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# Gender-based impacts of COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa

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**Abstract**

The lasting educational and economic impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionally disadvantaged girls on the fringes of society, extending beyond the period of imposed lockdowns. This study delves deeper into the education, socio-economic, and gender-specific effects of the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The research illuminates how the pandemic has influenced economic activities and the roles of teachers, parents, and students in the educational process. Furthermore, the paper examines the efficacy of distance learning across diverse media in SSA. The findings suggest that children from rural settings might have limited resources to adapt and continue their education during school closures. Marginalized girls are substantially more likely than their male counterparts to leave school altogether due to these closures, placing girls and women at a heightened risk of experiencing the most severe outcomes of the pandemic. Female education has been notably disrupted due to the rise in child labor, violence, and pregnancies amidst the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS**

COVID-19, economy, education, gender, pandemic, students, teachers

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 (novel coronavirus disease) was first reported in China in 2019 as an infectious upper respiratory disease. The virus has since spread throughout the world, presenting one of the major global health crises in history, with high socio-economic and education costs. While the health implications are clearly linked to the disease's spread, the other effects are mostly attributable to the respective governments' preventive attempts to stop the spread. To stem the spread, most nations imposed border restrictions and partial or complete economic lockdowns, resulting in the temporary closure of businesses, social services, and schools among other things (UNCTAD, 2020).

However, these measures have resulted in substantial educational and economic consequences. In economies, there have been setbacks notably in lost productivity and trade between and within nations. Specifically, these measures have placed a major burden on practically all of many economies' important growth-enhancing sectors, as well as their overall revenue. Several institutions have estimated the potential economic costs of implementing these measures. The World Trade Organization (WTO) predicted a 13% to 32% decline in global trade in 2020 because of COVID-19 disturbances in the international value chains, among other things (World Trade Organization, 2020). Overall, the global recession with a worldwide GDP slump of between 0.5% and 3.8% is unprecedented (UNCTAD, 2020).

Economic activity in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) fell by 3.3% in 2020, according to World Bank estimates, resulting in the first recession in the region in 25 years (World Bank, 2020a). According to their estimates, the South and Eastern African sub-region have been hit the most, owing to South Africa's stronger output contractions, which is the region's dominant economy. Lockdowns and interruptions in the tourism industry have also significantly stalled in the island nations. As COVID-19 worsens the determinants of fragility, fragile countries in the sub-region are anticipated to witness a severe decrease in growth. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has different socio-economic consequences for men and women, according to research, the pandemic increased existing inequities between men and women, as well as between socio-economic categories (UN Women, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to negatively impact the health of African households, their overall well-being, and thus their poverty levels (African Development Bank, 2020). The GDP per capita of SSA was predicted to rise by 1.7% before the pandemic. The GDP per capita growth projection is now predicted to fall by over 5%–7% points, by 3.1% in the basic scenario, and by 5.5% in the low scenario because of the pandemic and other related shocks (Montes et al., 2020). COVID-19 directly affects productivity because it reduces the ability of workers who are infected and recovering to work and engage in activities that generate incomes, with a greater expected effect for informal economy households with low or no social protection. This is exacerbated by the fact that in the sub-region, women predominately work in the informal sector. Consumer hoarding, as well as disruptions in international and domestic distribution channels of inputs and outputs, has increased in agricultural and other commodities, lowering the purchasing power of households (Fernando, 2020). Food insecurity will disproportionately affect households headed by women, who are typically among the poorest of society in most countries. Women's unpaid care work increased during the pandemic, restricting their ability to engage in activities that are productive, in study, and in rest. It can have a negative impact on their physical and mental health, as well as their ability to earn income (Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020).

A report by UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) in 2019 showed that SSA has the lowest rates of literacy proficiency and the highest levels of education exclusion, with over 20% of children aged 6 to 11 years, 33% of children aged 12 to 14 years, and 60% of young adults aged 15 to 18 years who are not in school (UIS, 2019). The World Bank reported that 53% of children could not read nor understand a basic story by the end of primary school in these low and middle-income countries. The ratio is 80% in developing countries. As regards gender, the girls' exclusion rate (36%) is 4% higher than boys' (32%). The literacy rate in these countries increased slightly from the previous year to 65.5% in 2018 (UIS, 2018), but it remains low compared to the global average of 86.3%. These figures show how backward the SSA region is in education when compared to other regions before more setbacks that came with the pandemic.

The state of education globally has also been negatively impacted by the pandemic but sub-Saharan Africa looks like the most affected because of its less robust education systems (Partey, 2021). Similarly, the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report (2020) stated that 40% of low and lower-middle-income nations did not support disadvantaged learners during the temporary school shutdown. Furthermore, the economic recession in Africa because of the COVID-19 pandemic jeopardizes countries' capacity to invest in education when demand is rising. Due to the pandemic, Africa's economic development is expected to slow. This would have far-reaching consequences for education funding. According to the World Bank, economic growth in SSA is expected to fall by 5.1% in 2020, lower than 2.4% in 2019, marking the region's first contraction in 25 years (World Bank, 2020a). Primary education was accelerated in SSA during a time of rapid economic development. In the coming years, lower-than-expected economic growth will limit tax revenues available for education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the education set-up in Africa in a way that has further exposed the persistent inequality and exclusion that has plagued most African countries. It has created a new normal that requires a rethink on how quality education ought to be provided inclusively and equitably, with technology as a key enabler (ADEA, 2020). This study aims to explore and analyze the specific impacts of the pandemic on education, the economy, and gender disparities in SSA. It is crucial for governments in the region to respond effectively with policies that mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic's economic impact and ensure access to education for all. The education of the girl child is of particular importance, and understanding the effects of the pandemic on girls will facilitate the development of gender-responsive policies in pandemic responses.

