID-19 infection halted onsite access to educational organisations and services in Africa, with educators facing the challenge of sourcing professional development to provide outreach programs to students working in their communities (Ceesay, 2021). Students returning to their communities not only had to cope with the potential of COVID-19 infection but also significant challenges in an ever-changing family context. These challenges include the potential of a loss of income and lack of access to household commodities (Maredia et al, 2022); lack of access to services provided through school such as school meals (Carr, et al. 2022). Furthermore, with the closure of schools comes lack of access to essential services for women and girls including supports for girls at risk of early marriage (Musa et al., 2021); the continuation of services for sexual and repoduction health (Eghtessadi, et al, 2020); and supports for adolescent pregnancy (Jochim et al., 2021). Educators returning to their organisations also face these challenges and are looking for ways to help students return to education as well as cope with financial, social, and gender-based challenges experienced at home or in their communities.

Sextual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services play a vital role in providing information, guidance, support and access to medical resources and procedures, with the interruption of services during the COVID-19 pandemic having a negative impact on women and young girls (Mavodza, et al., 2022). Moreover, lack of access to SRH services has prompted organisations to explore new ways to provide outreach to women and girls at particular risk of gender-based violence, poverty, forced marriage and youth partnerships (Khan et al., 2022). Thus organisations are looking for new and innovative ways to reconnect with girls and women in their communities in order to provide access to information and resources, advocate for women and girls in their communities and support their return to work as well as a return school (Kons et al.,2022). Potential solutions to support women and girls in the community include the restoration of SRH services to pre-pandemic levels

(Murewanhema et al., 2022); the use of social media to reach target groups (Phiri, et al., 2022); and the need to address health, social and economic impacts on school return rates (Munala, et al., 2022).

Research by UNESCO (2021b) exploring the impact of COVID-19 on return to school rates provides examples of reopening and recovery plans which have been applied in an African context. For example, "*Ghana's plan recognizes gender related barriers to studying during school closures, while Rwanda's strategy supports pregnant girls and adolescent mothers to content their education*" (UNESCO, 2021b, p 15). Gambian policy makers are also moving to support families through 'flexible work arrangements' and 'grants' as well as 'uninterrupted access' to sexual and reproductive health services to lessen the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls (Jallow, 2020). While in Kenya, recommendations for supporting students' return to school include the need for strategies to help students catch up with the curricula, professional development to help educators adjust from online to in-person teaching and learning, with emphasis on equitable access to education (Uwezo, 2020). Furthermore, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Tanzania, and Uganda observed 'learning loss' during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for targeted instruction combined with structured pedagogy to accompany school reopening for students (Angrist, et al, 2021).

These strategies provide pathways and guidelines to improve access to supports and services which students may need to continue in full-time education. The ACW WEP program plays a critical core role in supporting female educators network with peers across Africa as well as take part in online activities which are designed to build confidence in leadership skills to enact change within their communities. ACW WEP Alumnae are uniquely placed to share their experiences of working with colleagues and students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and shine light on the barriers impacting girls accessing education in their communities and potential solutions to improving the situation for girls in their countries.

2.2 Research Questions

This paper sets out to explore what barriers exist for girls in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the results used to inform the design of future ACW WEP program offerings and support educators in their professional development journey. Research question one explores (1) impacts and trends inhibiting girls accessing education, and research question two explores (2) examples and improvements suggested for enhancing access for girls. These questions aim to provide new insights into the factors impacting school re-enrolment.

3. Methodology

This section covers the methods used to gather data from ACW WEP Alumnae to address the research questions. The researchers followed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative questions in a questionnaire instrument to gather descriptive as well as contextual data (Creswell and Poth, 2016). The questionnaire question framework was developed in collaboration between ACW WEP Alumnae, The Irish Global Health Network and The Camden Education Trust.

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The questionnaire content was prepared in English and French, all questions were optional and participant samples were self-selecting. Questionnaire developed involved two stages - piloting, then publication of the final version.

Figure 1 - Countries

The pilot phase involved issuing the questionnaire to a self-selecting sample of n = 8 ACW WEP program staff. Piloting reduced the questionnaire design to n = 15 questions, with this version issued to a further self-selecting sample of n = 55 ACW WEP Alumnae in the first quarter of 2022. A total of n = 32 Alumnae responded, with n = 23 Alumnae consenting to use of their data in reporting, representing n = 8 countries which were identified as Gabon, Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (Figure 1).

The results were then compiled into a paper, which was then circulated to n = 6 program stakeholders, with this process used to refine the content and further develop the findings.

