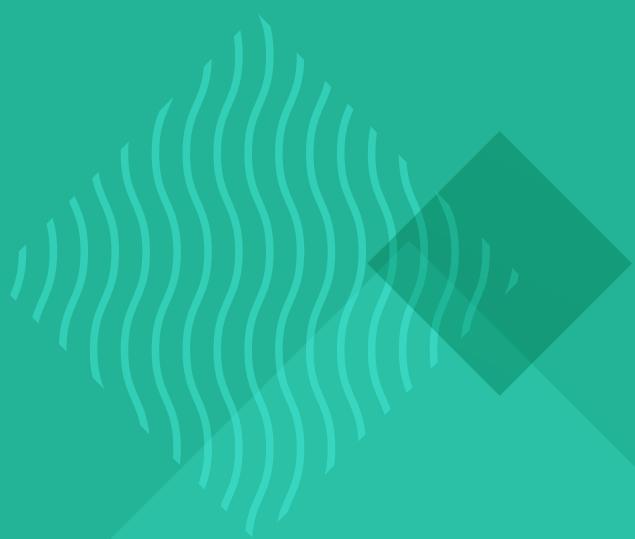


Programmatic approaches to the gender-related impacts of COVID-19 on education: Lessons from 2020

Case study: VSO Kenya -
Education for Life Project

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Promoting inclusive education through basic literacy, numeracy, life skills training and by ensuring a supportive enabling environment.





About the programme

The Education for Life project is implemented by a consortium of three partners, VSO Kenya, Leonard Cheshire and ActionAid. These organisations work with local nonprofit organizations to support project implementation. The project targets 5,000 out-of-school girls (OOSGs), including girls with disabilities, aged between 10-19 years, from marginalized communities and low-income households. The overall objective of the project is to improve girls' life chances through learning, transition and sustainability. The out-of-school girls receive basic literacy, numeracy, and life skill training offered within catch-up centres (CuCs), to improve their learning outcomes and self-efficacy.

Upon successfully completing the learning process in the catch-up centres, the OOSGs are supported to transition to either one of the following pathways: 1) formal schooling; 2) vocational training centers; 3) entrepreneurship, and 4) apprenticeships. To improve the quality of teaching offered to the girls, the programme also trains Educator Facilitators, who deliver sessions in the catch-up centres. Life mentors and Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) are trained on safeguarding and Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health (ASRH) in order to provide psychosocial support and life skills training to girls. The project also works with government and community-based organizations to build strong and active partnerships for strengthening girls' education and for sustaining project's gains.

COVID-19 Context

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Kenya on 12 March 2020. Soon after, nationwide school closures were introduced. Additional measures to curb the spread of the virus included restrictions on movement, closures of public places with high human traffic, dusk to dawn curfews and measures to ensure basic hygiene and social distancing. The phased reopening of schools began in October 2020, an announcement which was welcomed by UNICEF, who highlighted that the risks of prolonged school closures include increased drop-out, a higher risk of teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse among adolescent girls, and a lack of access to a reliable source of nutrition and safe water¹. Anecdotal evidence and reporting indicate gender-specific risks of school closures for adolescent girls, including a higher risk of female genital mutilation (FGM), a lack of access to MHM products, child marriage and learning loss².

Project response to the gender-related impacts of COVID-19 on education

To curb the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the country, the Government of Kenya issued a range of policy measures and behavioral protocols that discourage social gathering and promote social distancing. This subsequently led to the suspension of catch-up centers (CuCs) where the EFL project learning activities had been taking place. The project also suspended face-to-face training of Educator Facilitators (EFs), Mentors and Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) in order to comply with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on COVID-19 prevention. Whilst the majority of home visits undertaken by EFs and Mentors had to be cancelled, the project retained this initiative for girls with disabilities, in order to help monitor safeguarding concerns, track girls who were not reachable via phone, and offer psychosocial support.

Ensuring education continuity for out-of-school girls during the COVID-19 crisis period

The Education for Life (EFL) project has put adaptation measures in place to ensure learning continuity for out-of-school girls during the COVID-19 crisis period. These adaptation measures were adopted as a result of consultation processes with parents/guardians, project partners, community leaders and local government actors. As part of the COVID-19 response, Education for Life printed and provided girls with copies of workbooks in Numeracy, English and Kiswahili to facilitate home and peer learning. Educator Facilitators (EFs) and Mentors have also been provided with mobile phone data packages to enable them deliver remote sessions on Numeracy, English and Kiswahili to girls over the phone, track girls' progress with home-learning and offer any needed support. Project monitoring reports revealed girls' anxieties about their future. In a phone interview, one of the girls mentioned, "*I am becoming increasingly worried about what lies ahead of us since COVID-19 seems to be thwarting our dreams of getting education and succeeding in life*". Another girl also expressed that, "*My worst fear is whether we will succeed in our studies with the rising number of COVID-19 cases*".

1 <https://www.unicef.org/kenya/press-releases/UNICEF-welcomes-schools-reopening-in-Kenya> (2020) UNICEF

2 '*It ruined my life*': School closures in Kenya lead to rise in FGM (2020) Al Jazeera; <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/05/06/how-school-closures-during-covid-19-further-marginalize-vulnerable-children-in-kenya/> (2020) Brookings; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/26/impact-covid-19-childrens-education-africa> (2020) Human Rights Watch.

