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Education for Kenyan Girls in the Post Covid-19 ERA: Mitigating Strategies for Future Pandemics

Jerono Kiprop Marakis^{1*}

¹ University of Eldoret, P. O. Box 1125 – 30100 Eldoret Kenya.

* Author for Correspondence Email: marakisjerono@yahoo.com

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The study examined the effects of school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of secondary school girls in Moiben Sub-County, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. It used a mixed-method research design that targeted classroom teachers and Form III and IV students from mixed-day public secondary schools. A sample size representing 251 students was selected, while 66 teachers were purposively selected as respondents for the study. The data for the paper was collected using questionnaires. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics and presented in tables and figures. The study found that 10 – 14% of students dropped out of school due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Of those who dropped out, the girls accounted for more than 60.0% of the ones who did not resume their education after the opening of schools in January 2021. The study found that teenage pregnancies, child labour, early marriages, and low household income contributed to girls' not returning back to school. The paper recommends that the government set up appropriate interventions to ensure that future pandemics do not result in the discontinuity of education for students by investing in proper physical and human infrastructure. Other recommendations have been highlighted in the paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Education remains an element that promotes human dignity, and it is a basic right. According

to the UN Special Rapporteur on Education, Article 17 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights outlines the fundamental right to

education. Article 17 indicates that the child's welfare must be protected even in times of emergency (UNHCR Council, 2020). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is universal, holistic, and indivisible. In addition, SDG 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education because it is the only means of reducing societal inequalities and enhancing social mobility. It aims to promote lifelong learning opportunities that result in societies that are sustainable, resilient, and inclusive (UN, 2019). However, many barriers to education access and educational outcomes are yet to be eradicated in most third-world countries. On 20 January 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak to be a global public health emergency of international concern under the International Health Regulations (2005) (Rodriguez-Morales et al., 2020). The virus originated from the Wuhan market and spread quickly to Hubei province's Chinese cities before spreading to the whole of China. It then crossed to Italy, where it found its way to Europe and the rest of the world (Porcheddu et al., 2020). WHO finally declared the outbreak a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020). The World Health Organization came up with emergency methods for managing Covid-19, including social distancing, washing hands regularly, and wearing masks.

Due to the increase in infections, other drastic measures were employed that included locking down cities and shutting all schools and tertiary institutions worldwide. This closure affected over 1.8 billion children. UNESCO (2020) figures indicated over 189 countries had shut down (locked down) completely. In Kenya, over 90,000 schools were closed, affecting over 18 million learners of basic institutions. School closures had drastic effects on learners from low-income households, Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), urban slums, and pockets of poverty in Kenya, who depend on schools for meals and sanitary provisions. The closure of schools during the Covid-19 exacerbated this issue further. COVID-19 brought dangerous times for public education,

with risks of fragmentation of the students posing challenges to their ability to return to school. It has now become clear to many people that schools play a critical role in providing for the well-being of children and youth, ensuring health and nutrition, and academic learning. UNESCO warned that 'Covid-19' school closures worldwide would hit girls hard. It was feared that it would increase the dropout rates, which would disproportionately affect adolescent girls, further entrench gender gaps in education and lead to risk of sexual exploitation, early pregnancies and early and forced marriages. Therefore, this study sought to determine whether these assumptions were valid for girls in public secondary schools in the rural setup in Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

The closure of schools in Kenya due to the COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected all children. However, the most hit groups were the vulnerable children in poverty-stricken communities, marginalized areas and those in conflict and insecure zones. In addition, children from the slum areas, those with disabilities and girls were equally affected. According to Jelimo (2020), schools are safe havens for these children and are vital for their survival due to the free meals that they receive at school. The closure of schools had a significant effect on girls due to their vulnerability and the already existing gender disparity. This paper sought to examine the impact of school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of secondary school girls in Moiben Sub-County, Uasin Gishu County.

Objective of the Study

The study's objective was to examine the effects of school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of secondary school girls in Moiben Sub-County, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The government partially funds education in Kenya in conjunction with the parents. This is an area in which many governments intervene to fund, direct, or regulate its provision. Government

funding of educational services is needed to ensure that education is not beyond the reach of some members of society. With the pandemic, the gains made in the past decades, including gender parity in school enrolment in primary schools, 100% transition from primary to secondary, and a return to school policy for girls who have given birth, among others, were at risk of being rolled back. This could exacerbate the pre-existing inequalities, thereby exposing vulnerabilities in social, educational and economic systems (UN Women, 2020).

