



CHAPTER 4

Women Teachers Support Girls during the COVID-19 School Closures in Uganda

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Introduction

Schools in Uganda closed indefinitely on 20 March 2020. Several attempts to open them have so far been unsuccessful. In Uganda, school is a haven for girls; the presence of the Senior Woman Teacher (SWT) protects girls and encourages attendance, retention, and the completion of their education, as Okudi (2016) notes. The girls receive adolescent and reproductive health information, as well as guidance and counseling. They are also taught skills for life after school and are provided with an advocate, a mentor, and a role model to whom they can look up. All this was put on hold by the closure of schools in March.

At home, the girls now lack support systems that strengthen their skills and protect them from deterrents to progress in their education. For example, the Ugandan government has noted increasing cases of domestic

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violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 lockdown (Katana et al. 2021).

In the trying circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the members of many vulnerable groups will be put at even greater risk. In Sierra Leone, by way of example, temporary school closures and the lack of economic opportunities during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 drove girls who did not have access to girls' clubs to spend time with men. This resulted in increased early childbearing and had long-term implications for the education of those girls who dropped out of school permanently. According to an International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) report (2020), key among those at risk are young girls from low-income backgrounds, who risk falling into circumstances that will prevent their future education. This crisis is also likely to put them at higher risk of sexual violence and exploitation, trafficking, child marriage, forced labor, and social exclusion. Girls in Uganda are already faced with a host of barriers to education that result in substantial gender disparities.

In the Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan (2017/18–2019/20), the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) reaffirms its commitment to promoting gender equality, in part by addressing gender-specific barriers that undermine girls' education, including the management of sexual maturation. In this regard, the SWTs have been assigned the role of guiding learners to handle some of these challenges. These SWTs occupy a position recognized by the MoES as one of the basic requirements and minimum standards for operation of schools in Uganda (MoES 2017). This position is acknowledged in the National Strategy for Girls' Education (NSGE) 2015–19 as playing a key role in guiding learners' transition from childhood to adulthood (MoES 2013).

During the COVID-19 lockdown girls out of school did not have this support mechanism to guide and counsel them, provide them with facts on issues related to adolescent health, and teach them the skills of being assertive to protect themselves from any dangers in the community that might eventually have an impact on their education. Post-COVID-19, the girls will need to be supported to return to schools when these reopen, and barriers like the lack of school fees (for instance) must be dealt with. Child mothers and pregnant girls must be taken care of through the enacting, for example, of laws that will support them to return to school.

Methods

In my study, I aimed to establish the role of SWTs in a community setting and to identify the prevailing issues affecting girls during the COVID-19 closure of schools.

Exploratory Study

This is an exploratory study designed with the difficulties occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic in mind. Since this study offers a snapshot or cross section of the population, I carried it out in the two districts of Luweero and Wakiso to cover both a rural and a peri-urban area in Uganda. This enabled me to obtain an overall picture of conditions at this time that will allow for further research in the future.

Safety Protocols

I obtained a letter of permission to do this research in the community from the Local Council 1 (LC1) chairperson. I had to take into consideration the COVID-19 restrictions in relation to the planned activities, so I put into place all the necessary Special Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure the safety of the girls and the SWTs. This included taking the SWTs through a session on how to administer the questionnaire and ensure that they knew how to keep themselves safe and protect the students with whom they met.

Participating Senior Women Teachers (SWTs)

These teachers guide, counsel, and support girls with both survival and developmental skills. They advocate for the girls in the school setting, act as role models to them, and provide all the necessary information on adolescent health as indicated in the policy guidelines for a SWT in Uganda (MoES 2020).

The SWTs in this study were selectively identified because all ten of them are in active service as class teachers in primary schools in Luweero and Wakiso. The SWTs are all female teachers with more than three years of service each. They doubled as respondents and research assistants because they had to support the girls and also administer the questionnaires to them. The SWTs were therefore taken through the SOPs for the COVID-19 period, which included maintaining physical distancing, putting on masks, and sanitizing or washing hands regularly.

Participating Students

The eighty-nine girls, aged between eleven and eighteen, were randomly selected from fifteen private and government primary schools in both Wakiso and Luweero districts. Of the students, 61 percent were from peasant families, 37 percent were from the business community, and 2 percent were from civil servant families.

Participating LC1 Women Representatives

The LC1 woman representative holds a political position at village level in Uganda. This representative, appointed in every village in line with the affirmative action clause within Uganda's new constitution of 1995, is mandated to ensure that women's issues are highlighted in all discussions. Ten LC1 women representatives were part of this research, because they speak for the girls too. All were selected because they were then sitting LC1 women representatives in the villages in which the schools are located and in which the girls and SWTs reside.

Questionnaires and Interviews

The first activity at the start of the research study was the development of the data collection tools. These included the questionnaires for the students and interview guides for the SWTs and LC1 women representatives.

Given the COVID-19 lockdown, the data collection was pegged to the two methods of questionnaires and interviews. The SWTs and the LC1 representatives were interviewed by phone, while the girls were provided with a questionnaire with both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions offered predefined answer options from which the respondent had to choose, while the open-ended questions allowed them freedom and flexibility in providing their answers.