## 2 | SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SSA

The health consequences of COVID-19 are specifically connected to the disease's spread, whereas the economic consequences are largely the resultant effects of the respective governments' preventive measures to stop the spread. To stem the spread, most countries, including those in SSA, have implemented border closures and partial or complete economic lockdowns, resulting in the temporary closure of schools, businesses, and social services, among other things (UNCTAD, 2020).

However, these measures have had a significant negative impact on African economies, particularly in terms of lost productivity and trade between and within countries. These policies, in particular, have placed significant strain on almost all of many SSA economies' key growth-enhancing industries, and thus on their overall revenue. Several institutions have estimated the

potential economic losses associated with the measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19. WTO predicted a 13% to 32% drop in world commerce in 2020 as a result of disruptions caused by COVID-19 in the global value chains. Overall, the global recession with a global GDP slump of between 0.5% and 3.8% is unprecedented (UNCTAD, 2020). The SSA countries as a region that already had high levels of extreme poverty before the outbreak are expected to be affected more by this global statistic.

Smallholder agriculture is a common economic activity in SSA; it is part of the main reasons why in 2019 that 35.9% of workers in SSA were living in extreme poverty and about 25.4% in moderate poverty; because of this, 240 million workers were affected (ILO, 2020).

Although the international community has concentrated on COVID-19's public health implications, the socio-economic consequences have become a critical policy lever in determining the response from governments. The pandemic provoked severe social and economic contractions in SSA, exacerbating our societies' long-standing legacies of injustice, prejudice, and growing inequalities. The global health crisis has had devastating effects on local populations' employment opportunities, public trust, and food security (UNESCO, 2020). In collaboration with the Canadian COVID-19 Social Impacts Network and Metropolis Canada, UNESCO released a report on the impact of COVID-19 on SSA, outlining crucial policy recommendations to address the effects of the pandemic, which have pushed the most vulnerable even further behind. The report was based on a survey conducted in nine cities across SSA (Johannesburg, Maputo, Nairobi, Harare, Dakar, Abidjan, Freetown, Libreville, and Kampala—members of UNESCO's International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities—ICCAR) and received 3001 responses from people aged 18 to 65 years and above in English, French, and Portuguese. The responses were collected between August 11 and September 4, 2020, through a web-based survey that included both qualitative and quantitative questions.

The report's key findings included the economic changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, 81% of respondents reported negative financial consequences, nearly half reported difficulty accessing employment, and just under 40% reported difficulty obtaining financial support. The report also addressed health issues. One out of every five participants reported having a poor or very poor mental state, and young Sub-Saharan Africans reported difficulty accessing health care.

## 3 | EDUCATION IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SSA

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every area of daily life (Blundell et al., 2020; van Dorn et al., 2020), and although health systems have been hit the hardest, the implications for education are equally devastating. According to a new World Bank study, COVID-19 has interrupted or ended the studies of over 220 million postsecondary students worldwide, accounting for 13% of the overall number of students impacted (World Bank, 2020c). Before the pandemic, SSA youth have made significant progress toward gaining access to primary school, far quicker than many other developed regions with similar starting points. In SSA, total enrollment rates in primary education had risen to nearly 99% by 2018 (UIS, 2020). By 2050, the population of youths in Africa is estimated to reach 456 million, and by 2075, Africa accounts for nearly half of the global youth population (UN-DESA, 2019). Between now and 2030, the demand for secondary education is projected to almost double, from 60 million students to 106 million by 2030 (Education Commission, 2019).

Many families would be unable to send their children to school due to job losses and the economic crisis. Household investments account for 44% and 49% of upper- and lower-secondary education expenses, respectively, compared to 30% for primary education (UNESCO-UIS, 2011). Remittances, a major driver of education spending for families, are also expected to drop by nearly 20% (World Bank, 2020b). Students from lower income families are frequently under more pressure to work to help sustain the family. Relying on this money makes it more difficult for these students to return to school after the recession. After lengthy periods of disengagement from the educational system (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4), older students at secondary and tertiary schools are more likely to drop out permanently. Children in rural areas are less likely to have the means to change and enable them to maintain their schooling during school closures, such as internet connectivity and moving school calendars to accommodate seasonal harvests. In Burkina Faso, a teacher expressed fear that prolonging the school year to compensate for lost time will exclude children from rural areas if it clashed with the season for crop cultivation. Some children would no longer attend classes because they would rather help their parents in their farms so that they can feed themselves. As a result, more students would be unable to attend (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

COVID-19 has posed a significant threat to SSA's tertiary education sector, with nearly 8.4 million students seeing their studies finished or substantially interrupted (Agyapong et al., 2020). Despite significant efforts to reform and develop the SSA tertiary education market, analysts predict that the COVID-19 crisis will destabilize the sector, posing severe threats to equity, quality, importance, and performance (Mohamedbhai, 2020). Shifts to distance learning due to the pandemic have already shown deep equity disparities, which are likely to widen in the aftermath of the pandemic. Access to devices and synchronization and fundamental digital awareness on the part of the teacher, parent, and pupil are both prerequisites for digital solutions. While the rise of digital literacy and connectivity presents promising opportunities for distance learning, methods that rely solely on technology may inadvertently intensify disparities. Such approaches might privilege students from affluent backgrounds by enabling their educational engagement and progression, potentially leaving their less privileged counterparts behind.