Health, wellbeing and community sensitization

In addition to online learning for girls, the programme pivoted to focus on three activities: providing hygiene kits to all girls; online training for Educator Facilitators and Mentors; and radio communication. The hygiene kits contained ten bars of soap, seven packets of sanitary pads, six packets of toothpaste, a toothbrush, four pairs of pants, six packets of tissue paper and petroleum jelly to support girls' menstrual hygiene during COVID-19 school closures and lockdowns, and to enable them to concentrate on their home-based learning. The project officers and teacher coaches continue to offer online training to Educator Facilitators and Mentors via Skype and Zoom. The EFL project also adopted monthly radio talk shows and daily radio messaging led by VSO and partners and co-facilitated by experts in public health, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child safeguarding and education to create awareness and sensitize the communities on COVID-19, SGBV and girls' education. This has reached over 210,000 people living within the project catchment areas of Isiolo and Migori counties. The radio talk shows also provide an opportunity to raise awareness on a toll-free number provided by VSO through which primary actors can report cases of SGBV and any other safeguarding concerns for immediate referrals.

"I am becoming increasingly worried about what lies ahead of us since COVID-19 seems to be thwarting our dreams of getting education and succeeding in life".

A female learner expresses her anxiety about her future during a phone interview conducted as part of the Education for Life project monitoring efforts.

Project outcomes

Monitoring and evaluation exercises completed in May, June and July 2020 indicated that 100% of the girls enrolled in the Education for Life project are continuing with home-learning using the workbooks provided, including girls with disabilities. Girls attributed this to the support they have been receiving from Educator Facilitators (EFs) and Mentors who have been keeping in contact with them at least three times a week by phone, and the support they have been receiving from their households. 97% of the girls mentioned that their household members have been offering them the necessary support to facilitate their home and peer learning. During an interview, a girl explained "My in-laws whom I stay with have been very helpful in explaining the concepts that I don't understand in Literacy and Numeracy".

Monitoring findings also revealed that 85% of the girls and their households have been listening to radio talk shows and awareness messaging on COVID-19 and GBV. However, 3% of the girls have been continuing with home-learning, but with little support from their households. This particularly affected girls who come from households with illiterate members. Another girl interviewed said, "*My household members are illiterate, so they hardly offer any support. Although, if I don't understand any concept I either reach out to my teachers or ask my neighbours to guide.*"

Learnings and challenges

Remote learning through mobile phones, workbooks and home visits can be an effective way of ensuring education continuity and keeping in contact with the girls. However, this becomes more challenging where girls are difficult to reach due to lack of mobile phones and poor internet connectivity. In order to mitigate this, the project has recorded alternative contacts through which girls can be reached with home learning materials - for example via girls who are already in the project, community resource persons, community-based organisations (CBOs) and local institutions. The project is currently mapping and identifying more girls to participate in the programme through the referral mechanisms mentioned above. These methods of identification and enrollment have been effective - in the last three months, a total of 562 girls have additionally been identified and enrolled into the programme.

Looking beyond the immediate COVID-19 crisis

The EFL project rolled out mobile and web-based systems (software/application) in October 2020. The system facilitates access to learning content, delivery of sessions and tracking of progress. A third cohort of OOSGs, including girls with disabilities, are expected to be enrolled into the project by January 2021. After being closed for nine months, schools in Kenya reopened at the beginning of 2021, amid reporting that thousands of learners failed to report back to schools at the start of the term. Kenya has experienced one of the longest school closures of the continent and was the last country in East Africa to fully reopen its schools. The project had already proposed various measures to be undertaken to ensure safe, inclusive reopening of schools, such as adaptation and fumigation of catch-up centres for learning, intensified community back to school campaigns, and tracking and re-enrolling girls who are likely to drop out. Consultations with local government and community leaders about future courses of action are ongoing as the pandemic situation continues to unfold. Ensuring girls' continuity of learning and safe return to school, especially for the most marginalised, will continue to be a priority for the EFL project.



Sign up to learn more about the Education for Life Project:

<https://vso.resourcespace.com/pages/view.php?ref=69644&k=91a074d647>

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Page 6 (top left) - © Peter Onani/VSO Kenya. The county COVID-19 response team opens up on Day 1 of the dignity kits distribution project to out of school girls at Siabai Catholic Catch-up Centre. The Chair of Migori County Steering Committee for the Education for Life Project and a member of the COVID-19 response team (far left) prepares packages of sanitary pads for distribution.

Page 6 (top right) - © Karanja Mburu/VSO Kenya. The items included in each dignity kits that out of school girls receive from the Education for Life project.

Page 6 (bottom left) - © Karanja Mburu/VSO Kenya. Adolescent girls attend a class in their local Catch-up Centre after the reopening.

Page 6 (bottom right) - © Paul Otwate/VSO Kenya. At Nyamagenga Catch-up Centre, an out of school girl receives a dignity kit. Parents and adolescent girls welcomed the dignity kit distribution project during the COVID-19 pandemic.



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