



# COVID-19 AND FEMALE LEARNERS IN SOUTH SUDAN

The impact of school closures in Juba, Rumbek, Kapoeta, Torit and Pibor

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The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting closure of South Sudan's schools in March 2020 exacerbated many of the challenges female learners face in pursuing an education. Research found that increased poverty, domestic care work, early and forced marriage, and teenage pregnancy would make it difficult for female learners to return to schools when they reopened in May 2021. Greater financial and material support to female learners and their schools; more inclusive school environments for mothers, married or pregnant learners; and improved availability of services for learners experiencing gender-based violence, early and forced marriage or pregnancy are necessary to adequately support female learners to continue their education.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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Cover photo: Learners in the accelerated learning programme at Mayo Girls' Primary School in Juba. Photo credit: Mustafa Osman/Oxfam in South Sudan.

# SUMMARY

Female learners in South Sudan face multiple challenges in accessing and completing their education, whether at the primary, secondary or higher-education level (GPE, 2020; World Bank, 2020). They are vulnerable to early and forced marriage, teen pregnancy and gender-based violence (UNICEF, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the closure of South Sudan's schools in March 2020, has exacerbated many of these challenges.

The qualitative research on which this paper is based revealed that many learners were likely to struggle to return to schools when they reopened in May 2021. Female learners reported an increased burden of domestic chores, along with pressure to support income-generating activities for their households, to the point that they felt exhausted and isolated. Furthermore, isolation from peers and teachers who would have usually provided them with psychosocial support had affected their mental health and motivation. Rates of gender-based violence, early/forced marriage and teen pregnancy were anecdotally reported to have increased in the locations visited for this study. Consequently, female learners felt especially discouraged and demotivated about continuing their education.

Ad hoc programmes were implemented by educational stakeholders during the period of school closures, including distributions of food and menstrual hygiene materials, along with awareness-raising campaigns. When provided with comprehensive support, female learners in candidate classes (i.e. those preparing to take exams) showed high rates of participation in alternative education programmes and completion of exams. Varying levels of success were observed with the implementation of distance learning programmes put in place during the pandemic. Home-learning packages, as introduced in some education programmes, seem to have helped motivate and protect learners. However, this type of support was not widely available around the country, and thus there was a need to increase it in terms of both access and scope to help female learners return to school.

The closure of schools in South Sudan undid much of the progress made since independence in increased female enrolment and achievement in education, and therefore presented a complex and challenging context for school reopening. It was clear from the study results that mitigating the challenges faced by female learners in returning to school would require comprehensive support from a variety of educational stakeholders. This briefing paper makes critical recommendations for ensuring female learners continue to learn through periods of school closures, and that the education system is able to adequately ensure the return of female learners now that schools have reopened.

In the short term, we recommend the following:

- Providing increased direct financial and material support to female learners;
- Equipping female learners with menstrual hygiene supplies;

- Creating inclusive school environments for married learners and young mothers; and
- Strengthening services and referral pathways for women and girls experiencing gender-based violence, early/forced marriage or teen pregnancy.

Longer-term recommendations include:

- Implementing broader poverty interventions to alleviate the economic pressure on female learners to drop out;
- Increasing government financial and material support to schools; and
- Enhancing data collection mechanisms to monitor the situation of female learners and their well-being.

Furthermore, it is essential that the government of South Sudan and its partners carry out a comprehensive analysis of the COVID-19 education response, with the aim of informing future policies and programming. They must ensure that future disaster response plans adequately address the learning and protection needs of all learners.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

When COVID-19 became a threat to South Sudan in early 2020, all educational institutions in the country were shut down by presidential directive. This had a significant impact on the young country's education system.

After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 following decades of conflict and displacement in which humanitarian needs were prioritized, the government, aid actors and communities began creating policies, programmes, services and institutions to increase educational enrolment, completion and accessibility. . Particular emphasis was placed on gender disparities, and educational stakeholders sought to address the underlying causes for the low rates of female enrolment at all levels (General Education Strategic Plan South Sudan 2017–2022).

When civil war broke out in 2013, schools in many locations were closed, destroyed or occupied by armed forces or internally displaced persons (IDPs). As a result, educational stakeholders had to re-strategize their education in emergencies programming and provide access to schooling in protection of civilian (PoC) and ad hoc IDP sites (South Sudan Education Cluster, n.d.), while also working to reopen schools in areas where the security situation had stabilized.

After the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan in 2018, many parts of the country saw a decrease in conflict incidents. However, there are still pockets of insecurity and intercommunal violence has increased in many areas (UNMISS, 2021).

Additionally, in 2020, approximately half of South Sudan's counties experienced flooding (OCHA, 2020), and the majority of the population was facing significant food insecurity (Food Security Cluster, 2020). All of these factors contribute to a challenging context for educational services.

In particular, female learners in South Sudan face numerous barriers to accessing education that perpetuate a gender gap enrolment and completion rates (GPE, 2020; UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2020). These barriers include poverty, inadequate educational institutions and a lack of female teachers, in addition to social norms that prioritize marriage, dowries and domestic work over education. Conflict, displacement and the economic crisis have further exacerbated gender disparities in education (JICA, 2017). As well as a gender gap in literacy, numeracy and life skills, these educational gaps lead to disparities in the job market and income-earning potential – and in leadership positions in government, the private sector and aid organizations (JICA, 2017). As most women and girls earn income in the informal sector (University of Juba, 2020), they are more susceptible to economic shocks and environmental hazards. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, it compounded a context filled with numerous challenges for female learners.

To better understand the impact of school closures, researchers conducted qualitative research with female learners enrolled in primary schools and alternative learning programmes (ALPs) and with educational stakeholders, including local government officials, community leaders, school staff and NGOs supporting schools (see **Section 3** for the methodology, including participants and locations). Schools reopened in May 2021 after more than a year of being closed. The aim of this research is to enable the government, aid actors and communities to address issues that arise following the reopening. The findings demonstrate how the daily lives of female learners were impacted by the closures, how they were supported during this period, and what needs to be done for them to continue their education.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

South Sudan's Education Act of 2012 established that primary education is both free and compulsory for the country's citizens and prohibits discriminatory practices that inhibit a citizen's ability to access education (Ministry of Education, 2012). As part of this, the education system is mandated to 'promote gender equity throughout the primary, secondary and other institutions of learning' (Ibid, p.7).

The structure of the general education system includes both formal and informal education services, divided into pre-school, primary, secondary, alternative learning systems and adult education. In terms of administration, it is recommended that government regulation of schools is accompanied by the establishment of parent-teacher associations (PTAs) for primary schools, and boards of governors for secondary schools and beyond.

### PRE-PANDEMIC SITUATION

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, female learners faced significant challenges in accessing and completing education in South Sudan. The female literacy rate for those 15 years of age and older in South Sudan is 28.9%, compared to 40% for men (World Bank, 2020). Female learners in South Sudan are expected to receive 3.5 years of schooling on average, compared with their male counterparts who are expected to receive 5.9. Many aspects of the classroom environment do not favour enrolment and retention: according to the UNDP (2021), only 44% of teachers in the country are trained, and the average class size is approximately 47 students.