3.1. Limitations

The pandemic continues to impact education, with researchers grateful to all ACW WEP Alumnae who responded to the questionnaire. The researchers acknowledge that while low response rates limit the ability to make generalisations (Pyrczak and Tcherni-Buzzeo 2018), the results provide unique insights into the barriers impacting girls accessing education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, establishing validity in social research is complex (Creswell and Miller, 2000), with access to participants limited during the pandemic. In response, the researchers sought validity through peer review with program stakeholders.

4. Data Analysis

The following protocols were used for processing numerical and text results reported in the following sections. Percentages were generated from counts used as indicators (Remler and Van Ryzin, 2021), while pattern coding was used to merge constructs into themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Translation services were also used to convert French language text responses into English language text for analysis, with both languages included in reporting. Furthermore, notation is used in the text - the letter 'P' is used to indicate a participant quote, followed by a number which is used to link quotes and capture the number of participants.

4.1 Participant Demographics

Gender analysis identified n = 22 participants as female (95.7%) with one further n = 1 participant as male (4.3%) (Table 1). While organisation location analysis identified n = 16 participants as working in an urban context (69.6%), and n = 3 participants as working in a rural context (13.0%) while a total of n = 3 more participants self-identified as working in a peri-urban context (13.0%), with one more participant working in 'another' context (4.4%).

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Table 1 - Participant Demographics						
Variables	Gender		Organisation Location			
	Female	Male	Urban	Per-Urban	Rural	Other
Sample	23		23			
Count	22	1	16	3	3	1
Percent	95.7%	4.3%	69.6%	13.0%	13.0%	4.4%
SUM	100.0%		100.0%			

4.2 Organisational Type, Student Demographics, and Country

Analysis of participant organisation type and student demographics (where participants worked in an educational organisation) confirmed that n = 5 participants, representing one rural and four urban *primary schools* (21.7%) located in Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, taught mixed cohorts, aged between 5 to 17 years with school registrations between N = 118-1,007 students (Table 2). Further analysis confirmed that n = 8 participants representing two rural, one peri-urban, and five urban *secondary schools* (34.8%) located in Morocco, Nigeria and Uganda, taught two male cohorts and six mixed cohorts aged between 5 to 19 years with school registrations reported between 50 to 2,000 students.

Two (n = 2) further participants representing two urban *tertiary organisations* (8.7%) located in Gabon and Zimbabwe also took part in this research, with one participant teaching a mixed cohort, aged between 13 to 24 years, with registrations reported as 800 students. Finally n = 8 participants representing two peri-urban, four urban, and one other type of *organisation* (34.8%) located in Gabon, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, taught six mixed cohorts aged between 4 to 20 years, with registrations reported between 10 to 500 students. Organisations identified within this category include a Government Agency, an 'Incubator' organisation, one Junior High School, as well as two Special Schools.

Table 2 - Organisation Type, Student Demographics and Country							
Organisation Type				Student Demographics			Country
Organisation	Count	Percent	Location	Gender	Age	Registrations	
Primary	5	21.7%	Rural Urban	Mixed	5 - 17	118 - 1,007	Ghana Morocco

							Namibia Zimbabwe
Secondary	8	34.8%	Rural Peri-Urban Urban	Mixed, Male	5 - 19	50 - 2,000	Morocco Nigeria Uganda
Tertiary	2	8.7%	Urban	Mixed	13 - 24	800	Gabon Zimbabwe
Other	8	34.8%	Other Peri-Urban Urban	Mixed	4 - 20	10 - 500	Gabon South Africa Uganda Zimbabwe
SUM	23	100.0%	-	-	-	-	-

4.3 COVID-19 Impact

This section explores the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education per country within the sample group. The data used to explore the impact of COVID-19 on girls education was obtained through participants responding to each of the following questions - "*has COVID-19 negatively impacted girls' education in your country?*", then "*if yes, how has COVID-19 negatively impacted girls' education*", "*what trends are you seeing in your country*", "*do you have any examples of how communities have responded to improve the situation for girls*"; and finally "*specifically, what can we do to improve the situation for girls?*". Table 3 provides the mapping between the variables used in analysis and the text used to obtain impact data.