Countries in SSA are introducing various strategies to maintain learning accessibility, including the use of television, radio, newspapers, and the dissemination of written educational materials. In addition, the widely used means of distance learning (radio and television) often fail to access the weakest and isolated students. Low network penetration in rural areas and inadequate access to radio; in some cases, batteries, were found to be ineffective in ensuring equal access as was the case during the Ebola outbreak (Jalloh et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 lockdown, some schools sent revision papers to parents through WhatsApp and a grading system, and the papers are supposed to be graded by the parents (Human Rights Watch, 2020). According to Human Rights Watch (2020), many children got no guidance, interaction, or feedback from their teachers during this time. While some students had obtained printed assignments, teachers believed that it is not a normal education. So many students could not learn on their own and lost a lot of ground. Some that could study on their own found some subjects daunting and had no one to assist them, we can only imagine how overwhelming that could be. Children in primary school were the most affected by school closures in Africa (Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8).

In June 2020 when schools closed in the Central African Republic (Figure 1), there were no teaching. Some parents tried to get their wards to do revision exercises and listen to classes on the radio. However, it was said that the programs were not tailored to each class level. It was

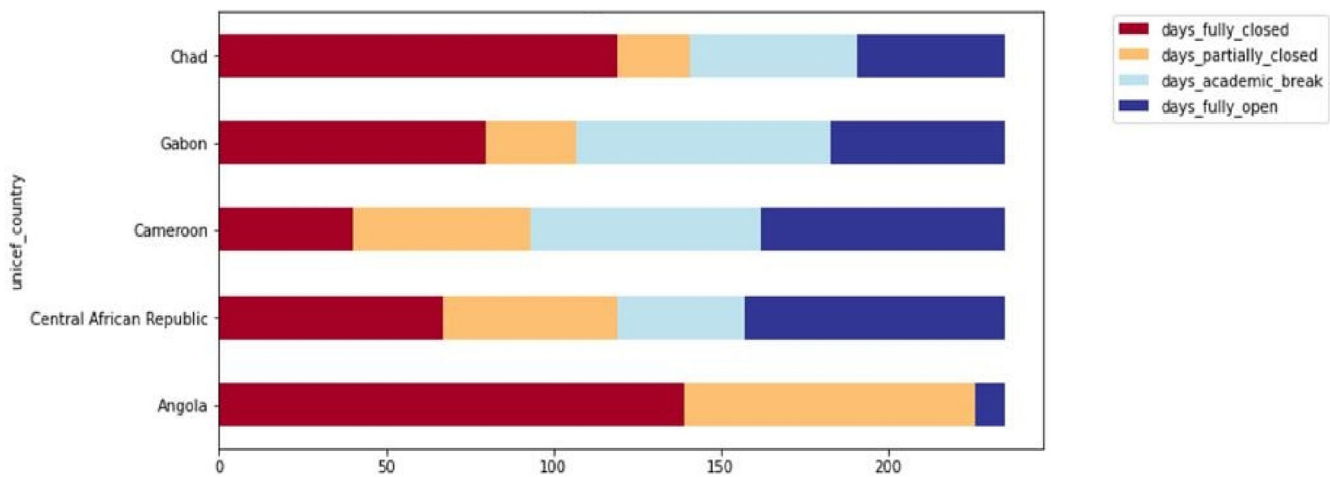


**FIGURE 1** Full and partial school closures in Central African countries during COVID-19 lockdowns. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

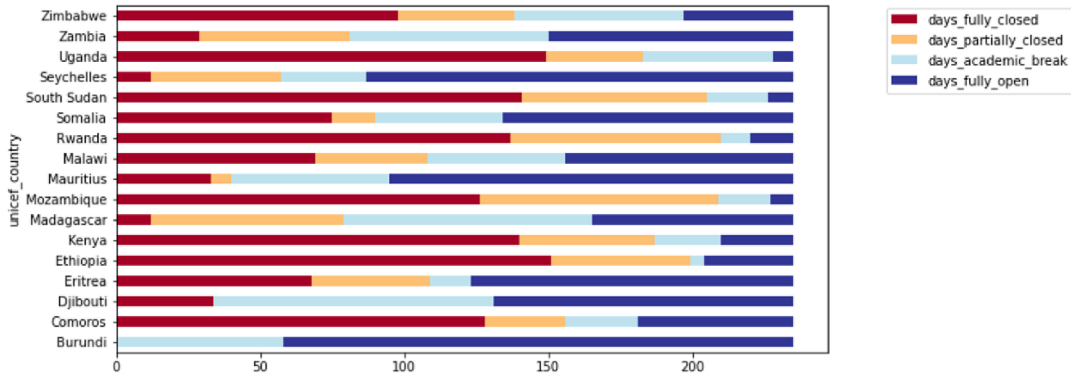


**FIGURE 2** Full and partial school closures in East African countries during COVID-19 lockdowns. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