One critical obstacle female learners have faced is the high rate of early/forced marriage and Gender-based violence. Some 52% of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18. An estimated 9% of girls in South Sudan are married by the age of 15 and the birth rate for girls aged 15–19 is 62% (UNICEF, 2021). UNICEF (2019) also estimates that half of the women in South Sudan have experienced intimate partner violence. Another

UNICEF paper indicates that the majority of girls and women experience sexual violence for the first time under the age of 18 (UNICEF 2019).

## SCHOOL CLOSURES

In March 2020, Vice President Abdelbagi Akol announced that educational institutions at all levels would be closed for 30 days (Emmanuel, 2020). The order was renewed for a further 30 days, and then indefinitely. Though South Sudan had not yet registered its first case of COVID-19, closures were mandated to prevent the spread of the virus, particularly given that the limited health infrastructure in the country would be unable to support the population in the case of a significant outbreak.

In July 2020, UNESCO and UNICEF released a joint statement advocating for the reopening of schools in South Sudan (Ayoya and Banda, 2020). The organizations argued that the risks to children outweighed the benefits of keeping them home, noting that '[w]hen children are out of school for prolonged periods of time, their exposure to physical, emotional and sexual violence increases. Their mental health deteriorates. They are more vulnerable to child labour and less likely to break out of the cycle of poverty'. In relation to the impact on girls, the authors observed that 'when girls remain out of school they are at higher risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, including child marriage', especially for those also living in poverty or situations of displacement.

While the government did not consider it appropriate to fully reopen schools in July, schools did resume for 'candidate classes' – that is, for those preparing students to take final exams. ALPs were not specified in this directive for the partial reopening of schools, and at the time of writing, data was not available as to what extent these programmes in general had reopened. In February 2021, the government announced a new set of restrictions on movement and school closures to curb a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases. These restrictions were renewed in March 2021, and subject to review after a month by the national task force on COVID-19, led by Vice President Abdelbagi Akol. Schools fully reopened in May 2021.

The Education Cluster in South Sudan released a 'School Reopening Checklist' in 2020, which outlined steps that could be taken to prepare facilities, accommodate social distancing, improve sanitation and hygiene practices, monitor the health of school staff and students, and communicate strategies. It also covered safe food preparation, child protection and psychosocial services (South Sudan Education Cluster, 2020). However, the guidance did not provide specific steps to be taken to accommodate the unique needs of female learners.

## GENDERED IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

Reports from UN agencies, NGOs, civil society and local government officials have found that rates of early and forced marriage, teen pregnancy and gender-based violence increased during the school closures. In schools

supported by the Building Resilience in Crisis through Education (BRiCE) programme, the research from this study found that the number of pregnancies had almost doubled compared with the previous year. A 2020 UN Women study indicated that low literacy levels have put women and girls at a disadvantage during the pandemic, as they cannot access written materials and information that would help keep them safe. It also found that many women who sold goods in markets felt they had no option but to continue working, so as not to lose their only source of income. Girls experienced an increase in domestic chores as they were not attending school, and incidents of gender-based violence were rarely reported due to a lack of trust in local authorities, as well as a lack of awareness of their rights. A study conducted by the University of Juba (2020) in conjunction with UNDP revealed that women accounted for 72% of heads of household without any education in Juba. Given that they often work in the informal economy, the economic crisis has left them with few income-generating opportunities. The study also noted that there had been a rise in recent cases of domestic violence, which was primarily attributed to the pandemic.

#### **Box 1: BRiCE programme**

BRiCE (Building Resilience in Crisis through Education) is a four-year programme funded by the EU with the aim of providing IDPs and host communities with quality and protective education through the provision of accelerated education programmes and initiatives to strengthen educational systems. The project has a strong focus on gender, teacher professional development and the role of teachers, as well as advocacy. It also includes a research component on the well-being of teachers and learners. In South Sudan, the programme is implemented in Torit, Kapoeta and Juba by AVSI South Sudan, the Community Development Initiative and Oxfam in South Sudan, and runs until 2022.

While South Sudan has been grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent impact it has had on communities, other crises have worsened. In 2020, over half of South Sudan's counties experienced flooding (OCHA, 2020). Food insecurity worsened, with half of the country's counties estimated to be at a critical level by the end of 2020 (IPC Phase 3 Crisis levels, Food Security Cluster, 2020). An economic crisis that began with the outbreak of conflict in 2013, and which was exacerbated by hyper-inflation in 2015, worsened in 2020 with further inflation, as well as the impact on livelihoods of border closures and bans on social gatherings.

The multiple crises faced by the South Sudanese people, compounded by a history of under-development and entrenched patriarchy, created a precarious situation for female learners ahead of schools reopening. All of these factors raise the risk that gender inequities in the education system will increase, and that female learners will become more vulnerable to early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and teen pregnancy.

# 3 METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative methods to collect primary data in November and December 2020, supplemented by a literature review. Specifically, key informant interviews (KIIs) with educational stakeholders and focus group discussions (FGDs) with female learners were used to collect data from 10 schools in different parts of the country. The list of key informant participants, as well as schools targeted for FGDs, were agreed upon between the Institute of Social and Policy Research and Oxfam in South Sudan.

This methodology allowed for detailed and nuanced data on the lived experiences and perspectives of both educational stakeholders and the female learners they support. Educational stakeholders, including government officials, national and international partner organizations, and community leaders were selected as participants for the KIIs. Female learners from candidate classes were recruited to participate in FGDs, as schools were only open to these learners at the time the research was carried out.