Table 3 COVID-19 Question Framework		
ID	Variable	Question
Has COVID-19 negatively impacted girls' education in your country? (Y/N)		
(1)	**Negative Impact**	*If yes, how has COVID-19 negatively impacted girls' education?*
(2)	**Country Trends**	*What trends are you seeing in your country?*
(3)	**Community Examples**	*Do you have any examples of how communities have responded to improve the situation for girls*
(4)	**Future Improvements**	*Specifically, what can we do to improve the situation for girls*

4.3.1 COVID-19 - 'No' Impact

The first question asked participants to indicate the extent to which COVID-19 had negatively impacted girls' education in their country (Table 4). Analysis confirms that n = 4 participants representing *Gabon, Morocco*, and *South Africa* responded 'no' to this question - indicating COVID-19 did not have an impact on girls' education in their countries (17.4%).

Table 4 COVID-19 Impact			
Question - Has COVID-19 negatively impacted girls' education in your country?			
COVID-19 Impact	Count	Percent	Countries
No	4	17.4%	Gabon, Morocco, South Africa
Yes	19	82.6%	Gabon, Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe
SUM	23	100.0%	-

Two participants (n = 2) in this sample provided further examples from their counties (Table 5). One participant in this sample observed 'equality' as a trend in their country giving the sample that "*girls get all equal opportunities as boys*" (P1), further sharing the example of communities working "*hand in hand*" (P1), and concluding with the recommendation to encourage more girls "*voice*" (P1) as a way to improve the situation for girls. A second participant from Gabon, within the same sample, recommended the need for greater 'technology awareness' in their country as a way to improve the situation for girls sharing the example to - "*utiliser des ressources technologiques mais surtout sensibiliser tous le monde / Use technological resources but above all raise everyone's awareness*" (P2).

| Table 5 COVID-19 Impact						
Country	Count	Percent	(1) Negative Impact	(2) Country Trends	(3) Community Examples	(4) Future Improvements
N/A*	1	50.0%	N/A	Equality	Gender Equity	Girls Voice
Gabon	1	50.0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	Technology Awareness
N/A* Country not identified by Participant						

4.3.2 COVID-19 - 'Yes' Impact

The remainder of this section covers the analysis of responses from participants who responded that COVID-19 did have a negative impact on girls' education in their country (Table 6). A total of n = 19 participants representing - *Gabon, Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda,* and *Zimbabwe* indicated 'yes' - COVID-19 had negatively impacted girls' education in their country (82.6% - Table 4). Table 6 provides a summary of key themes and the following sections discuss the results per country with quotes and examples included. The analysis also includes responses from one participant from an 'unassigned' country.

Table 6 COVID-19 Impact Themes per Country						
Country	Count	Percent	(1) Negative Impact	(2) Country Trends	(3) Community Examples	(4) Future Improvements
1.Gabon	2	10.5%	School Closure, Early Pregnancy	Home Working, No Career Options	Gender Equality, Training Centres	Mandatory Schooling, Training Budgets
2.Ghana	2	10.5%	Early Pregnancy	Poverty, Child Care	Practical Skills, Pregnancy Support	Financial Support, Sexual Health Awareness
3.Morocco	2	10.5%	School Closure, Online Learning	Home Working, Online Safety	Distance Learning	Technology Access, Online Awareness
4.Namibia	1	5.3%	School Closure	Early Marriage	Health and Wellbeing	Parental Support
5.Nigeria	5	26.3%	Early Pregnancy, Drop Out	Pregnancy, Marriage, Trading, Vocational Education	Exam Fees, Donations, Counselling, Job Skills	Learn New Skills, Access Counselling and Mentoring,
6. Uganda	2	10.5%	Early Pregnancy, Drug Use	Relationships Prostitution, Street Trading	Coding Workshops, Pregnancy Support	ICT Inclusiveness, Community Outreach,