In January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a global emergency by the World Health Organisation. Globally, coronavirus cases were over 203.4 million and had caused over 4.3 million deaths by September 2021. According to WHO (2021), 47 African countries were affected by the pandemic. The COVID-19 cumulative cases in Africa stood at 7,056,119, with over 142,200 deaths as of early August 2021. Within the same period (early August 2021), Kenya had registered a total of 211,828 infections, and several thousands of people lost their lives (Orangi et al., 2021). The rise in Covid-19 resulted in school closures across the world. Gomez-Gerdel's (2020) on 'the consequences of school closure due to Covid-19 and educational inequalities' raises concerns for the Spanish educational system to apply to teach only online. For the most vulnerable families, it means difficulties in accessing technologies and, thus, leads to delays in education. Other issues that arose were the drastic modification of the teaching-learning system from the teacher to the families with no training left to train their children (Valle & de Olague-Smithson, 2022).

The Constitution of Kenya, 2010 (Article 53), has education as a fundamental right for all children. During the closure of schools because of COVID-19, the education for children, particularly those in basic institutions, was curtailed. The underprivileged children were exposed to significant human rights violations, hindering the achievement of the global SDGs and Kenya's Vision 2030 on providing quality education for all

(Ngwacho, 2020). The closure of schools in Kenya affected over 18 million children in basic institutions. The government then responded by developing a COVID-19 response plan, Kenya Basic Education Covid-19 Emergency Response Plan, in collaboration with education partners and other stakeholders (GOK, 2020). Through this, learners were provided with remote teaching using the internet, radio, and television sets. Even with this setup, the expectations of the role of young girls remained unchanged: to care for the house and young children, restricting their ability to participate in education remotely (HRW, 2020). The plan aimed to provide learners access to quality, equitable, and inclusive education, among other objectives (GOK, 2020).

Empirical Studies on the Psychosocial Effects of Covid-19 on Education

A rapid literature review carried out in the period between 21 April and 5 May 2020 explored experiences of school closure in developing countries, mainly in connection to the Ebola crisis in West Africa. Selbervick (2020) notes that there are few comprehensive impact studies on the educational sector, and they are far apart. According to Hallegarten (2020), girls formed the major bulk of 'dropouts' in DRC after the Ebola' school closure', though they could not trace the actual figures. But from previous experiences, the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return (UNICEF, 2015). During the Ebola outbreak, the World Bank carried out several waves of phone surveys in Liberia and Sierra Leone. In Liberia, approximately 25% did not reopen school. The households with primary school-going age children in Liberia had 'more than three quarters' (3/4) returning to school, while for the older children, the figure was slightly lower at 73% (World Bank, 2015).

In Sierra Leone, those who did not return to school after reopening were 13%. In both countries, the fear of Covid-19 infection was the main reason for not re-entering school for a smaller percentage, while the main reasons remained to be economic issues such as the inability to pay fees or the need to generate income (World Bank, 2020).

However, due to incomplete data, Ebola's effects on enrolment were difficult to assess. Primary school enrolment figures were present for both countries, while those for secondary education were missing. Cordeiro (2020) conducted a study on the impact of Covid-19 on education in Eastern Africa. The study involved nine countries, including Kenya and found out that the pandemic resulted to increase in teenage pregnancy, sexual acts in exchange for food and child labour. Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2020) conducted the study between April 2020 and August 2020. The study revealed that Covid-19 had exacerbated previous educational inequalities whereby vulnerable children were excluded from learning and attaining their primary education as a fundamental human right.

The survey by Edtech Hub and E-learning Africa (2020) on the effect of COVID-19 on education in Africa surveyed the experiences and opinions of educators and technology specialists in 52 African countries. From the findings, learners highlighted three main obstacles during school closure, including a lack of access to technology, unsuitable home learning environment, and a lack of access to learning materials. It also shows that poorer students and those from marginalized areas were the most at risk of missing out on education if there was no conventional school to attend. Parents, too, were ill-equipped to support children's education at home. A study by Mwabe and Austrian (2023) on 'the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents in Kenya' set out to collect data and conclusively outlined the challenges facing Kenyan adolescents in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adolescent boys and girls, which comprise 24% of Kenya's population, were the target. Data was collected on school enrolment, experiences of sexual and gender-based violence, time spent on household chores, income-earning activities (voluntary and forced), early marriages and access to healthcare services. However, this study only covered four counties, i.e., Nairobi, Kisumu, Kilifi and Wajir. None of the counties