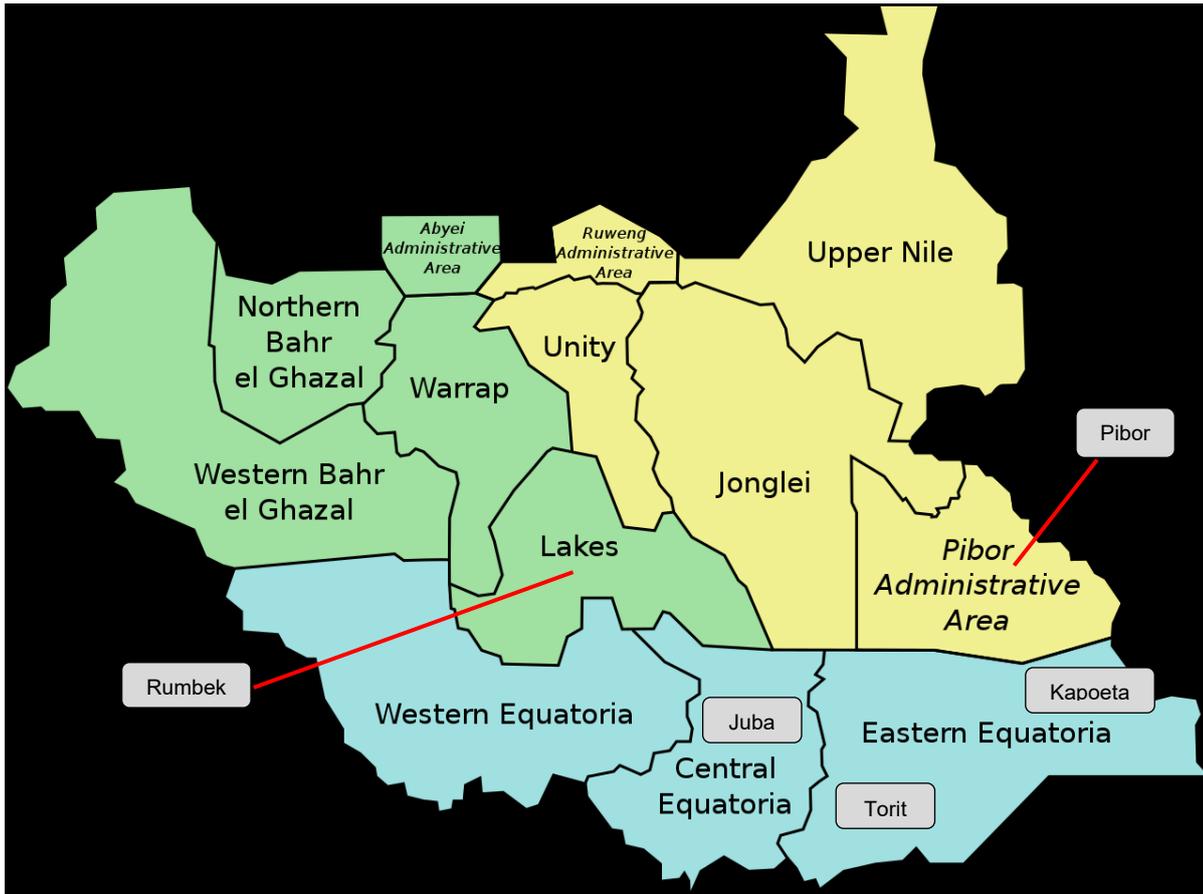
## LOCATIONS

Data collection was conducted in five different locations, with priority given to where Oxfam and its partners are currently supporting educational programmes. In four of these locations include schools supported by the EU-funded BRiCE programme, including schools managed by the Italian INGO Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI) and the local organization Community Development Initiative (CDI).

Ten schools were identified for this study – two in each area. The selected schools were located in the following areas (marked in grey on the map):

- Juba (Central Equatoria State);
- Kapoeta (Eastern Equatoria State);
- Torit (Eastern Equatoria State);
- Pibor (Pibor Administrative Area); and
- Rumbek (Lakes State).

Figure 1: Locations of schools selected for the study



Except for Kapoeta, these locations are state/area capitals and major towns. As a result, much of the data collected reflects the experiences of key informants and female learners located in more urban areas; those residing in more remote rural areas may have had different experiences, particularly due to their more limited access to government institutions, civil society and NGO services and programmes, as well as market systems. It is also the case that poverty in South Sudan tends to be more concentrated in rural areas (Pape & Finn, 2019).

## PARTICIPANTS

The KIs were held with different educational stakeholders involved in the well-being of female learners, and/or those responsible for implementing relevant programmes, policies and services. These included:

- National-level government officials;
- State and county level government officials;
- Local leaders, e.g. chiefs;
- Head teachers and teachers;
- Oxfam project implementing partner organizations, e.g. CDI, Disabled Association for Relief and Development (DARD), Serving and Learning Together (SALT), Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and AVSI; and

- Committees responsible for supporting the management of schools, e.g. parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and school management committees (SMCs).

In total, 106 female learners aged 12–28 enrolled in primary schools as well as ALPs were interviewed in 14 FGDs. The significant variation in learners' ages is due to the nature of the ALPs, which provide a second chance at education for youth. In Juba, the research team was also able to conduct an FGD with five male learners aged 12–28 to obtain their perspectives on the broader impacts of school closures, as well as the gender dynamics of the situation.

## QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Key informants were asked questions about how female learners had been impacted during the school closures, how they had been supported by different educational stakeholders within their communities, and what needed to be done in order to prepare for the reopening of schools for all.

The FGDs sought to document how participants' daily lives had changed, the challenges and risks they had experienced, the support they had received during this time, and what they thought was needed to prepare for the reopening of schools.

## LIMITATIONS

The main limitations of this study are its primary focus on large towns, and that four out of five locations contained schools supported by Oxfam's EU-supported BRiCE programme. As a result, the study does not include the perspectives of educational stakeholders and female learners in rural settings, nor communities who may not be receiving comprehensive support from educational partners. Furthermore, participants were female learners in candidate classes (i.e. students preparing for exams), as they were the only students attending schools during the period of school closures. Since most learners were not back in school when the research took place, we relied on these students to relay their experiences. The findings of the study therefore reflect the experiences of the learners in candidate classes rather than learners at all levels.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Oxfam and its implementing partners helped mobilize participants, obtaining consent from local authorities to conduct the study and identifying appropriate key informants. The partner organizations were AVSI (Torit), DARD (Rumbek), SALT (Pibor) and CDI (Kapoeta). Oxfam staff provided support in Juba and Pibor.

At the beginning of each interview or focus group, the researchers outlined the purpose of the study to participants, as well as how the data would be

used. Participants were reassured that they would remain anonymous in any publications. They were also notified that their participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to end the interview/FGD at any time, and that they had the right to decline to answer any specific questions. Verbal consent to audio-record sessions was requested from each participant prior to starting. If any participant opted not to be recorded, the researcher took notes by hand instead. Due to the low levels of literacy in South Sudan, informed consent was obtained verbally from each participant.

Researchers wrote up notes from each KII and FGD at the end of every day and shared them with the lead consultant. These notes included summaries of each respondent's answers, as well as key quotes. The data was coded and analysed using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) to identify emergent themes prevalent across locations. The identified themes structured the findings section of this briefing paper and informed its recommendations. Additionally, if findings and contexts were unique to a particular location, this was noted in the analysis.

## 4 KEY FINDINGS

The research revealed that the impact of school closures on female learners was significant, regardless of age and location. Barriers to learning that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were exacerbated by the closures, and respondents anticipated that they would prevent many female learners from returning to school.

Female learners told researchers that they faced a lot of uncertainty about when and whether schools in their community would reopen. Many relayed anecdotes of female learners who got married or pregnant, or engaged in livelihoods and relationships that made them vulnerable to exploitation. It is imperative that educational stakeholders are aware of the types of challenges likely to arise, as well as their scope, in order to adequately support female learners to return to school and complete their education.

While the findings present the broad themes that were prevalent across all research locations, there are variations across the country in terms of the cultural, social, political, environmental and economic contexts; the programmes and services available; and the level of access to government institutions. This study was primarily conducted in urban areas, where support from government and civil society is more prevalent than in rural areas, which are often more deprived. Educational stakeholders should take these variations into account when designing programmes, services and policies to support female learners in returning to school.

The challenges experienced by female learners may also vary according to age; for example, ALP learners tend to have more significant responsibilities in terms of childcare and income-generation, which were both made more difficult during the school closures. Primary learners, who tend to be

younger, struggled more with social isolation and the increased burden of domestic chores.

## REASONS FOR SCHOOL CLOSURES

In this study, participants identified COVID-19 as the primary reason for school closures. According to the National Ministry of Education, it was the first time that the Government of South Sudan had issued instructions for all schools across the nation to be closed. However, for some locations in South Sudan, there were other factors behind why schools had closed and might struggle to reopen.