7.Zimbabwe	4	21.1%	School Closure, Parental Job Loss, Early Pregnancy	Domestic Roles, Domestic Abuse, Lotering, Prostitution	Outreach Initiatives, Exam Fees, Slow Response	Community Partnerships, Funding.
N/A*	1	5.3%	Early Pregnancy	Relationships	Pregnancy Support	Awareness Campaign
SUM	19	100.0%	-	-	-	-
N/A* Country not identified by Participant						
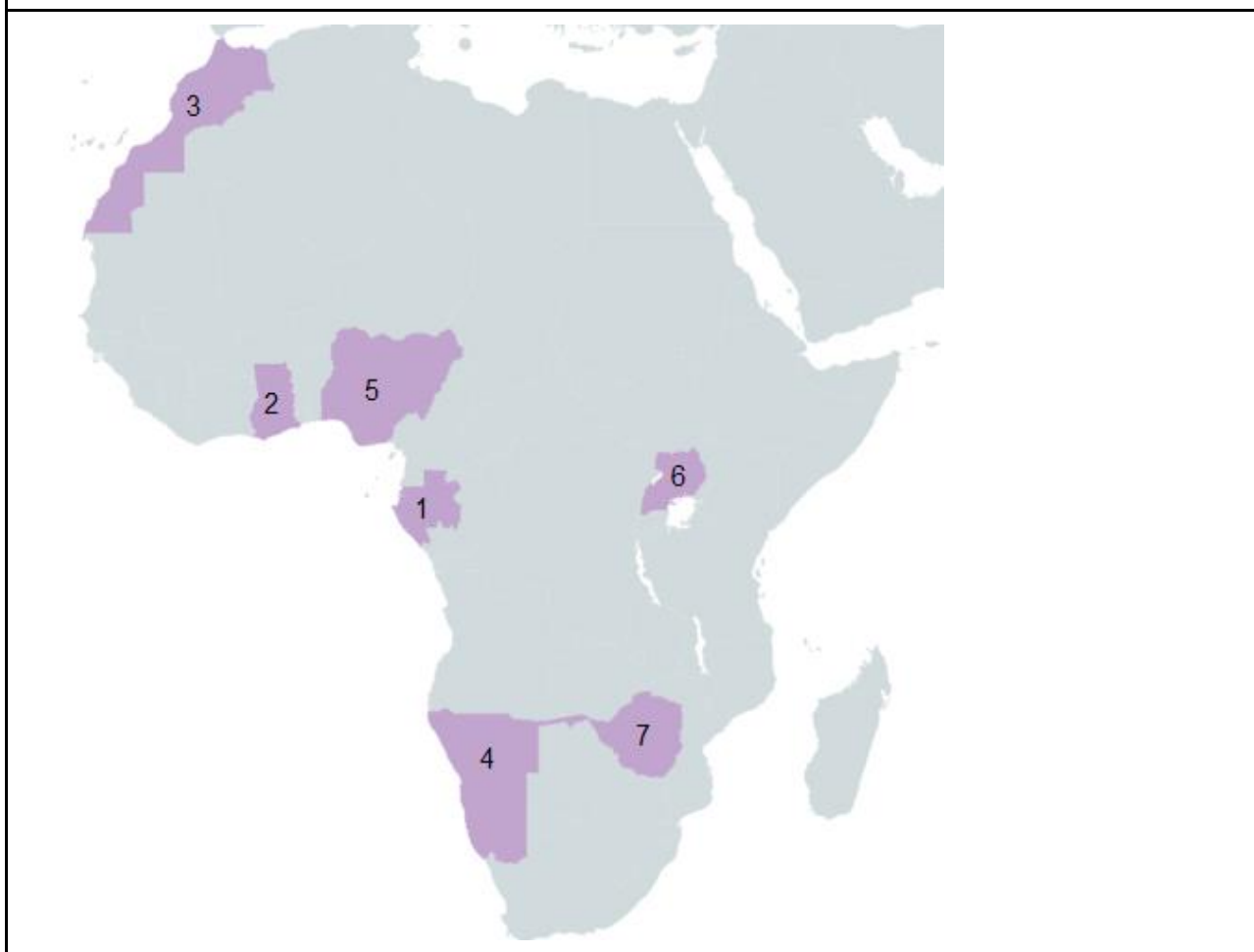
The following analysis is arranged alphabetically, and includes quotes from participants. Each section follows the same structure, with quotes addressing negative impacts first, followed by country trends, then community examples; ending with future improvements.

1. Gabon

A total of n = 2 female participants shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls

education in Gabon (Table 6). The first participant identified 'school closure' as having a negative impact on girls' education, observing 'home working' as a trend, sharing the example of communities supporting 'gender equality', and recommending the introduction of 'mandatory schooling' as a way to improve the situation for girls:

"*en mettant une loi sur l'obligation de scolariser les filles / by passing a law on the obligation to send girls to school*" (P_1).

The second participant identified 'early pregnancy' as having a negative impact on girls' education, observing a lack of 'career options' as a trend, sharing the example of communities creating 'training centres' for girls to continue their education, and recommending the need to increase 'training budgets' to improve the situation for girls:

"*allouer des budgets pour leurs scolarisation ou pour leurs formations professionnelle / allocate budgets for their education or professional training*" (P_2).