covered were in Rift Valley, whose demographics may differ from the target counties. Thus, this study was undertaken in a rural setting of Moiben Sub County in Uasin Gishu County. One constant factor in all the reflections was that being in school provides safety, happiness, and hope for adolescents.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study applied a mixed-method research approach that utilized quantitative and qualitative techniques to collect and analyze data from respondents. The research was conducted in selected public day secondary schools (mixed ones) in Moiben Sub-County, Uasin Gishu County. Students and class teachers were integrated into the investigation. Moiben Sub County has 47 public secondary schools, of which 33 are mixed-day schools, and many have 2 streams from Form I to Form IV. The study targeted 5016 Form 3 – 4 students and 66 class teachers. In the selection of the sample size, 5.0% of the students representing 251 were selected as the sample size, while all 66 teachers were involved in the study. The students were selected using a stratified random sampling technique, while class teachers from each stream were selected using a purposive sampling technique. A of 251 students and 66 teachers were selected to participate in the study. Two types of questionnaires were used as instruments for collecting primary data. The questionnaires were examined for validity and reliability before administration to the field. The data collected was analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. SPSS assisted in data coding, entry, and analysis. The results were presented in tables and narrations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, the class teachers interviewed were asked to indicate their age category. Their responses are provided in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Distribution of Teachers based on Age Category

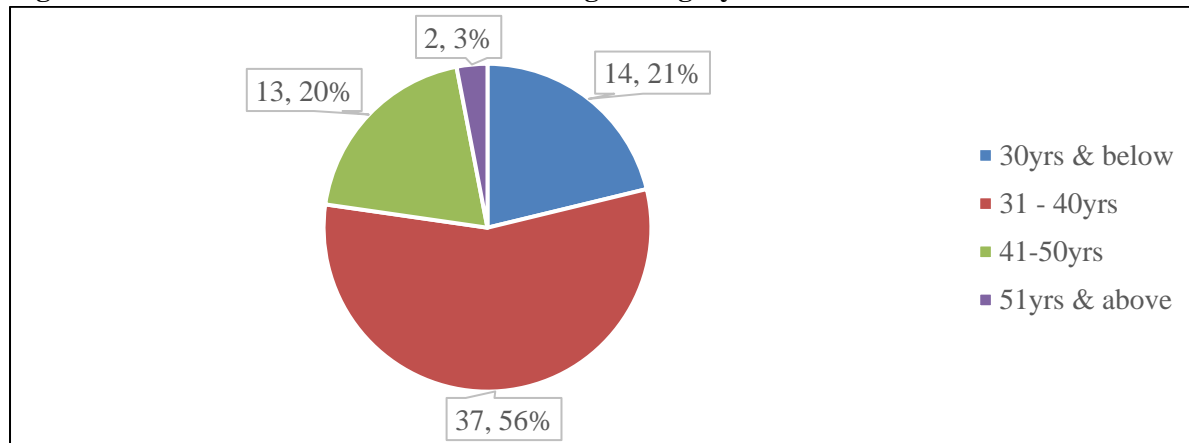
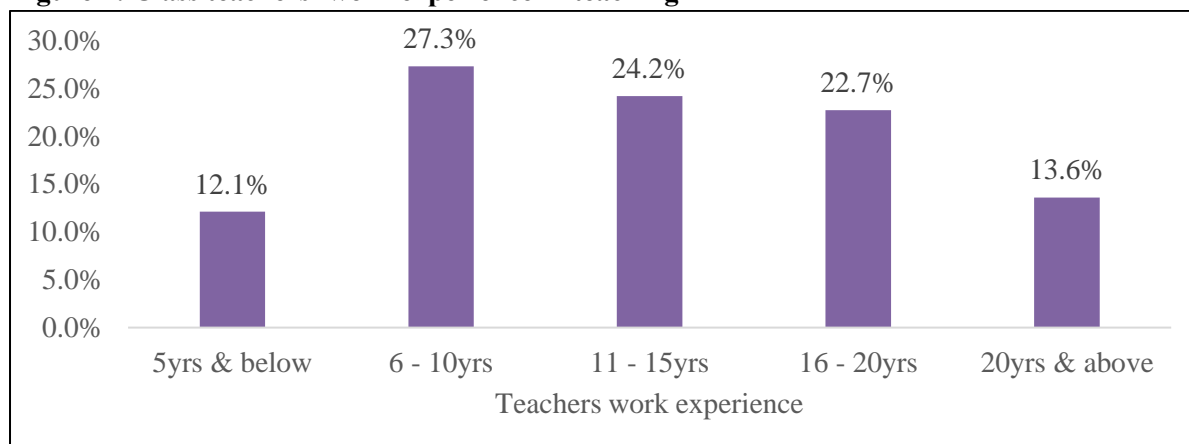