Intercommunal violence and disasters from natural hazards such as flooding are other key reasons for school closures in South Sudan, although these are usually temporary in nature.

Even though the government mandated the reopening of schools across the country, it was anticipated that many households would not have the resources to send their children back to school, and that communities would not have the resources needed to reopen schools. In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty, lack of resources, the impact of disasters from natural hazards and displacement all create additional challenges that hinder the resilience of communities and their educational institutions.

Pibor, in particular, presents a challenging context. Key informants here attributed the closure of schools to COVID-19, flooding, intercommunal violence, poverty and a lack of teachers. As one women's leader in Pibor explained, 'The conflict and the flooding made the community become vulnerable economically. Some families became poor. It became difficult for them to recover and send their children to school, hence some schools were closed'. Furthermore, some school sites in Pibor are used to host IDPs. These challenges were present in Pibor in 2019, and communities did not have a chance to recover before they were hit by COVID-19 in 2020. Schools in Rumbek have also been impacted by flooding and insecurity.

## IMPACT ON SCHOOL STAFFING

Retention of teachers is important in terms of getting female learners back in school. Teachers who were employed before the pandemic know their learners as well as their backgrounds, and are therefore in a better position to reach out to learners and their families than new teachers.

During the study, participants reported that some teachers who were working in schools that closed had sought out alternative employment in order to support their families, usually with NGOs or by starting up small businesses. In Torit, key informants reported that teachers had resorted to joining the army or police force, becoming *boda boda* (motorcycle taxi) drivers or security guards. Some PTA members also observed that teachers in their community had left for Juba.

Many female learners and educational stakeholders emphasized that teachers needed to be given more financial support through increased salaries or incentives. Given that teachers' salaries are often quite low, and in some schools may often be delayed for months, there were concerns that it would be difficult to recruit sufficient teachers for the next school year. Additionally, the teachers who resorted to employment with NGOs and other sectors were often the most qualified in terms of academic credentials, meaning that schools would have a less qualified pool of applicants to select from when they reopened. In Pibor, school staffing was a significant problem prior to the closure of schools; participants noted the lack of trained teachers, as well as the tendency of teachers not to show up for class.

Financial incentives for teachers were noted to make a significant difference in a school's ability to retain its teaching staff. Head teachers in BRiCE-supported schools noted that they were able to keep most, if not all, of their teaching staff thanks to the incentives provided through the programme. Head teachers, however, expressed concerns about the levels of inflation in the country, and whether incentives at their current levels would be sufficient to maintain their staff when schools reopened.

## **NEGATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS**

When asked about the impact of school closures on their daily lives, female learners in all locations stated that they had been given more responsibilities for household chores and childcare. As one female learner in Kapoeta said, 'When I was at home, my mother gave birth. I [had] to help her with washing, bring water for showers, feed my younger siblings, go to the market to make money and feed the family'.

Displacement and conflict in South Sudan have also led to an increase in the number of female- and child-headed households. Combined with social norms that place the burden of domestic chores and childcare on female household members, losing access to education had a significant impact on how female learners allocated their time and energy. Taking on these additional responsibilities was not optional for girls and women, as one participant in Kapoeta pointed out: 'We overwork at home, and if you tell them you're tired they consider you lazy'. Similarly, a female learner in Rumbek described the impact of these responsibilities on learners' mental health: 'We are overworking at home, conducting domestic activities, fetching water, cooking, farm work. We are too stressed. When we are at school, we feel good, as we only engage in reading, not the hard work at home'.

Female learners also said that they felt cut off from their social support mechanisms during this time. They primarily referred to the loss of their peer groups. As a female learner based in Torit said, 'We used to share ideas together, but since some of us have dropped out we are struggling to build new friendships'. Another explained, 'We want to tell you that many of us are feeling stress, anxiety, isolation and depression, because at some point

there has been [a] lack of contact with our [friends] and school community when the school was closed, and this is the same with our sister[s] at home'. In addition to the additional stress they were dealing with during this time, female learners also lost their support mechanisms, which compounded the psychosocial and social impact of the closure of schools. Learners in multiple locations also noted that they had been affected by the closure of churches and ban on religious gatherings.

A key informant in Juba said that 'Most of the girls are at home every day, and they feel imprisoned by their parents, since in school they had friends and classmates who would move around with them. They ask all the time when school would open so they [can be] set free'. Female learners also said in the interviews that being cut off from their social networks made it difficult to navigate pressures to get married, and some of the focus groups revealed that many such female learners felt they had no option but to accept these circumstances. In Torit, some female learners explained how their fears of dying from COVID-19 led them to get pregnant so that they could leave a legacy for their parents.

## **INCREASED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, FORCED MARRIAGE AND TEENAGE PREGNANCY**

Both female learners and key stakeholders in all locations observed an increase in gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, and teen pregnancy compared with 2019. A women's leader in Torit observed that in her community, some learners had started engaging in sex work while '...others are pregnant, some are rape victims and others are forced to marry'. Similar findings were shared by a government official in Rumbek: 'Most girl learners got married voluntarily, others were forced into marriages, others got unintended pregnancies, and teen marriages became common'. Participants in all locations attributed these increases directly to the closure of schools, which made female learners of all ages more vulnerable.

As one female learner in Kapoeta explained, 'We also have our parents in the villages who took the closure of school as an opportunity for us to get married'. Similarly, her peer said that, 'People in the community are also competing in the village. Sometimes one family gives their girl for marriage and they go convincing others to give out [their female children for marriage] as well, and parents normally do it'. This highlights the important role that other stakeholders have in supporting female learners, as they require assistance to advocate within their families and communities for marriage to be delayed, and to be allowed to complete their education.

As another female learner in the community said, communal pressure plays a role in early and forced marriage: 'The community would say to your parents, "Why are you here? When your daughter is in school, they are becoming prostitutes, she may become pregnant. Better give her for marriage in order to get dowry." And the parents sometimes agree. When

these challenges happen, sometimes the church helps, but they come and take us out [of school]. If you refuse [to get married] you would get beaten and be taken back home’.

A women’s leader in Rumbek noted an increase in women and girls being moved to cattle camps for marriage: ‘The rate of forced marriages in the cattle camps is alarming from what other women are telling us’. In these instances, women and girls are not given a choice, as they face pressure from their family and community to comply.

While some participants said that if they or their peers were either being forced to marry or facing gender-based violence they should reach out for help, others felt that they had little power or choice, and simply had to accept the situation they were in. A number of female learners also said that if they refused to get married, they would be beaten. Narratives emerged of learners who had run away to other areas of the country or even crossed international borders to escape this fate.

Due to the increase in domestic chores and responsibilities resulting from school closures, young girls were often having to travel to nearby streams, forests or markets, which made them vulnerable to sexual assault. This was noted in all locations by multiple key informants, who observed an increase in the number of rapes among their peers compared with the previous year. In some areas intercommunal violence had worsened, increasing the risk that women and girls would be abducted and forced to marry and bear children in other communities, leaving them little opportunity for education.