2. Ghana

A total of n = 2 female participants shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls education in Ghana (Table 6). The first participant identified 'early pregnancy' as having a negative impact on girls' education: "*most of the girls got pregnant and drop out school*" (P1); observing 'poverty' as a trend: "*some are into petty trading and others are home doing nothing because of poverty*" (P1); sharing the example of running 'practical skills' sessions for students seeking to learn the skills for a trade: "*specifically… I gathered some of the girls to train in skills like some making, sanitizer, bridal fan etc*" (P1); and recommending 'financial support' to fund materials and provide start-up capital for girls who want to start in business:

"*financial support for more materials for training and startup capital for the girls because most of the girls want to learn a trade but no support*" (P1).

A second participant also identified 'early pregnancy' as having a negative impact on girls' education: "*some got pregnant when we came back to school*" (P2); observing 'child care' as a trend: "*they are taking care of their babies*" (P2); and sharing the example of the community changing policy to provide 'pregnancy support' enabling girls to come to school:

"*by allowing them to come to school with the pregnancy*" (P2). The same participant recommended more '*sexual health*' (P2) awareness to improve the situation for girls.

3. Morocco

A total of n = 2 female participants shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls education in Morocco (Table 6). The first participant identified 'school closure' as having a negative impact on girls education: "*l'abondan et l'échec scolaire / school dropout and failure*" (P1); observing

'home working' as a trend; "*travail , chez elles, mariées / work, at home, married*" (P1); and observing communities supporting 'distance learning' to support girls continue in their education: "*encourager l'éducation des filles, favoriser l'enseignement / apprentissage à distances , construire des internats / - encourage girls' education, promote distance teaching/learning, build boarding schools*" (P1). The same participant further recommending equitable 'access to technology' to improve the situation for girls:

"*pour moi personnellement j'ai besoin d'équiper ma classe avec des PC , offrir des tablettes aux filles voire à l'ensemble des élèves / For me personally, I need to equip my class with PCs, offer tablets to the girls or even to all the students*" (P1).

A second participant identified 'online learning' as having a negative impact on girls' education, with online courses perceived as complex: "*impossibilité de suivre les cours, certaines ne sont pas revenues / impossibility to follow the courses, some did not return*" (P2). The same participant observed 'online safety' as a trend: "*les filles sont sujet au harcèlement surtout avec les smartphones / girls are subject to harassment especially with smartphones*" (P2); and concluded by recommending more 'online awareness' on the use of digital devices to help address online harassment as a way to improve the situation for girls:

"*les accompagner, sensibiliser les parents, les former correctement / accompany them, educate parents, train them properly*" (P2).

4. Namibia

One female participant (n = 1) shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls education in Namibia (Table 6). This participant identified 'school closure' as having a negative impact on girls' education as demonstrating in the following example:

"*during lock down school closures, many school girls found themselves in rural areas, where they were not exposed to any formal or modern education, this led them to become sexually active and most of them fell pregnant thus could not return to school after Covid-19 lockdown. Many girls couldn't further their courses on time due to online classes that they missed most of the time as they had home chores to attend to in the lockdown*" (P1).

The same participant observed 'early marriage' as a trend: "*most girls are married off by their families at early ages, some dropped out due to early child pregnancy, some are restricted by their cultures from going to school to look after livestock. They are rooming around the streets and some become street vendors*" (P1); also providing the example of the local business community providing cosmetics and sanitary products to a school as well as the school providing after hours computer classes to support mental 'health and wellbeing':

"*yes, at my school, business people have been helpful in terms of providing cosmetics and sanitary supplies to us. Parents have allowed their children to get involved in computer classes after*

school hours" (P1). The same participant recommended more 'parental support' as well as joining clubs as ways to keep girls engaged in their education:

"*we can only do that by educating their parents first, because most girls want to get involved in getting education but are restricted by parents. 2. Introduce girls training/clubs in schools that award girls with visible rewards or items, this will boost both parents and girl's interest to be in school*" (P1).

5. Nigeria

A total of n = 5 female participants shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education in Nigeria (Table 6). Four participants identified 'early pregnancy' and one more participant identified 'dropping out' as having a negative impact on girls' education.

Examples include one participant reflecting that: "*some of the girls dropped out of school after lockdown*" (P1) while a further participant added "*some girls have dropped out of school due to poverty, teenage pregnancy*" (P2). Participants further observed the following trends in their country - girls 'falling pregnant, getting married, or trading goods', as well as girls accessing 'vocational education' as a way to further their education. One participant observed that some girls "*now prefer to go vocational training while some ended up being married as a result of unwanted pregnancy*" (P1), while a further participant observed that girls are still getting married, "*while some are in the streets selling goods*" (P3).