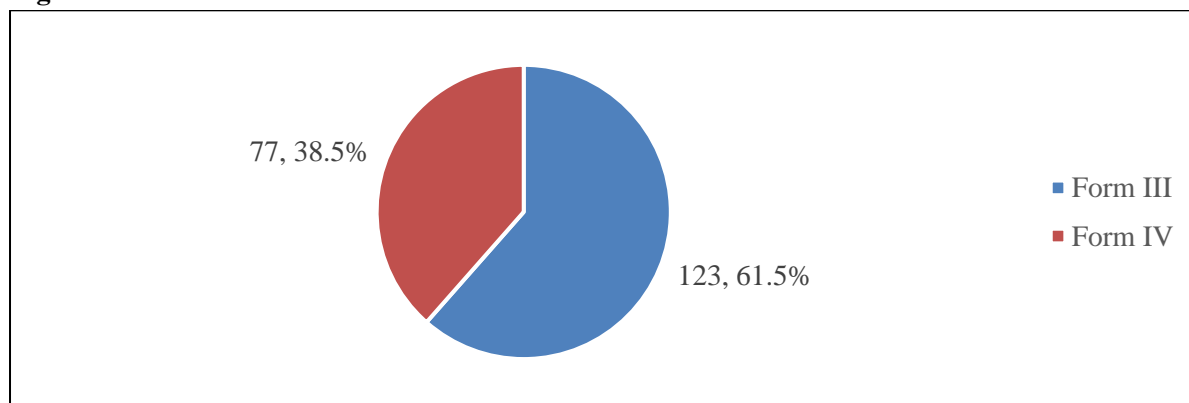
Figure 1 shows that 37(56.1%) of the teachers were aged 31 – 40 years, 14 (21.2%) were aged 30 years and below, 13 (19.7%) were aged 41 – 50 years and only 2 (3.0%) were aged 51 years and above. The results concerning their work experience in teaching are provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Class teachers’ work experience in teaching



The research establishes that 8 (12.1%) of teachers had been teaching for a period of 5 years and below, 18 (27.3%) had been teaching for 6 – 10 years, 16 (24.2%) had been teaching for 11 – 15 years, 15 (22.7%) for a period of 16 – 20 years and 9 (13.6%) for 20 years and above. The above finding shows that teachers have considerable years of experience and can state girls’ participation before and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Moiben County. The participation of students based on their class is provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Students’ class



Results show that 123 (61.5%) students were from Form III, while 77 (38.5%) were from Form IV. The students were asked to indicate the proportion of their colleagues who returned to school in January 2021 when schools were reopened. The results showed that 180 (90.0%) said they returned, while 20 (10.0%) indicated they did not. From the students, it can be deduced that 10.0% of students did not return to school after reopening. The information was corroborated with teachers where 57 (86.4%) indicated that they returned while 9 (13.6%) said that they did not return. Therefore, it can be deduced that 12.0% of students did not return to secondary schools in Moiben Sub County after schools opened in January 2021. When asked further to state the proportion of learners who did not report to the school, most 45 (68.2%) of the teachers indicated that they were girls, with only 21 (31.8%) indicating that they were boys. When asked the same questions, the students indicated that 115 (57.5%) said they were girls, while 85

(42.5%) indicated that those who did not report back to school in January 2021 were boys. It can be deduced that the proportion of students who did not report back to public mixed-day secondary schools in Moiben Sub County were girls as opposed to boys. This means that the Covid-19 pandemic forced a significant number of girls not to return to school after reopening in the country.