Female learners and educational stakeholders also noted that due to stigma, combined with pressure from families and communities, once a girl has become married or pregnant, it is very difficult for her to return to her studies. As observed by a female learner in Kapoeta, ‘Sometimes parents give their daughters for marriage, convincing them that the man will take them to school, but it never happens’. This is one of several factors that contribute to low completion rates for lower secondary education for girls in South Sudan – 12.7% for girls compared with 23.2 % for boys (World Bank 2011). In Pibor, female learners advocated for the establishment of boarding schools in their community, as this would allow them to complete their education in a safe environment, away from the pressures of their families and communities.

## **FINANCIAL BARRIERS AND INCOME GENERATION**

Many female learners said that financial barriers continued to impact their access to education, preventing them from completing their studies. In South Sudan, legislation states that primary education should be free (MoEST 2015). However, due to the lack of financial support from the national government, schools often charge ‘registration fees’ to cover their overhead costs and pay staff. Secondary schools and private educational institutions are legally able to charge tuition. The increasing cost of

education presents an additional barrier for female learners to progress from primary to secondary school.

The financial situation for households appeared to be different in Juba, where many of the female learners said that they relied on the salaries of their parents or other family members to support their households and cover school fees.

Outside of Juba, participants explained that the economic crisis was worsening because of hyperinflation, restrictions on movement, the closure of businesses, and displacement and food insecurity due to intercommunal violence and flooding. This had made it increasingly difficult for many female learners and their families to pay school fees. Even when female learners found ways to obtain the financial resources themselves, without the assistance of family members, the resources they had secured might be taken from them by family members. As one female learner in Kapoeta stated, 'When asking for school money from parents, they don't take care of you; they say you are doing nothing. And when you go making money for your education, they take it away. This makes us drop out'.

Further, female learners reported that more of them had been seeking income-generating opportunities to support their families in order to provide food, menstrual hygiene supplies and other basic goods while schools were closed. As a female learner in Kapoeta explained, 'Most girls do not have money to buy sanitary pads. This in turn makes them be exploited by boys when they were at home'. Indeed, female learners in all five locations consistently identified the provision of dignity kits as a key factor in supporting their return to school. Female learners in this study were asked to identify the key income-generating activities that women and girls in their community rely on. Brewing alcohol for sale in local markets was a common answer among female learners living in Kapoeta. In other locations, female learners had also sought out employment by working in hotels, selling food items in the market, making crafts or even undertaking sex work.

In Juba, a key informant observed that, 'In an economic situation where most families are poor, they take the opportunity to send their children to the market to sell goods to earn for the family'. Even this became more challenging as the economy worsened and the demand for their products and services decreased. As a female learner in Torit recounted, 'Some of us learned some business skills which was good, but COVID-19 destroyed the markets and we cannot put the skills to use any more'.

Collecting dowry has become a financial survival mechanism for families that do not have access to sufficient assets and means of generating income. Female learners in Rumbek indicated that flooding in their communities had led to increased rates of early and forced marriage: 'Many communities lost their crops, and as such they decided that their children were becoming a burden to them. Therefore, marrying them off would ease the burden', one said.

An FGD with male learners in Juba also revealed that many of them had resorted to trying to generate income when schools closed. Driving *boda*

*bodas* was the most frequently listed activity; however, some participants also noted that their peers had engaged in criminal activities or joined gangs. While male learners were not interviewed in other locations, key informants observed similar trends. In Rumbek, it was also noted that some male learners had left the towns for cattle camps in order to support their families' livelihoods, ending up engaging in intercommunal violence that risked them being killed. Key informants in Rumbek explained that this could have consequences for their siblings: 'Some of the parents who lost their own children during communal conflict are now preventing their other children [from] going to school, because they need the ones left to remain helping them'.

## DECREASING MOTIVATION

Female learners emphasized the impact that being out of school for so long had had on their learning. Many of them reported feeling bored at home, unmotivated to continue with their education, and that they had forgotten much of what they had learned the previous year. Particularly with the increase in household chores and responsibilities, studying independently at home had not been possible for many of the female learners in this study. As one female learner in Kapoeta said, 'Whenever we tried reading, parents would say "school has not opened, so get to work"'. Thus, female learners felt that they had fallen behind in their studies and were being pressured to prioritize helping their families. While female learners had often assisted with such tasks in the past, many of them reported that their burdens had increased to the point that they were left exhausted and unable to independently study at home.

While candidate classes for students with exams had restarted by the end of 2020, students were concerned that they might not have adequate time to successfully prepare for their exams. Given the additional effort and sacrifices that female learners must make in order to obtain their education, the possibility that they might not pass and have to repeat a year of school was disheartening. Female learners from candidate classes also expressed concerns for their peers in other classes who were losing their motivation to continue with their education, especially since an official decision to reopen schools had only come recently. In Torit, key informants also said that the fear of being stigmatized for repeating a class was a frequent concern of female learners.

Motivation to continue with schooling had a strong connection with poverty, and the fact that many learners started generating income during the pandemic. For both male and female learners, the increased pressure to meet basic needs had inevitably increased the pressure on them to sustain their income-generating activities, rather than return to school. The lack of adequately qualified teachers as well as teacher absenteeism described in some places also affected learner motivation. This was especially noted in Pibor, where teachers are not paid incentives.

## GENDERED IMPACTS

Both female learners and educational stakeholders noted that there were significant differences in the way in which male and female learners had been impacted by the closure of schools. Historically, many communities in South Sudan have prioritized sending boys to school. As a result, there is long-standing inequality between boys and girls in enrolment and completion rates. Primary education net enrolment for girls is 30%, while it is 40% for boys (2015 data, World Bank 2020). Completion rates for girls is 19%, while it is 35% for boys (2011 data, World Bank, 2020). Learners and educational stakeholders who participated in this study predicted that these disparities would increase in 2021 as a result of the school closures in 2020.

When relating differences in how their everyday lives had changed, female learners had been increasingly burdened by household chores and childcare responsibilities, which are traditionally not given to male family members.

Male learners tended to not be negatively impacted by the trends in early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and teen pregnancy. The primary impact they experienced was additional financial pressures to support their families and to provide dowry payments if they got married or fathered a child. Although this could be a potential challenge for male learners in returning to school, marriage and parenthood does not bring the same stigma as for female learners and therefore does not exclude male learners from returning to school.

Additionally, the ability of male learners to get married was closely tied to the marriages of their female siblings, as indicated by one female learner who stated that 'Parents give their girls for marriage so as to get money to pay for the male child to marry. This discourages some girls from going to school.' A youth leader in Pibor observed that male learners were also forced into marriage by their families if they had the cattle to pay dowry; however, this point was not raised in other locations. Participants in the study also observed that male learners had increased their consumption of alcohol and 'idleness' during the period of school closures. Some key informants noted that the majority of homeless children were male, and their numbers had increased in 2020. Key informants and female learners also blamed poverty and the closure of schools for what they perceived as an increase in minor criminal behaviour by male learners.

Looking to the future, female learners noted that they would face greater challenges in being able to return to school than their male counterparts. As a result, any future programmes and services that are designed by educational stakeholders need to consider how the school closures have impacted female and male learners differently.