Participants then shared examples demonstrating their community providing 'jobs skills' training, paying 'exam fees', and giving 'donations' with one school providing 'counselling' - "*the school is the only place where they get counselled*" (P1). Finally, participants recommended the need to promote schools as a place to 'learn new skills' - "*encourage them to go back to school or get a skill learnt*" (P3) as well as a place to access 'counselling and mentoring' services, and, remind girls about "*the importance of education*" (P1).

6. Uganda

A total of n = 2 female participants shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls education in Uganda (Table 6). The first participant identified 'early pregnancy' and 'drug use' as having a negative impact on girls' education; observing girls in 'relationships' with married men as a trend; sharing *'Mindset Coders'* (https://mindset-group.org/) and *'WomenTechmakers Google Kampala'* (https://twitter.com/WTMKampala) as examples used by students in the community; adding recommendations for more "*ICT Inclusiveness*" (P1).

A second participant also identified '*early pregnancy*' as having a negative impact on girls' education: "*early pregnancies and early marriage for survival sake*" (P2); observing 'prostitution / street trading' as a trend, with girls also "*on the streets selling sex and doing small jobs to survive*" (P2). This participant shared the example of communities providing 'pregnancy support' for girls which offered the "*chance for pregnant girls to attend school*" (P2); as well as making the recommendation for

'community outreach' to *"fund projects supporting girls who have fallen prey to the vagaries brought in by the COVID lock down. Projects offering psychosocial support, skills training and economic empowerment"* (P2).

7. Zimbabwe

Within this sample, n = 4 female participants shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education in Zimbabwe (Table 6). Two participants identified 'school closure' as an impact, while one participant identified 'parental job loss' and a further participant identified 'early pregnancy' as having a negative impact on girls' education. Examples include one participant sharing that *"the girls are no longer getting any education at all due to Covid 19 lockdown restriction"* (P1), with a further participant observing that *"girls dropped out of school because of loss of economic activity by parents/guardian"* (P3).

Participants also observed the following trends in their country - girls taking up 'domestic roles' and exposed to 'domestic abuse' with girls also 'loitering' and involved in 'prostitution'.
One participant observed that *"girls are now fending for the family, helping parents, if parents are still alive"* (P3) with another participant observing that - *"girls are at home, prone to all forms of abuse especially sexual abuse, child labour, teenage pregnancies"* (P1) while one more participant observed that girls are *"loitering, staying at home"* (P4), and a final participant shared that girls in some instances *"are into prostitution"* (P2).

Participants then shared examples of their community providing 'outreach initiatives', 'fees' to pay for girls' education, with the response, in some communities, 'slow'. Examples in the community include one participant observing that *"there are interventions that are working with girls e.g. DREAMS"* (P2), with another participant observing; *"organisations specifically paying fees for girls"* (P4), while a further participant observed finance as a constraint in their community - *"communities try to make Girl child movements to occupy the girls but due to lack of resources they are not effective"* (P1), with one more participant sharing that *"response has been slow or non-existent"* (P3).

Participants then provided recommendations for developing 'community partnerships' as well as providing 'funding' for improving the situation for girls. The first participant stressed the need for community partnerships sharing that: *"if communities could partner with donor families and local community businesses and empowered them with Digital Literacy skills and provide devices so that they can learn online it would improve the situation"* (P1), while the second participant recommended more funding to strengthen *"economic empowerment"* (P2). The third participant shared the need for resources and financial assistance to support a number of initiatives - *"girls need counselling so that they go back to school. They also need financial assistance to cover their education costs. Girls may also be empowered to assist in paying their own fees, e.g. through simple projects like growing chickens for sale"* (P3). While the fourth participant stressed the need for financial support for girls to *"continue to fund their education"* (P4).

8. Other Contexts

One female participant (n = 1) shared their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education in another 'unidentified country' context (Table 6). This participant identified 'early pregnancy' as having a negative impact on girls' education: "*most of the girls got pregnant and dropped out of school*" (P1). The same participant also observed 'relationships' as a trend - "*most of the girls are either married off or cohabiting with other men. Some are hawking on the street to make ends meet*" (P1). This participant further shared the example of initiatives to provide 'pregnancy support' for expectant mothers - "*there's been some initiatives on keeping pregnant girls in school in my community*" (P1), and recommended a 'campaign' to "*Intensify awareness mentorship programs on the value of the girl child*" (P1).