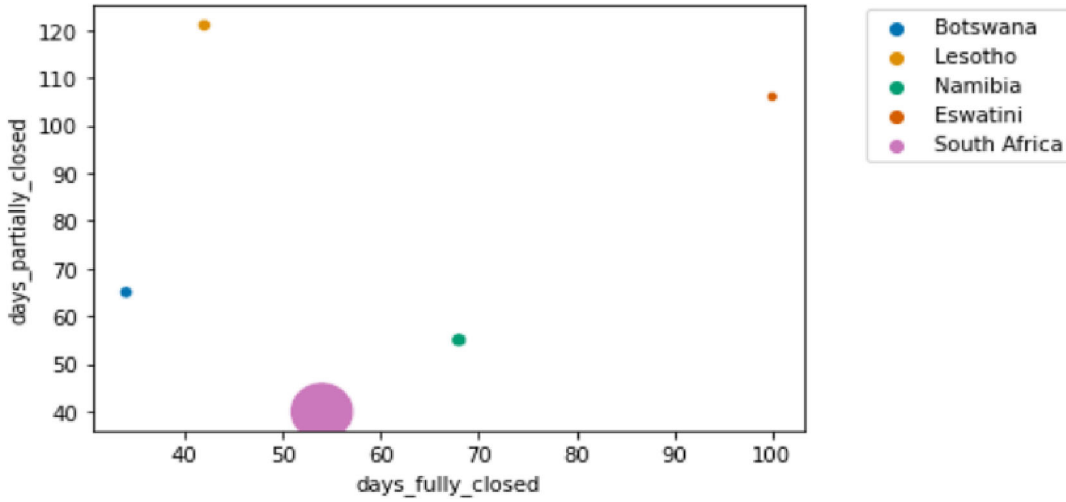


**FIGURE 3** Full and partial school closures in southern African countries during COVID-19 lockdowns. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

sometimes too complicated for them, and parents and teachers were concerned that the children's standards would slip due to the time lost. Students in Angola spent more days away from school when compared to other schools in Central Africa due to having the longest number of days for which schools were fully closed in Angola (total school closure that was almost 150 days) during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Figure 1).

Students in Kenya spent more days away from school when compared to students from other schools in East Africa, schools in Kenya were fully closed for over 150 days during the COVID-19 lockdown. Schools in Zambia, Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Djibouti were fully closed for less than 50 days. All countries in Figure 2 had to fully close their schools due to the COVID-19 lockdown except for Burundi, where schools were never fully closed. During the COVID-19 lockdown, there was just over 50 days' academic break in Burundi before schools opened again. The information in the graph suggests that Uganda, South Sudan, Rwanda,

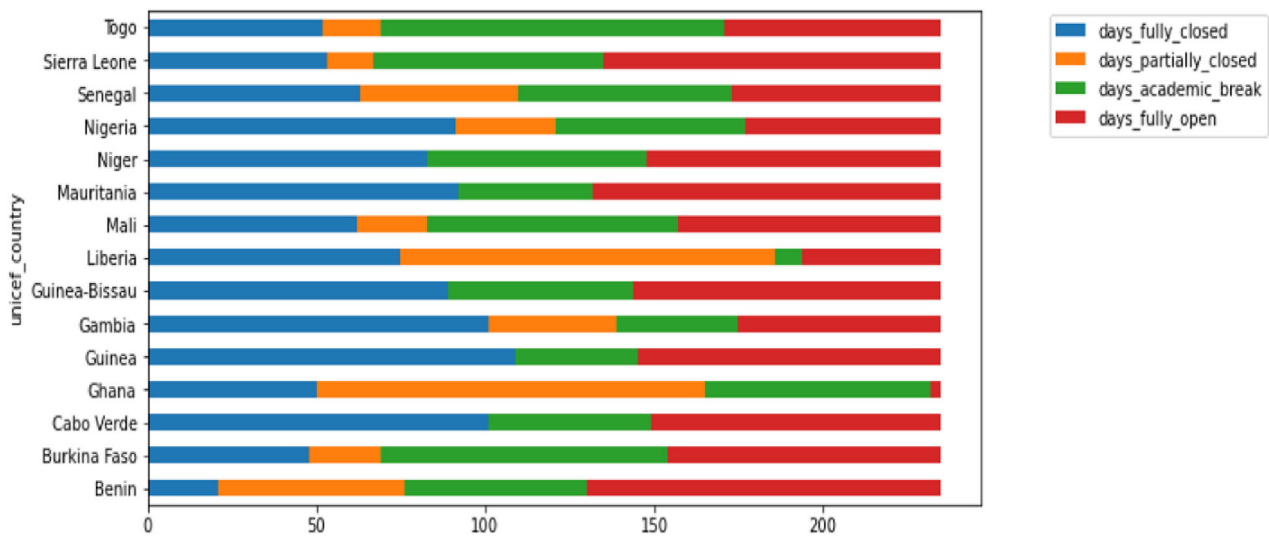


**FIGURE 4** Full and partial school closures in West African countries during COVID-19 lockdowns. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