## REDUCED COMMUNITY SUPPORT FROM PTAS AND SMCS

Most schools have either a PTA or SMC, consisting of school staff and parents from the local community. Prior to the closure of schools, these groups oversaw budgets and staff, liaised with local communities, and mobilized resources to support the functioning of schools. The involvement and capacity of these committees vary from school to school. Indeed, not all of them were active prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of learners said that these committees had not been active since schools closed, although a few key informants noted that PTAs had taken at least one kind of action during the period. Examples included distributing the remaining food supplies that schools had in storage, speaking to female learners to encourage them when they were feeling demotivated, and advocating for the reopening of schools.

As liaisons between communities and schools, PTAs and SMCs ideally could have played a role in supporting female learners during the period of school closures, particularly in relation to early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and teen pregnancy. Community and familial support are critical in advocating for the well-being of female learners, particularly adolescents, as they often lack the social power to be involved in decisions related to their lives.

Representatives of PTAs and SMCs interviewed for this study stated that they were ready to begin supporting schools to prepare for students' return. However, at the local level, county officials said that they had no budget to support reopening, and that the national government needed to provide on how to reopen facilities safely.



A female learner in an accelerated learning programme. Photo: Mustafa Osman/Oxfam in South Sudan.

# EDUCATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS SUPPORTING FEMALE LEARNERS

Throughout the period of school closures, initiatives to help female learners varied by school depending on the support available from educational partners. School sites were previously often used to implement programmes and services for female learners, in addition to formal education. These included cash transfers, distributions of dignity kits and hygiene products, food programmes and awareness-raising campaigns. Female learners in schools had also been able to access a community of stakeholders that could help them navigate challenges, such as pressure to get married from their families and communities. However, when schools closed, many of these programmes and support services were stopped indefinitely. At the time of the study some partners had been able to resume their activities, albeit in an ad hoc manner, although they did not have the reach and scope required to meet the demand in their communities. As these partners did not have independent sources of funding, they relied on donors and INGOs to provide the necessary resources.

Knowledge of and access to services varied both between and within locations visited for this study – many of the programmes and services were organized and delivered locally. In some instances, female learners were able to identify local government officials, community leaders and NGOs that they could contact if they needed assistance relating to gender-based violence or early and forced marriage. However, in some areas, female learners said that no such options were available to them.

At the national level, the Girls Education South Sudan (GESS) GESS programme has resumed its cash payments to students; however, GESS activities were reduced during school closures and because of accessibility challenges posed by the pandemic.

## Box 2: GESS programme

Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) is an inclusive programme that aims to transform the lives of a generation of children in South Sudan, especially girls and those on the margins of society, through education. It focuses on behaviour change communication, cash transfers, capitation grants, quality of education and knowledge, evidence, research and learning.

Some NGOs also supported female learners in candidate classes by, for example, distributing hygiene items, dignity kits and school materials, or paying school fees. For example, the BRiCE programme supported female learners in candidate classes to continue accessing ALP courses, and also covered their exam fees. Learners were provided with masks, hand sanitizer and hand-washing stations to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 as they prepared for their exams. According to head teachers in BRiCE-supported schools, female learners performed well in the primary-level exam in 2020 due to the assistance they received.

During the school closures, radio programmes run by the Government of South Sudan provided educational lessons, awareness-raising for learners and their families regarding COVID-19, and specialized programming on the prevention of early and forced marriage, and gender-based violence. Learners were able to call the radio station with questions. However, female learners and educational stakeholders reported that the programmes were not accessible to all students: 'As these programmes were based on radio, few learners were able to access the services as most of them do not have radios', a key informant in Torit told us. Another key informant observed that, because the programmes were aired during the day when not everyone was at home, they were not regularly listened to by the few female learners who did have access to radios. This was particularly true for female learners who had to take on more domestic chores or household activities, or pursue other income-generating activities. In Rumbek, similar findings were observed, and the heavy burden of domestic chores often interfered with the ability of female learners to access these programmes. Colleagues from AVSI and CDI pointed out that radio signals are not available to all communities in Eastern Equatoria.

BRiCE-supported schools introduced home-learning packages. These were assignments that students picked up from their school each week, and returned to their teachers for grading the following week. Schools in different locations provided these packages differently. While some schools could only provide packages to some levels of ALP classes, others were able to provide them to all classes. Head teachers noted that they had high participation rates among students, and they actively followed up with students who were not turning in their work. Students also reported that they found the home-learning packages an effective method of learning while schools were closed, as the packages allowed them to complete the work at a time that was convenient to them, and they were still able to ask their teachers questions. Head teachers noted that learners in the first levels of ALPs may have had more challenges with home-learning packages as they were still developing their literacy skills; however, they noted that this did not mean they should be excluded from such initiatives. Both female learners and educational stakeholders in relevant areas recommended that home-learning packages be continued for as long as schools were closed – and that they be provided to all classes.

Key informants from NGOs reported conducting awareness campaigns on preventing early and forced marriage in areas such as Kapoeta. However, due to a lack of comprehensive and consistent data in South Sudan on child marriage rates, it is challenging to track the impact of such interventions. Additionally, until underlying factors are addressed, knowledge on the harmful impacts of such behaviours is insufficient to create substantial change, particularly in rural areas. A female learner in Rumbek emphasized this point when she said, 'If there are economic activities, this may reduce our fathers fighting our mothers and even us as children'. Thus, campaigns to discourage gender-based violence and early and forced marriage should adopt a multi-sectoral approach.

In many countries, government officials and institutions provide services and protection to women and girls, particularly when it comes to early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and teen pregnancy. However,

government institutions in South Sudan often lack the resources and comprehensive legislation to enforce these protections, or to hold perpetrators accountable. During 2020, many local and state government positions had not been filled yet as part of the creation of the new government. As a result, officials were usually in 'caretaker' positions, and faced difficulty implementing accountability mechanisms.

In Torit, a women's leader noted that this gap in governance had led to many parents forcing early marriage on their daughters without fear of repercussion. For example, key informants in Torit reported that an estimated 400–500 cases of gender-based violence, early and forced marriage and teen pregnancy had been reported to local authorities in 2020. In Rumbek, female learners cited poor enforcement of laws that protect women and girls against gender-based violence and early and forced marriage as one of the key challenges they face. The Ministry of Gender in Rumbek reported in its interview that cases of these types of incidents had tripled in 2020, compared with 2019.

## **PREPARATIONS FOR REOPENING SCHOOLS**

Most participants in this study observed that much still needed to be done to safely reopen schools and support female learners in returning. In addition to preparing school facilities, female learners said that they would require assistance in terms of school fees, materials, uniforms and food, as well as support to address the stigmatization of their peers who had married or become pregnant during school closures.

In Kapoeta, a number of key informants noted that parents were eager for schools to reopen, and had started contributing money and assets to cover school fees, pay teachers' incentives and purchase uniforms and books, as well as prepare the school facilities. One school was mentioned for having acquired soap and water for handwashing. NGOs, including Oxfam, were reported to have provided masks, water tanks and soap, and also to have assisted with the disinfection of school facilities. A key informant working with an INGO based in Juba noted that the ability to disinfect school facilities might not be effective or possible in all locations. For example, some schools had constructed classrooms and desks using locally available materials that could not be easily sanitized.