5. Findings and Conclusions

This paper set out to explore what barriers to education exist for girls in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the results constructed to inform the design of future ACW WEP program activities to support educators help girls in their educational journey and community. Two research questions were addressed. The first question set out to identify (1) perceived barriers impacting girls in communities in Africa seeking to return to full time education and the second question set out to (2) identify solutions as pathways for returning students.

Analysis of the literature identified four factors impacting girls in accessing education during the COVID-19 pandemic - (1) girls involved in domestic chores, (2) girls experiencing technology inequity at home, (3) a lack of information on return rates and funding pathways, and (4) a lack of access to mental health and wellbeing services impacting the provision of supports to girls return to school who may be pregnant or have young children. In response, this report provided new insights into the challenges and barriers impacting girls accessing educational services as well as girls seeking to return to full time education from seven African countries - Gabon, Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Gabon identified early pregnancy as a trend, with communities providing vocational training to enable girls to build skills while out of school, with recommendations for more funding to support girls to pursue vocational careers. *Ghana* also identified early pregnancy as a trend, with educators in the community stepping in to provide health and well being classes for girls as well as the country adapting policy to enable pregnant girls to attend school. *Morocco* further identified early marriage as a trend, with calls to improve online services and increase equitable access to technology, with recommendations for online safety awareness campaigns covering online harassment and bullying as well as more support for students following online courses. While one participant from *Namibia* observed early pregnancy and early marriage as a trend, with businesses in the community providing health and wellbeing supplies to schools and educators providing after school courses such as computer clubs, with recommendations for more parental support for girls continuing in their education.

Nigeria also identified 'early pregnancy' as a trend as well as girls losing motivation to continue in their education, while communities played an important role in providing vocational training opportunities for girls, with recommendations for a campaign to reinforce the importance of school as a place to learn skills as well as obtain access to services including counselling and mentoring. While in *Uganda* early pregnancy and prostitution were identified as emerging as trends, with communities providing girls with access to online computing workshops and schools active in supporting pregnant girls return to the classroom with recommendations for more funding for outreach services (psychosocial and economic) in order to support girls make the transition back into full time education. Finally, *Zimbabwe* identified 'parental job loss' as a trend, with girls playing a greater role in chores and domestic work to assist families and parents, while communities were urged to play a greater role, with recommendations for more outreach services and partnerships with local businesses enabling girls to learn key skills in areas including digital media, as well as the need for financial support and counselling services to help girls integrated back into school.

5.1 Perceived Barriers Impacting Girls

The first research question explored perceived barriers impacting girls accessing education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared examples detailing the negative impact of COVID-19 in their country, as well as sharing trends which they had observed within their home countries. One theme which spanned contexts and countries was 'early pregnancy' - with girls dropping out of school due to becoming pregnant, and in some cases getting married. All countries, with the exception of Morocco, identified 'early pregnancy' as impacting girls' return to school. Key factors included the need for policy changes to support girls return to education while pregnant, the provision of training to equip girls with vocational skills to provide for themselves and their families, the need to challenge stereotypes, social and cultural norms and poverty within community groups thus enabling families and parents to send their children to school, and the need for sexual health awareness, as well as the need for greater online outreach to support girls completing distance education courses.

Another theme which emerged through analysis was the move by girls to spend time setting up small businesses and trade goods, with students also experiencing difficulties in accessing technology using online learning resources at home. Lack of access to resources inhibiting access to online content, combined with the need to support girls while learning online (addressing topics including staying safe online and cyber bullying) were also factors.

Furthermore, analysis of country trends identified a lack of access to financial supports to help girls train for and enter new career paths, girls providing child care for their own children, girls dropping out of school due to a lack of an overarching strategy to keep students engaged with school work while working at home, with girls also being distracted (such as reassignment to domestic chores) as well as losing interest in assignments.

Finally, participants shared insights demonstrating the impact of community constraints, with girls falling pregnant and unable to return to school due to a lack of access to SRH services in their locality to help them cope with the transition back to full time education, as well as the need increase access to mental health and wellbeing services to reintegrate into school.

5.2 Solutions and Pathways for Returning Students

The second research question set out to explore solutions to assist girls returning to education. Participants provided the following solutions to improving the situation for girls, sharing examples observed in their communities. Examples included using training centres to provide continuing and further access to education, educators self-organising skills workshops enabling girls to create small businesses, strategies to support online and distance learning, with some schools also enacting policies and services enabling young and pregnant mothers to return to schools. Localised access to SRH services was also suggested to support girls' access to education. Further examples include educators involving students in coding workshops, educators engaging with the community as well as local businesses to run workshops covering health, wellbeing, and counselling sessions, with girls also being awarded funding through donations to continue their education.