The issues discussed during the interviews were related to those currently affecting girls living through the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways in which the SWTs could support them to protect themselves and stay safe during this period. The SWTs took the opportunity to encourage the girls to study during this break to ensure that they are not left behind when schools reopen.

Research Questions

The research questions were as follows:

1. What is the importance of the SWT's role in schools?
2. What issues do the girls in the community face during the COVID-19 school closure?
3. What kinds of activities can the SWT do to support girls in the communities during this school closure?

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was analyzed using a mix of both descriptive and inferential statistics, qualified through open-ended questions for students and phone conversations with the SWTs and LC1 women representatives. I undertook to interview the SWTs and LC1 women representatives.

During the data collection phase, phone briefing meetings were held at the end of each day to triangulate and ensure that good-quality data was being obtained. Discussions were also held on newly emerging issues.

Results

Community Support

All the girls reached were aware of the position of SWTs in school and were able to identify their roles, as listed above, and recognize that it is through the enactment of these roles by these teachers that they benefit as students. All the LC1 women representatives, too, were aware of the role of SWTs in schools and were able to describe them.

The girls were asked to identify three main people who provided them with support in the community. The LC1 woman representative was mentioned by 44.5 percent, NGOs by 32 percent, and the LC1 chairman by 16 percent. Relatives were listed by 7 percent and parents by 2.3 percent. None of the girls identified the police as people they would approach for help. The SWTs also identified the LC1 woman representative as their ally in working on supporting girls in the community, while 85 percent of the LC1 women representatives appreciated the support of the SWTs and indicated their willingness to work with them. The LC1 women representatives acknowledged working on issues related to girls who need referrals from the school to the community. Of these, 21 percent mentioned having worked with the SWTs in handling cases from school that had needed referral to a girl's community.

Heavy Domestic Chores

The current issues and challenges identified by the girls included heavy domestic chores; 66.3 percent of them made this claim. Of the girls from peasant backgrounds, 78 percent brought up heavy domestic chores as an issue that affected them greatly during the COVID-19 school closure. Related to these chores, the girls mentioned the lack of time to do any schoolwork and requested the support of the SWTs in asking their parents to give them the opportunity to study and also provide them with materials for learning and lighting. Of the SWTs, 57 percent identified heavy domestic chores as a challenge, while 49 percent of LC1 woman representatives did so.

Socioeconomic Factors

Of the girls, 12.5 percent mentioned that they were not able to access learning materials because their parents were unable to provide them. The government has provided revision notes for students and copies of these materials can be found at the subcounty level, but parents or guardians must access these copies and photocopy them for their children. However, the parents or guardians have not done so because they do not have the money for photocopying.

While guidance and counseling from SWTs was, at 91 percent, the most requested, 81 percent of the girls indicated the need for sanitary pads and for support from the SWTs in providing them with skills related to making reusable sanitary pads. More girls requested this materials-based service from the SWTs than any other.

The survey also tried to identify the best possible ways for the SWTs to gain access to the girls, and it emerged that 89 percent of the girls were to be found in places where they supported their family income and livelihood. These jobs included selling wares in shops and at stalls, giving support in gardens, caregiving, and doing domestic chores in the home.

Seventy percent of the girls indicated that they would love the SWTs to regularly visit their homes to advise and speak with their parents so that the latter can understand them better, give them time to revise their schoolwork, and provide them with learning materials and sanitary pads. Of these girls, 67 percent also indicated that they would love to have the SWTs visit them and help them with their studies.

Health Information, Domestic Violence, and Sex-Based Concerns

Of the girls from the peri-urban setting, 59 percent said that the need for adolescent health information and support was the main challenge they were experiencing, while 31 percent of the girls from the peri-urban areas pointed out that they lacked adolescent health information, and 11 percent were faced with domestic violence as a problem. However, none of the girls pointed to either early marriage or sexual harassment as an issue in their communities. However, 20 percent of the LC1 chairpersons cited early marriage and 75 percent cited sexual harassment, stating that they had received several reports of early marriages and defilement of girls in their communities.

Discussion

This study aimed to establish the role of the SWTs in a community setting and to identify the prevailing issues affecting girls during the COVID-19 school closure. This will help identify ways through which the SWTs could continue to support girls' education by providing girls with the services they would otherwise have been accorded at school if not for the closures. Schools have been a haven for all girls, and more so for vulnerable ones given that the government of Uganda has ratified various policies that support and protect children and has put into place the National Strategy for Girls' Education 2014–19 (MoES 2013).¹

The Ugandan government has suggested that having SWTs is one way of overcoming gender discrimination and helping girls to deal with the challenges related to this. The SWTs were assigned to primary schools and, later, to secondary ones. This was part of the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards (BRMS) in Education Institutions (MoES 2020) document in Uganda, revised in 2009.²

This placement of SWTs is one of the contributing factors to the safety that girls experience in Ugandan schools, which enables them to attend regularly, complete their schooling, and get good examination results. However, as part of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda closed schools on 18 March 2020, and six months later, at the time of writing, schools are still closed, as is the case in many other countries. This has created the problem of how to support the girls and protect them from

defilement, early pregnancy, and early marriage and ensure that they can return to school when these reopen.