Due to classroom overcrowding, interviewees noted that it would be difficult for many schools in South Sudan to safely practice social distancing. When only students in candidate classes were attending regularly, schools were able to use their existing facilities in a socially distanced manner. It was anticipated that with the return of all classes, it would be a challenge for many schools, as they did not have adequate space for social distancing. Some schools were seeking capitation grants from the GESS programme to improve their infrastructure, which would make social distancing easier.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant school closures, the Government of South Sudan and aid partners had implemented a number of policies, programmes and services to improve educational access and completion for female learners. However, due to the prolonged period of school closures, that progress is at risk of being reversed unless comprehensive interventions are implemented.

This study revealed that female learners of all ages have faced increased challenges in their education, as well as in their personal and social lives, because of the pandemic. Educational stakeholders and female learners observed that rates of gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy and early or forced marriage had increased while schools were closed. Those interviewed indicated that many of their peers in lower level classes felt discouraged from continuing their education, and were facing immense pressure to support their families through generating income, obtaining dowries and/or taking on additional domestic chores. Being isolated from peers and other social networks also meant that female learners were struggling to deal with these increasing challenges alone. Study participants stressed that retaining teachers who already had an established relationship with all learners would be important in terms of getting female learners back in school. It was also noted that other challenges to female learners, such as food insecurity, intercommunal violence and disasters from natural hazards, had been compounded by the economic crisis and the pandemic.

While some organizations were able to provide ad hoc services to female learners during the closures, regular programming was stopped. Support from NGOs in South Sudan led to high rates of participation in distance learning as well as in primary-level exams, as evidenced in the schools that participate in the EU-funded BRiCE programme. The resumption of programming – as well as the introduction of additional resources and interventions designed specifically to encourage female learners to return to school – were seen as critical to getting back on track and supporting female learners in achieving their educational goals once schools reopened.

The findings of the study indicate that material and financial support provided to female learners in candidate classes during the period of school closures allowed them to return to classrooms safely and complete their exams successfully. Learners and educational stakeholders asserted the importance of financial support to keep education accessible to female learners. They also supported increasing access to distance-learning options that keep learners engaged and motivated. While the radio learning programme provided by the Government of South Sudan could have been improved in order to reach more learners, the home learning packages seemed to have worked well, including for older learners. The provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH supplies), especially including dignity kits, were also noted as

important. Such initiatives provided useful models to guide the design of interventions by educational stakeholders when schools reopened for all.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Given that COVID-19 and the resulting school closures have had multi-faceted impacts on female learners, including increased poverty, gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, and teenage pregnancy, it is imperative that any programmes and policies created to support female learners take this complex context into consideration through multi-sectoral approaches. All stakeholders – national, state and local government officials; school officials; civil society organizations and NGOs; and community members – have a significant role in helping the education system recover.

### SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **PROVIDE PPE, SANITATION SUPPLIES AND DIGNITY KITS**

Now that schools have reopened, reopen, PPE, WASH supplies and dignity kits are required on a greater scale. Sufficient materials were being provided when only candidate classes were using the schools visited during this study. However, now that all classes have returned, further supplies are needed. This includes enough dignity kits to last each learner for the school term.

#### **INCREASE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR FEMALE LEARNERS**

The primary form of external financial support provided to female learners is through the GESS programme. However, given the current inflation and food insecurity across South Sudan greater interventions that address poverty are needed. This was also emphasized in UNESCO's (2020) 'back to school' guide. Many of the female learners in this study reported that school fees continued to be a barrier to accessing education. Due to the impact of COVID-19 on the economy, income-generating measures that female learners typically rely on to cover registration fees may no longer be sufficient. Additionally, other items needed for school attendance, such as menstrual hygiene products, may be unaffordable. Dignity kits and cash distribution programmes to support female learners of all ages can alleviate some of these varied financial burdens.

## **FOSTER INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURES THAT WELCOME MARRIED LEARNERS AND TEENAGE MOTHERS**

Respondents anticipated that those who had become wives or mothers during the school closures might not be able to return to school. This is primarily due to stigma, as well as a lack of support from families. While this challenge has existed for a long time, it was anticipated to worsen due to the increased rates of pregnancy and marriage among female learners in 2020. Multiple learners also said that ALP services should be expanded to accommodate those who were expected to drop out of school due to early and forced marriage and/or having a child.

Training for female teachers and women leaders in communities will be critical in changing school cultures (UNESCO et al., 2020). Providing flexibility in modes of learning (e.g. through distance learning), curricula and schedules will be important in increasing access for female learners. (Ibid.) Extensive outreach is required to reach married learners and teenage mothers, in order to ensure that they feel welcomed into learning spaces and have the support they need to return to school.

## **PROVIDE MENTORSHIP FOR FEMALE LEARNERS**

Even when the material needs of female learners are met, they still have psychological, social and personal needs. Addressing resistance from family and communities to pursuing their education can be difficult in isolation. One NGO, Crown the Woman, has implemented a programme in Juba that supports adolescent girls through one-on-one mentorship. Supporting women-led initiatives and organizations that are already working in this area of programming is critical to providing responsive programming (Ibid.). To expand this approach to other locations, educational stakeholders can support the creation of mentorship programmes (both one-on-one and support groups) to locations outside of Juba, particularly for pregnant and young mothers.

## **STRENGTHEN SERVICES AND PROTECTION MECHANISMS FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND EARLY/FORCED MARRIAGE**

At present, services and referral pathways at the local level for female learners faced with gender-based violence, early/forced marriage and teenage pregnancy are fairly limited. Coupled with social stigma, obtaining critical support can be challenging for women and girls. Increasing the facilities, staffing and services available to women and girls in each of these areas will help to address these key issues. This includes local health clinics, schools and local authorities, such as government institutions and the police.

## **GIVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO TEACHERS**

Due to the economic crisis, continued financial support should be provided to teachers in line with the current inflation rate. The findings of this study revealed that BRiCE-supported schools were able to retain the staff they have due to the incentives provided to teachers. As inflation has increased significantly over the course of the pandemic, it is uncertain if the current incentives will be sufficient to prevent teachers from seeking alternative sources of employment. In other locations, such as Pibor, schools and learners expressed heightened concerns about retaining teachers.

## **BACK-TO-SCHOOL CAMPAIGNS**

The findings in this study revealed that households were showing decreased support for female learners' educational goals. Female learners also expressed decreasing motivation due to the numerous challenges they were facing. Back-to-school campaigns that targeted both female learners and the broader community were therefore needed.

## **EXPAND SCHOOL FACILITIES TO ALLOW FOR SOCIAL DISTANCING**

School facilities should be expanded through outdoor teaching or the construction of additional classrooms to allow for social distancing and compliance with COVID-19 precautionary guidelines from the government (High Level Task Force, 2020) and the World Health Organization (2019). At present, many classrooms in South Sudan are overcrowded. The schools visited in this study had an average of 50 students per class, and insufficient classroom space to permit social distancing. Where the immediate expansion of school facilities is not possible, schools should try other strategies, such as teaching classes in shifts. It is likely that COVID-19 will be with us for several years, so it will be important to factor in measures that allow for social distancing.