Participants provided the following suggestions to improve the situation for girls. Future initiatives included the need for policy change to mandate school attendance, as well as an increase in training budgets to improve career pathways for girls, more emphasis and awareness campaigns on sexual health and wellbeing, technology equality (equal access to technology and building digital literacy skills) to alleviate the digital divide at home. Deeper investment in counselling and mental health services as well as mentoring services and career guidance which can be accessed in a community setting, were also suggested as necessary to assist girls with the transition back into formal education.

The following subsections provide further suggestions covering the importance of (5.2.1) leveraging ACW WEP Alumnae network, (5.2.2) rebuilding communities,(5.3.2) involving stakeholders,(5.3.3) and using technology as a platform to empower girls in their education.

5.2.1 Leveraging ACW WEP Alumnae Network
Participants providing responses in this paper were connected with the ACW WEP program. Thus, it is critical to engage ACW WEP Alumnae to develop a robust girls health education program which can be piloted and set up across the African continent, designed to afford girls in school direct access to information regarding their sexual and overall health as well as serve as a non-discriminatory contact / re-integration centre for girls returning to school.

5.2.2 Strategies for Re-building communities
Evidence presented in this paper further identified the need to develop resources and make available SHR knowledge to support young girls in case of early pregnancies/marriages. Potential solutions include using the ACW WEP program as a forum to equip teachers with the expertise

support girls with crisis pregnancy, as well as provide access to link services covering sexual and reproductive health. Further topics may include creating 'safe zones' in schools, where teachers can discuss sensitive topics combined with an information campaign providing information and access to resources targeted at parents/guardians.

5.2.3 Advocacy Involving all stakeholders

A further barrier identified in this paper is the lack of policy infrastructure in jurisdictions to support girls' return to education as well as to retain girls in education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reducing school abandonment is perceived as more effective when everyone participates (parents of students, professors, school principals, local institutions, and especially young people). Thus a development and roll out of a campaign for young people has the potential to make this cohort aware of the size of the problem, its causes, and the actors perpetuating the problem. Appointing and mentoring young advocates for girls' schooling issues, by giving them an opportunity to engage in the cause of girls' schooling, offers the potential to increase awareness so that girls can fully enjoy their schooling rights.

Moreover, enabling young people in Africa to be able to respond to polls and become an agent of change in their communities provides a further pathway to addressing stigma associated with girls either leaving school or returning to full time education. Moreover, social media could be deployed as a meaningful and age-appropriate tool for harnessing creativity (art, music, dance, multimedia), to share their story and experience of the school, using tacit knowledge to present new ideas in order to reduce girls dropping out of school.

5.2.4 Leveraging Technology to engage Girls in Education

Finally, this paper highlights inequality in access to technology for girls in home contexts. Urgency is required to tackle structural obstacles to equity in education, in particular in the context of the Pandemic of Covid 19, which could be alleviated through increasing girls' access to technology and to the Internet in home and community contexts. Innovations in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have altered our way of informing, communicating and interacting with society. Conferencing technologies (Zoom, and WhatsApp) and social media play an integral part in teaching and learning, used as a tool for connecting communities as well as sharing information about our lives and experiences.

The ACW WEP program currently provides online professional development to educators across Africa, seeking to upskill in leadership, design thinking methods, and technology. Current program participants as well as Alumnae receive guidance in the use of innovative tools used to enhance teaching and learning, as well as take part in projects leveraging design thinking and technology to develop campines for creating impact in communities.

The ACW WEP program is uniquely placed to leverage new and existing networks to engage with schools and students through activities such as 'Teachers' corner' and a 'Visit to my classroom' to connect with colleagues and advocate for girls. Moreover, these activities provide girls the

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opportunity to share their voices and experiences of living and learning in the 21st Century, playing a more active role in breaking down barriers to education.

Finally, the recent integration of the UNESCO (2022) Media and Information Literacy curricula into the core ACW WEP program offers the potential to equip participants with the skills to engage girls in their learning as well as support girls to operate safely online, with participants also mastering technical skills they can share with their students. Moreover, ACW WEP provides a pathway for girls in Africa to access role models and mentors as well supporting educators improve their digital skills and leadership expertise, for use in responding to girls' health, wellbeing, and educational needs across the continent of Africa.

6. Acknowledgements

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