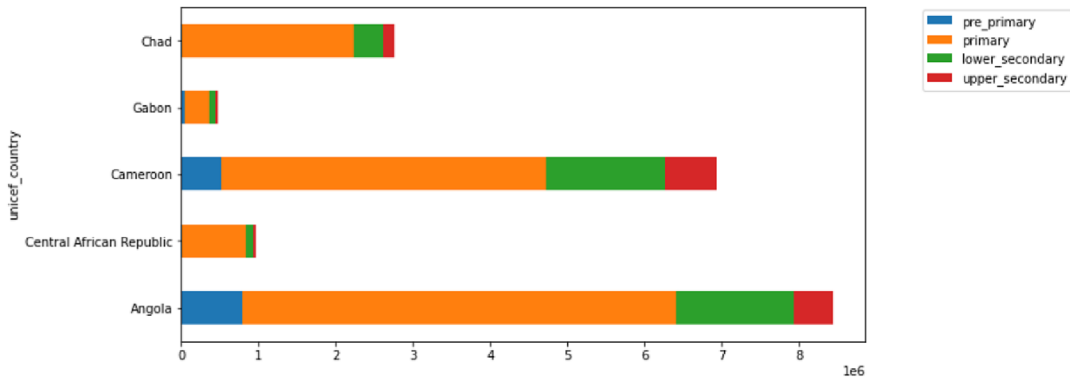


**FIGURE 5** Total population for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in Central Africa. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

Mozambique, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Comoros education must have been negatively impacted more than other countries in East Africa because schools in these countries were fully closed for over 100 days.

The size of the bubble in Figure 3 represents the total student population affected. The bigger the bubble, the higher the affected student population, and the smaller the bubble, the lower the student population. It is evident that South Africa has the largest student population affected by the lockdown compared to all countries in the southern block of SSA, with schools fully closing for up to 100 days and partial closure for about 120 days. Figure 3. suggests South Africa and Botswana being the front runners of the digital spectrum, had a lower number of days of full and partial closure, whereas Eswatini, which is on the lower spectrum of digital readiness, had the longest days of closure (UNICEF, 2021). On the other hand, one can postulate that South Africa has a larger total student population as illustrated by the bigger bubble hence a need not to prolong the school closures as it will disrupt and offset school academic years and possibly result in permanent school dropout by older students in the tertiary and secondary levels.

All Schools in West Africa (as represented in Figure 4) were fully closed for almost 50 days or more, except for schools in the Benin Republic, which were only fully closed for about 25 days. The COVID-19 lockdown heavily impacted schools in Ghana because the graph suggests that schools in Ghana were either fully closed, partially closed, or on academic break for over 200 days during the lockdown. Primary schools in Central Africa were most affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, as Figure 5 suggests. Preprimary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools in Angola were affected most by school closures in Central Africa compared to their counterparts in the same region.

Figure 6 suggests that the total populations for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools in Seychelles, Comoros, Djibouti, and Mauritius were least affected by school closures in Central Africa compared to their counterparts in the same region. Primary schools in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda were most affected (in the order Ethiopia → Kenya → Uganda) in East Africa. Ethiopia has the highest total population for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in East Africa. Additionally, Figure 7 suggests that primary schools were most affected when compared to pre-primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools in Southern Africa.

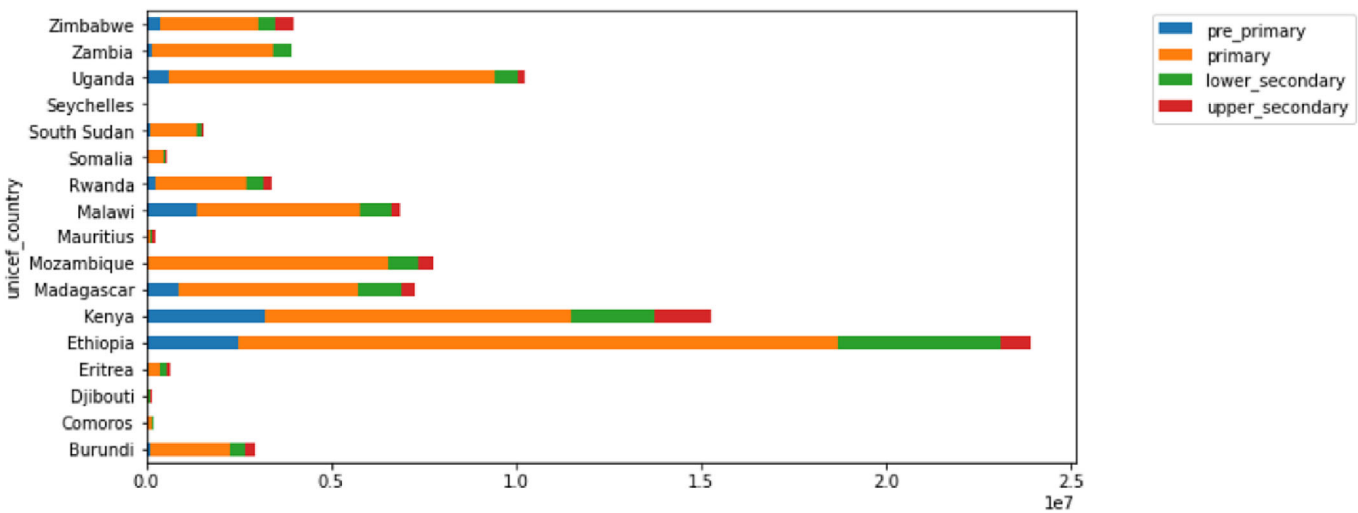


**FIGURE 6** The total populations for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in East Africa. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