Effects of COVID-19 on Girl Child Education

To understand the reasons as to why several girl students did not return back to school after reopening following the Covid-19 pandemic that forced schools to be closed, information was sought from class teachers and students. At first, Students were asked to respond to the statements on the effects of Covid-19 on their schooling. The students were to respond to statements on a Likert scale as follows: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Results are provided in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Students Responses on Effects of Covid-19 on their Education

Reasons for girls not returning back to school after reopening	SA	A	U	D	SD
Lack of fees	29 (14.5%)	56 (28.0%)	25 (12.5%)	49 (24.5%)	31 (15.5%)
Teenage pregnancies	45 (22.5%)	75 (37.5%)	29 (14.5%)	26 (13.0%)	15 (7.5%)
Family issues	10 (5.0%)	41 (20.5%)	65 (32.5%)	29 (14.5%)	41 (20.5%)
Permissive culture	0 (0.0%)	40 (20.0%)	39 (19.5%)	71 (35.5%)	25 (12.5%)
Covid-19 related issues	6 (3.0%)	34 (17.0%)	30 (15.0%)	46 (23.0%)	34 (17.0%)
Average	18.3	50.3	33.6	49.1	30.3

From their responses, students appeared to agree (37.5%) and strongly agree (22.5%) that teenage pregnancy was one of the main reasons that prevented girls from resuming day secondary schools in Moiben County. Similar to the findings, in a study by Kiprop (2022) on causes of students' absenteeism from school, teenage pregnancies were a significant factor; over 75% of the students agreed to be the primary cause. This indicates that students who were pregnant missed school more often and eventually left school as the

pregnancy advanced. Lack of fees was another factor that almost half of the students agreed 85(42.5%) to have caused some girls not to report back to school after COVID-19. Students failed to agree on the assertion that family issues and permissive culture resulted in the girls' students not reporting back to school after COVID-19 closures, with 70(35%) and 96(48%) students disagreeing, respectively. On Covid-19-related issues, 80(40%) of the students disagreed with this fact.

Through open-ended questions, class teachers were also asked to state what led girls not to return to school after the COVID-19 pandemic measures

were relaxed. Their responses are given in *Table 2* below.

Table 2: Reasons for not reporting back to school after reopening in 2021

Reasons	Frequency	Percent
Teenage pregnancies	21	31.8
Drug abuse	14	21.2
Early marriages	5	7.6
School transfers	6	9.1
Difficult economic situation at home	10	15.2
Looking for labour	10	15.2
Total	66	100.0

According to class teachers, teenage pregnancies were the leading factor with a 21(31.8%) rating; drug abuse followed relatively closer with 14(21.2%) of teachers giving this as a reason for girls not resuming school in post Covid-19 era. Other factors that were given include difficult economic situation at home with a 15 (15.2%) rating by parents, transfer to other schools had 6(9.1%), early marriages (7.6%) and looking for work (15.2%) as domestic managers made several girls not to resume schools after opening in post Covid-19 period. The result implies that girls dropped out of school mostly during the COVID-19 pandemic in Moiben Sub County mixed-day public secondary schools mainly because of teenage pregnancies. This can be attributed to long periods of staying at home and the uncertainty surrounding school resumption. UNICEF (2015) notes that the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return, as seen from previous experiences. Drug abuse was another prevalent factor which affected many of the school-going girls. This can be explained by the fact that parents could not adequately cater to their children's needs due to hard economic times and the loss of jobs. Consequently, girls started looking for other means of catering to their essential needs, like looking for jobs or engaging in social evils.

Teenage pregnancies and drug abuse can be attributed to girls having too much time at their disposal since they are not engaged in school. Some girls were even married off. This finding confirms UNESCO's earlier warning that 'COVID-19 school closures around the world

would hit girls hard since it would increase the dropout rates, which will disproportionately affect adolescent girls, further entrenching the gender gaps in education, leading to girls being exposed to sexual exploitation, early pregnancies and early and forced marriages. Though early marriages and rebellion registered minimal percentages, it cannot be dismissed since this had a greater impact on the girls' lives, since failure to complete school reduces the chances of bringing up healthy and educated families in future. This study differs from Gomez-Gerdel's (2020) study on 'the consequences of school closure due to COVID-19 and educational inequalities', which only raised concerns for the Spanish educational system about face-to-face teaching since learning continued online. However, Hallegarten's (2020) study in DRC after the Ebola' school closure' indicated that girls formed the majority of 'dropouts', though they could not trace the actual figures.

In addition, the World Bank phone surveys in Liberia and Sierra Leone after the Ebola period found that Liberia had approximately 27% of older children not reopening school (World Bank, 2015). This indicates that any form of interruption to the schooling of children has adverse effects on their continuity. As found out in this study (Table 2), hard economic times were the biggest challenge for parents after COVID-19, resulting in their inability to take their children back to school. This concurs with the World Bank's (2020) findings in Liberia that the main reasons for not re-entering school after Ebola were economic issues such as the inability to pay fees. Mwabe and Austrian (2023) study on 'COVID-19

school closures and mental health of adolescent students: evidence from rural Mozambique' found that 250,000 (16%) of girls did not return to school after Covid-19 in the three counties that the research was carried out. This study focused on looking at the reasons for girls not returning to school in Moiben Sub County. Hence, it could not ascertain the number of girls who did not return to school after COVID-19, as was the case in the Mwabe and Austrian (2023) study.