## **MAINTAIN DISTANCE-LEARNING OPTIONS**

During extended school closures, distance-learning options should continue to be provided to learners. Home-learning packages should include all classes, and radios should be distributed to learners to increase access to radio-learning programmes. Guidelines should be put in place in the event of future closures due to COVID-19 or other causes.

## **ASSESS THE COVID-19 RESPONSE**

The COVID-19 response in the education sector, specifically in relation to female learners, should be assessed to understand how effective policies, programmes and services have been at supporting and retaining female learners in the education system. This could involve looking at female learners' access to distance education, what role and support the teachers and PTAs/SMCs can play, and the specific support female learners needed

during school closures and in the initial phases of school reopening. This will allow the Government of South Sudan and educational partners to identify which methods were effective, and where there are gaps that still need to be addressed. The findings could be used to guide future responses to pandemics, crises and school closures in general.

## **LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS**

The long-term recommendations listed below are of a structural nature and will not only impact female learners but also the broader educational context. However, it is clear from the findings of this study that poverty and gender-based violence often disproportionately affect girls. Addressing structural challenges will therefore be of particular significance for female learners, while also improving the educational context for male learners.

### **IMPLEMENT BROAD POVERTY INTERVENTIONS**

Access to education for female learners cannot be seen as separate from poverty. Growing food insecurity and poverty in South Sudan over the course of the pandemic have increased the pressure on female learners to drop out of school and either support income generation for their households or acquire assets through dowries. While GESS has provided cash transfers to learners across the country, more comprehensive and broader interventions are needed in different sectors to enact sustainable measures that alleviate the pressures of poverty on families. Poverty interventions will allow families to meet their income needs, while also supporting female learners in their families to attend educational programmes. Interventions could include food-security programmes, training programmes for skills in high demand, support for agricultural and livestock livelihoods, and job-creation programmes.

### **INCREASE GOVERNMENT SUPPORT TO SCHOOLS**

Increased financial support from the government at the national level would allow schools to align with national legislation mandating that primary basic education be free. Currently, even public schools charge registration fees to meet their overhead costs. Due to the increased financial hardships that many households in South Sudan are experiencing, female learners who rely on family support to pay registration fees face considerable barriers in returning to school. According to recent budget information, the Ministry of Finance had allocated 5.6% of the national budget to the education sector (MoFEP, 2019). However, UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action recommends that countries allocate 15–20% (UNESCO, 2021). Schools need extensive investment in WASH infrastructure and materials, as well as additional classrooms, to allow students to socially distance. Increased government support could also allow for teachers to receive a salary in a timely manner that reflects current inflation rates and the cost of living.

## **ENHANCED DATA-COLLECTION MECHANISMS**

The extent of the impact of school closures on female learners may not truly be known for years to come. In order to effectively design responsive programmes and policies, it is imperative to introduce longitudinal data collection mechanisms that not only capture enrolment, attainment and completion, but also:

- how many students dropped out as a result of school closures;
- the well-being of female learners; and
- rates of early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and teen pregnancy.

This data needs to be collected nationally. If we rely on partners to report on the situation only where they are operating, there will be significant gaps, especially in rural areas and areas with restricted access due to flooding or violence.

## **INCREASED ACCESS TO POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Access to secondary school and vocational training opportunities for female learners should be supported. In the interviews for this study, both female learners and educational stakeholders emphasized the importance of developing the educational pathways for female learners. In some areas, such as Kapoeta, female learners may have to leave their communities in order to access further education opportunities. The worsening financial crisis also makes it difficult for female learners to pay for secondary school fees or vocational training opportunities, even when they are available in their communities. Increasing access to post-primary education could include establishing new secondary schools and vocational training centres, as well as providing similar assistance to female learners, such as that given in Oxfam-supported schools (i.e. financial assistance for fees and exams, dignity kits, school materials and hygiene materials).

## **INCREASE SECURITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

While the national security context has become relatively more stable since the signing of the peace agreement in 2018, intercommunal violence has increased across the country. An unsafe environment, in which girls and women are targeted, can discourage families from supporting girls' education, especially once they reach adolescence. This is because there are far fewer secondary schools than primary schools in South Sudan, so many students have to travel longer distances or move to a different area to access secondary education. State and local government officials should help provide local leadership to address insecurity.

## **NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS AT THE LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL LEVEL**

When schools in South Sudan were closed by presidential decree, the decision was made without consulting those responsible for regulating and implementing educational services across the country. As a result, community leaders indicated during interviews that they felt they had been left on their own to navigate the new challenges that emerged. Community leaders and PTAs in multiple locations noted that they tend to have a stronger relationship with NGOs in their areas due to the support they provide than with the state level governments. Improving these lines of communication will help communities feel more included in what happens to their educational institutions and youth and understand how they can proactively support their learners.

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# ANNEX 1: LIST OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Location	KII	FGDs
<b>Rumbek</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• County Education Director</li> <li>• Ministry of Gender representative</li> <li>• Women's leader</li> <li>• Youth leader</li> <li>• PTA and SMC chairpersons</li> <li>• Female member of PTA/SMC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abinajok Primary (12 female participants, aged 12–21)</li> <li>• Matangai Primary (six female participants, aged 16–18)</li> </ul>
<b>Torit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• County Education Director</li> <li>• Ministry of Gender representative</li> <li>• Women's leader</li> <li>• Youth leader</li> <li>• PTA and SMC chairpersons</li> <li>• Female member of PTA/SMC</li> <li>• AVSI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christ Bright Academy ALP &amp; Primary School (primary: 10 female learners, aged 11–17; ALP: 10 female learners, aged 15–28)</li> <li>• Torit East ALP &amp; Primary school (primary: 10 female learners, aged 15–18; ALP: 10 female learners, aged 15–23)</li> </ul>
<b>Kapoeta</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• County Education Director</li> <li>• Ministry of Gender representative</li> <li>• Women's leader</li> <li>• Youth leader</li> <li>• PTA and SMC chairpersons</li> <li>• Female member of PTA/SMC</li> <li>• CDI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singata ALP &amp; Primary school (six female participants, aged 14–16)</li> <li>• St. Mary Magdalen Riwoto ALP &amp; Primary school (two FGDs, first: seven female learners aged 14–16; second: seven female learners, aged 17–18)</li> </ul>
<b>Pibor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• County Education Director</li> <li>• Ministry of Gender representative</li> <li>• Women's leader</li> <li>• Youth leader</li> <li>• PTA and SMC chairpersons</li> <li>• Female member of PTA/SMC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pibor Boys ALP Centre/Primary school (six female participants, aged 14–16)</li> </ul>
<b>Juba</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• County Education Director</li> <li>• Ministry of Gender representative</li> <li>• PTA and SMC chairpersons</li> <li>• Female member of PTA/SMC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mayo ALP Centre/Primary (two FGDs, first: five female learners, aged 18–20; second: five male learners aged 12–28)</li> <li>• Homing Dove ALP Centre/Primary (six female learners aged 17–25)</li> <li>• Gudele West ALP Centre/Primary (11 female learners, aged 14–24)</li> </ul>
<b>National Level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ministry of Education</li> <li>• Oxfam</li> <li>• Crown the Woman</li> <li>• South Sudan National Education Coalition</li> </ul>	N/A

# OXFAM

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