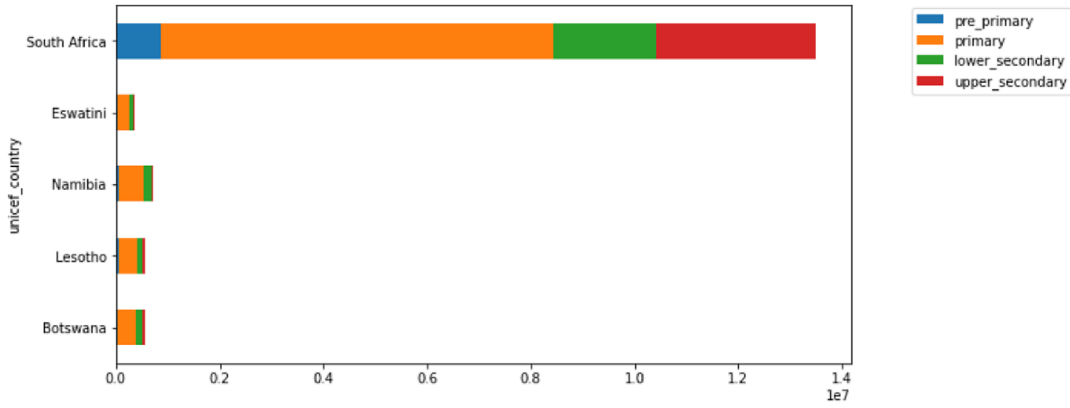


**FIGURE 7** Total population for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in Southern Africa. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

South Africa had the highest total population for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in Southern Africa. Schools in South Africa were affected in the order primary → upper secondary → lower secondary → pre-primary.

Nigeria had the highest total population for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in West Africa, as demonstrated by Figure 8 in the order primary → lower secondary → upper secondary → pre-primary. Primary schools were most affected compared to pre-primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools in West Africa. Ghana is the next country with the highest total population for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in West Africa.

## 4 | COVID-19 IMPACT ON GENDER DIMENSION IN SSA

As COVID-19 worsens the drivers of fragility, fragile countries in the sub-region are projected to see a sharp reduction in growth. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has different socio-economic consequences for men and women, data show that the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated existing inequalities between men and women and socioeconomic groups (UN Women, 2021).

In a study, "Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in East and Southern Africa" by UN Women (2021), the economic consequences of the pandemic are expected to increase poverty in a region with extreme poverty prior to the outbreak. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, over 60% of the participants reported having either lost all of their income or had their income reduced. The same study observed that before the COVID-19 pandemic, women were more likely than men to live in extreme poverty, which will continue post-COVID-19 recovery. Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact suggests that women's economic and productive lives will be affected disproportionately and differently than that men's (United Nations, 2020). Women worldwide earn less, have less secure jobs, save less, and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector (Fernando, 2020). They represent the vast majority of single-parent households and have limited access to social protection. As a result, they have a lower ability to absorb economic shocks than men (United Nations, 2020).

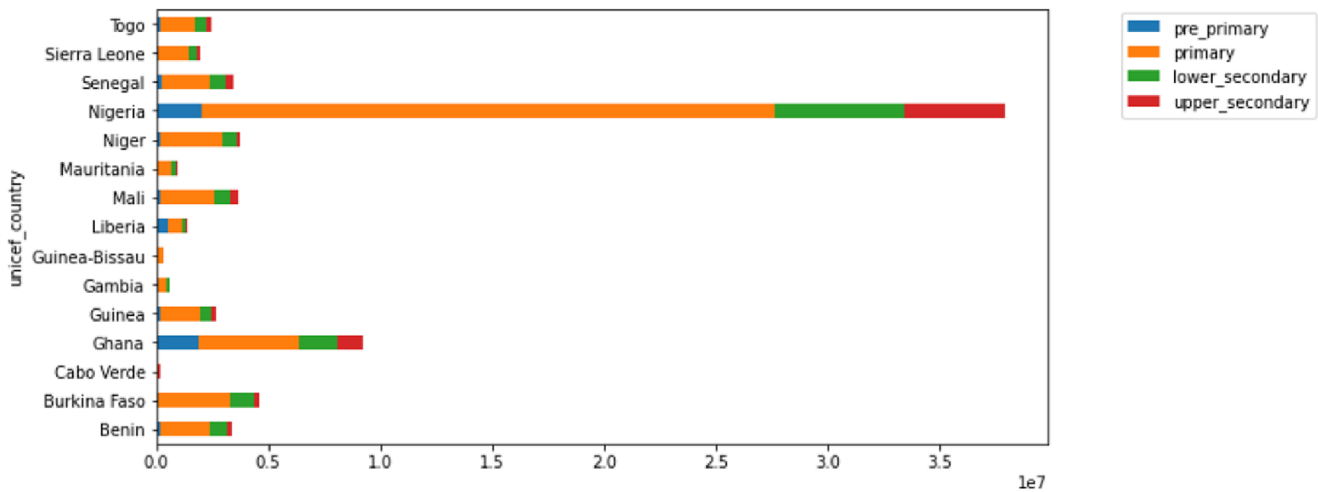


**FIGURE 8** Total population for pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools affected by school closures in West Africa. *Source*: Authors' drawings based on the UNICEF (2021) dataset.