Strategies to Prevent Effects of Future Pandemics on Girl Child Education

Class teachers were requested to suggest measures the government can apply during future pandemics to prevent girls' students from dropping out. Their suggestions are tabulated in *Table 3*.

Table 3: Suggestions to mitigate the effect of future pandemics on education

Suggestions	Frequency	Percent
Take care of students at school	17	25.8
Provide guidance and counselling	6	9.1
Proper planning to avoid school closures	18	27.3
Set aside money for disasters in schools	12	18.2
Treat students for free in case they contract the disease	13	19.7
Total	66	100.0

Most classroom teachers 18(27.3%) suggested that proper planning be implemented to ensure schools are not closed in the future in case a pandemic like COVID-19 happens. According to Gomez-Gerdel (2020), schools are essential in offering interaction and socialization that is achieved through student/teacher relationships in schools lacking in virtual education. The Government of Kenya (GOK, 2020) attempted to provide remote teaching using the radio, internet and television sets, but it could not yield the requisite objectives since it disadvantages the less privileged children without gadgets and internet connections in remote areas. Even with this setup, the expectations of girls to care for the house and do domestic chores restricted them from participating fully in the learning. Another 17(25.8%) teachers suggested that the government make arrangements to take care of students at school to avert school failures. That means that schools should not be closed. This was also the view brought forward by Valle and de Olague-Smithson (2022) who supported retaining students at school because the drastic modification of the learning system from teacher to families was not in order since the latter had no training in teaching.

The other views 13(19.7%) class teachers wanted the government to treat students who contracted the virus. Such allocations of monies can reduce previous inequalities in education affecting vulnerable children that had been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2020). 12(18.2%) parents were of the opinion that the government set aside money for disasters in schools, which can be available for the schools in case of future pandemics and other unforeseen issues. This money can be helpful during such times to prevent underprivileged children from exposure to human rights violations, which hinder the achievement of the global SDGs and Kenya's Vision 2030 on providing quality education for all (Ngwacho, 2020). It can also be used to purchase devices for virtual learning where students can be accessed on a common ground. Finally, 6(9.1%) teachers suggested that the government must provide guidance and counselling to students during emergencies. This statement coincides with Zagalaz et al.'s (2020) recommendation that scientists, doctors, and educators be obligated to care for children's psychological and emotional health. In addition to this, Giallonardo et al. (2020) asserted that children were at risk of developing anxiety and post-traumatic disorders due to the lack of understanding about the virus

and the frustration of their parents due to hard economic times (Table 3). Roy et al. (2020) and Forte et al. (2020) add a rejoinder and note that there was the need for attention to the mental health of older children due to stress experienced during the pandemic. This indicates that the whole society was concerned about the well-being of students at the time schools were reopening.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study aimed to investigate the effect of school closures during the COVID-19 era on girls' education in Kenya to provide intervention strategies for future pandemics. The study concludes that due to the long stay of children at home arising from the closures of schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, a significant number of students (10.0 – 14.0%) did not return back to school after opening in January 2021. Class teachers and students reported that the number of those who dropped out of school was girls (60.0%) as opposed to boys (40.0%). The cause of percentage of girls who did not report back to school after reopening was mainly explained to be due to teenage pregnancies. Some could not return due to a lack of school fees since most parents lost their sources of livelihood during the pandemic, making them unable to pay school fees. School closure due to COVID-19 school closures contributed to the rising number of girls dropping out of school in Moiben Sub County, thereby increasing the gender disparity in education. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- There need to be proper and prior plans in place to ensure that schools are not closed. Secondly, to avoid school closures, the government should be committed to providing the requisite funds so that students remain in school during the pandemic.
- There is a need for a government-funded kitty in every school that comes in handy during pandemics and other unforeseen issues at school level such as helping underprivileged

students buy devices for virtual learning to occupy and make them busy.

- Since school closures affected girls more than boys, there is a need to build more girls boarding schools, particularly in areas where they remain vulnerable.
- There is a need for the provision of psychosocial support to prevent stress and other post-traumatic disorders and anxiety that students undergo as a result of abrupt school closures.
- There is also a need for the government, through the village elders, to organize a proper mapping of those girls who dropped out of school during this period to return them to school.

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