

One million African girls 'may never return to school'

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Credit: Albert González Farran, UNAMID

Girls' loss of schooling as a result of COVID-19 threatens to set back development, a [report](#) warns.

About one million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa may never return to school after getting pregnant due to COVID-19 school closures, a development that could derail Africa's growth, a report says.

The Ibrahim Forum Report highlights the COVID-19-related challenges facing Africa, including an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, strain on already weak [health](#) services, rising instability and economic hardship.

The report released this month warns that school closures negatively impact girls' socialization, access to sexual and reproductive health services, and safe spaces. It says they become vulnerable to [sexual violence](#) and exploitation, [female genital mutilation](#) (FGM), forced marriage and early pregnancies.

"The Ibrahim Forum Report shows how school closures risk widening existing learning inequalities," says Camilla Rocca, head of research, Mo Ibrahim Foundation. "Already in 2019, there was a 3.9 percentage points gap between the rate of out-of-school girls and boys in Sub-Saharan Africa."

The analysis, Rocca explains, is based on data such as education enrolment and adolescent pregnancy rates.

Stay-at-home orders during the pandemic have triggered an increase in violence against women and girls across the world, notes Rocca, adding: "This is happening at a time when access to support and emergency services to curb SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence] have declined due to the pandemic and its related restrictions."

Rocca tells SciDev.Net that in a survey of 1,056 women across Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal almost 41 percent of respondents reported incidents of domestic violence before the pandemic, while this rose to more than 52 percent during COVID-19.

The report outlines a roadmap to a sustainable COVID-19 recovery for Africa, including strengthening collaboration, prioritizing young people,

and championing good governance.

Tijani Salami, a physician advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights in Nigeria, says that women are bearing the brunt of socio-economic fallout from COVID-19.

"Child marriage is prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa," explains Salami, an Aspen New Voices fellow. "About 43 percent of girls in Nigeria marry before the age of 18. The impacts of COVID-19 could worsen this practice with consequences on the health of girls,"

The New Voices Fellowship at the Aspen Institute is a year-long, non-residential program that provides intensive media and advocacy training for frontline development experts.

Tammary Esho, a director at Amref Health Africa's Center of Excellence to End Female Genital Mutilation, says that the pandemic has exacerbated the harmful practices of deliberately cutting or injuring female genitals in countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal and Uganda.

"Women and girls make up a huge human capital and this will have a negative impact on Africa losing up to a decade of developmental progress if GBV [gender-based violence] is not addressed," she says.

The pandemic calls for innovative approaches to strengthen and support social, economic, health and justice systems for public emergency prevention and response preparedness, Esho adds.

Elizabeth Anne Bukusi, senior principal clinical research scientist at the Kenya Medical Research Institute, says that COVID-19 has demonstrated the lack of attention to promotive and prevention health services which are key to mitigating the pandemic.

Recovery will require access to COVID-19 vaccines in which Africa is at the back of the queue, and a framework to help increase the region's capacity to navigate future crises, according to Bukusi.

"Africa also needs to rethink priorities and investment in the healthcare of its citizenry [and] in research for health [to] achieve health and wellbeing for its citizens," Bukusi adds.

Provided by SciDev.Net

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