Cuts and layoffs will disproportionately affect women's jobs as they take on more domestic duties (Paci, 2021). Such outcomes have the potential to reverse the already shaky gains in women's labor force participation, limiting the ability of women to provide for and improve their living conditions and that of their families. The first round of layoffs has been particularly severe in many countries in the SSA, in the services sector, which includes hospitality, retail, and tourism, in which women are overrepresented (Ataguba, 2020). The informal sector is critical to the African economy, accounting for a roughly greater percentage of African countries' GDP in 2017. Therefore, a large percentage of persons employed in the informal economy are women, and as a result, policies that disrupt the informal economy have an unusual impact on women. The movement restrictions in various parts of SSA have affected various economic activities in the informal economy (Akpan, 2020).

Markets, for instance, are an important part of any African city or urban area because they offer facilities and space for trading various agricultural and non-agricultural products. Women typically dominate markets in the informal economy. Because of the significant number of individuals who congregate in markets on a daily basis to buy and sell goods, the markets were among the first places to be closed down when African governments imposed movement restrictions. Market closures have significantly impacted the earnings and living conditions of women who rely on market sales (Akpan, 2020).

Despite the fact that agriculture and food produce transportation were exempted from the movement ban, the volume of agricultural produce transported decreased significantly due to the large number of security officers on the roads, and the presence of so many checkpoints, which led to delays and damage to the products, and, as a result, a loss of potential income to traders. The government also banned street trading, which disproportionately affected women (Akpan, 2020).

Women have the most job opportunities in the formal economy in the service industry. Women are more likely to be engaged in this industry because of their duties as support and administrative staff, leisure and hospitality workers, service attendants, health and social workers, airline workers, cashiers, and receptionists. As a result, when the economy suffers a downturn, women are more likely to stay unemployed or temporarily laid off (Akpan, 2020). Girls are frequently asked to help with childcare and domestic chores. Their work grew when schools were shut down. According to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2020), school closures increase the vulnerability of girls and young women to child or early marriage, early pregnancy, and gender-based violence (GBV). Some girls spend so many hours a day looking after their younger siblings because they also act as teachers to their younger ones. Children have to use computers to learn, and due to a lack of access to devices or data, male children are often given more access than girls to these resources (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

## 5 | CHILDCARE NEEDS GENDER-DIFFERENTIATED COVID-19 IMPACT

The pandemic resulted in the closures of daycare centers and schools, implying that children must be cared for and (if possible) educated at home. Even as schools gradually reopened, the need for social distancing measures has ensured that childcare sharing with neighbors and friends is limited. Single parents face particular difficulties as a result of all this. The division of childcare for parents who raise their children together will be determined by how much work flexibility each parent has in terms of working from home and, at the same time, caring for

children. The sudden spike in childcare needs from parents and the need for social distancing will likely pose more burdens to the female gender very disproportionately. This could mean many mothers staying out of work or taking lower pay because they need to work fewer hours and take care of their wards. This also means that children are at risk of living in poverty since their mother will have to stay out of work or make do with lower pay due to lesser work hours (Alon et al., 2020).

## 6 | IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ESCALATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Global domestic violence helplines and shelters have reported an alarming rise in calls for help, correlating with the spread of COVID-19 and the consequent enforcement of lockdown measures. In Kenya, a 35% surge in GBV cases was reported, with violence against girls escalating by 50% within the initial 2 weeks of lockdown in April 2020 (World Vision, 2020). Following the introduction of curfews in Nigeria in March 2020, a staggering 149% monthly increase in GBV case reports was recorded (IGC, 2020).

Uganda also witnessed a disturbing increase in domestic violence reports during the lockdown period. Tragically, several Ugandans have lost their lives due to domestic abuse. In fact, as of March 31, 2020, Ugandan media reported that five individuals had lost their lives due to domestic abuse following the initiation of stay-at-home regulations in mid-March (Byamukama, 2021).

GBV has been a long-standing issue in Africa (Mahtani, 2020; Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020), which the lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have exacerbated. Prior to the pandemic, potentially abusive spouses were engaged in activities outside their homes. The movement restrictions imposed during the pandemic have enforced prolonged cohabitation, increasing tensions and potentially resulting in escalated frustration and aggression among partners (Akpan, 2020).

## 7 | COVID-19 IMPACT ON THE INCREASE IN UNPLANNED PREGNANCIES

Pregnancy and parenthood drive girls out of school, and some schools exclude pregnant or parental girls from enrolling (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Relying on data from previous health crises, it is predicted that reduced access to contraception as a result of COVID-19 could result in between 325,000 and 15 million unwanted pregnancies worldwide, depending on how long the preventive measures for COVID-19 are implemented (UNFPA, 2020). Though the estimate is not broken down by region, it is reasonable to speculate that this increase had a significant impact on SSA. Quarantine highlighted the need for measures to reduce unwanted pregnancies. Traffic restrictions imposed by the government during quarantine restricted access to contraceptives and family planning equipment. The global encounter with COVID-19 was expected to raise the number of unwanted pregnancies in terms of reproductive health (Yazdkhasti, 2020). Unwanted pregnancy is a major healthcare challenge that comes at a high cost to society in terms of socio-economic costs. In other words, unwanted pregnancy has a socioeconomic impact on reproductive indicators in the health system, lowering women's quality of life and workforce productive output (Yazdkhasti et al., 2015).

COVID-19, as a highly transmissible disease, in addition to unwanted pregnancy, can result in high-risk pregnancies. SARS during pregnancy has been linked to spontaneous miscarriage, intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR), preterm labor pain (PLP), intensive care unit admission, endotracheal intubation, and disseminated intravascular coagulopathy (DIC) (Rasmussen et al., 2020). Furthermore, adults' health may impact labor force participation, absence from the workplace, and worker efficiency. Furthermore, macro-level research has found that the population's health significantly affects every country's economic growth rate (Fogel, 2004). An unwanted pregnancy may result in an abortion. With the lockdown period in place, the rate of unsafe abortions could have risen, especially in developing countries. Unsafe abortions may result in mental health problems for women, disability, and even maternal death (Major et al., 2009).

The increase in the risk of unwanted pregnancies due to the COVID-19 lockdown also applies to SSA. Being entrapped by an unwanted pregnancy may particularly damage women from lower-income households since they may be compelled to carry the burden of childbirth and caring on their own. Girls who want to return to school could be discouraged by their peers' stigmatization. Early pregnancies in younger girls have serious consequences: They face the danger of delivery and health-related difficulties such as mortality, preterm births, and vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), which can have long-term detrimental effects on their education and their lives (Akpan, 2020).

## 8 | COVID-19 IMPACT ON THE INCREASE IN THE RISK OF CHILD MARRIAGES

Large-scale school closures may also increase the possibility of child marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In Malawi, South Sudan, and Tanzania, a direct correlation was reported between girls abandoning their education and being pressured into marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affects the daily lives of girls, including their mental and physical health, education, and their families' and communities' economic circumstances. Such changes increase the likelihood of child marriage. The pandemic will place approximately 10 million more girls at risk of becoming child brides in the next decade (UNICEF, 2021). Child marriage is becoming more common, particularly in Africa, because of various causes, such as school closures, economic shocks, and service disruptions caused by the pandemic. It is generally known, for example, that economic uncertainty can lead to child marriage to ease the financial burden on a family.

Child and forced marriage has long been a cultural practice in SSA. Parents regularly marry off their secondary-school-aged daughters. The United Nations Development Program reports that a considerable number of young girls marry before the age of 15 years. This significantly impacts girls' education and, among other things, increases the likelihood of getting obstetric fistulas during childbirth. The COVID-19 restrictions are anticipated to increase the rate of poverty and child marriage in SSA (Akpan, 2020). Though the full extent of the pandemic's impact is unknown, there are steps that will have long-term advantages, which can be taken now to protect young girls. Enacting comprehensive social protection measures, providing equal access to school for all children, building a protective policy and legal framework, addressing social challenges, and ensuring that healthcare and social services for girls are appropriately funded and are accessible to them (UNICEF, 2021).

## 9 | CONCLUSION

Governments across SSA are grappling with the complex effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its socio-economic and educational impact. Amid these challenges, low-income and rural communities face significant educational system disruptions. This article sheds light on policymakers' need to leverage this crisis as a learning opportunity by applying theoretical perspectives on the subject.

Education offers a safeguard for girls against abuse, challenges detrimental gender roles, and fuels aspirations for a brighter future. Proactively mitigating the pandemic's effects and preparing for future uncertainties will expedite the recovery of educational systems and economies, benefiting the most marginalized individuals in society.

The current crisis underscores the importance of not abandoning future generations but maintaining the commitment to ensuring every child has access to stable, affordable, and quality education.

### 9.1 | Recommendations: Advocating for gender-sensitive approaches in response to COVID-19

Given the challenges presented by the pandemic, swift and comprehensive action is crucial for African governments to protect the lives and livelihoods of women and girls.

Public awareness: Enhance efforts to increase public awareness, particularly among boys and men, about the gravity of violence against women and the potential penalties.

Employment flexibility: Encourage policies that provide flexible employment for women, considering their familial responsibilities.

Financial assistance: Provide one-time financial or in-kind assistance to alleviate immediate burdens on affected families.

Gender budgeting: Implement fiscal measures attuned to women's needs through gender budgeting, aiming to address the pandemic's impact.

Support to women-owned businesses: Offer targeted financial support to vulnerable women-owned small- and medium-sized businesses.

Funding women's rights organizations: Amplify funding to women's rights organizations that provide community-level support during the crisis.

Legislative reforms: Advocate for the introduction of new legislation to dismantle oppressive laws against women in SSA.

By integrating these gender-sensitive approaches, grounded in theoretical perspectives, governments can navigate the complexities of the pandemic and bolster a more equitable recovery for the work.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Not applicable.

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