Reports from the Ebola crisis in Liberia in 2014 indicated that girls faced several challenges during the crisis, including early pregnancy and marriage. It was clear that most girls were unlikely to return to school at the end of that crisis. Most of the child protection cases during the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda are related to child labor, defilement, child marriage, and domestic violence, all of which have a devastating impact on the welfare of children, as reported by Hope Ejang Muzungu (2020).

The government of Uganda used the article “Lessons from Sierra Leone Ebola Pandemic on the Impact of School Closures on Girls” (2020), published by *The Conversation* on 20 May of that year, to guide its policies on girls’ safety and education during the lockdown. These policy responses, which prolonged the school break for girls, point to the need for interventions and alternative safe spaces within the community to support pregnant girls to continue their education. For example, interventions could include supporting young women through virtual mentoring or phone-based group chats, or any other feasible group activities that take up time that might otherwise be spent on unproductive activities. Such support could also help girls build and maintain their social networks, enabling them to be more resilient during the crisis.

In stories about COVID-19 narrated by youth from northern Uganda aged between eighteen and twenty-four, Save the Children (2020) found that the youth ended up engaging in risky behavior that led to unwanted pregnancies and child marriages because they were idle and did not have opportunities to participate in social networks, like sports galas, community dialogues, and religious activities.

My study reveals that there are hardly any support systems for girls in the community. The LC1 woman representative was mentioned by the SWTs and girls as the person in the community to whom they turn. However, this position is a political one, introduced in Uganda as part of the affirmative action plan to ensure that women are represented administratively, politically, and financially in society. But the woman representatives have varying levels of education, are from different professions, and have different experiences, so they may not be trained to support girls and may not have time to juggle women’s and girls’ issues in the community in a way that enables them to deal with both adequately.

The SWT is a dedicated resource who already works with the girls and is trained to guide, counsel, and work with children. The government of Uganda has been able to make some strides in supporting girls, not only through affirmative action but also through laws and regulations that protect them. These structures and regulations are more easily monitored and implemented at school level than in the community. This could be because of local culture and tradition and the lack of a referral and follow-up system in communities similar to the one that exists in the school setting, which makes it a safer place for girls, given the resource of the SWT.

The argument for the work of the SWT in the community is further strengthened by the experience in Sierra Leone, which indicated that over the course of the Ebola epidemic, out-of-wedlock pregnancy rates for girls aged twelve to seventeen increased by 7.2 percent at the onset of the crisis. The report, by Imran Rasul et al. (2020), goes on to state that this was entirely reversed for girls who had had access, prior to the epidemic, to the safe space of one of the girls' clubs. This justifies having the SWTs continue with their roles and provide these clubs in the communities to help ensure that girls continue to be empowered to keep away from the temptation of early marriage and sexual relations that can lead to pregnancy, and in the long run, lead to their dropping out of school.

The girls mentioned the LC1 chairperson as their other support mechanism, but this is a political position and is mainly male dominated. As noted in the research findings, slightly fewer than half of the girls mentioned the person in this position, yet they are the first point of arbitration in the community. The police were not identified by the girls as a resource to whom they could go for help. On inquiry, the girls mentioned that they did not feel they would get any support from the police, and they feared approaching them.

It is not surprising that heavy domestic chores ranked the highest among the girl's challenges, with 66.3 percent of the girls mentioning this. In Uganda, the COVID-19 lockdown coincided with the planting season. Of the respondent girls, 60 percent were from peasant homes that depend on subsistence farming for their livelihood. Children generally make up the labor in small farms. It is not surprising that 55 percent of the 67 percent of girls who mentioned heavy domestic chores as an issue came from peasant homes, since this was an opportune time for parents to take advantage of their children's availability. Family livelihoods have been shaken by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and everyone

must work doubly hard to ensure the sustainability of these livelihoods. However, heavy domestic chores constitute the price paid by girls.

The survey also tried to identify the best possible way for the SWT to gain access to the girls, and it was found that 89 percent of the girls were in places where they helped support their family income and livelihood. The advantage of finding these girls at their workplaces is that they will be with either their parents or caregivers or their employers, who could then join in the conversations with the SWT. This presents the opportunity for the SWT to advise both the girl and the caregiver or employer about the importance of education and about how these adults can protect the girls and provide them with time to study during the long school break.

The need for the girls to contribute to the family livelihood undermines the need to encourage remote learning; the family considers the latter a luxury because they are not able to afford even the most basic necessities. A report by Joining Forces Coalition (2020) points out the importance of continued learning during this period and goes on to explain that the longer children stay out of school, the higher the risk of their never returning. Girls who are not learning during this period will lag behind their peers when school resumes.

Heavy domestic chores are thus affecting girls during the pandemic. Cultural demands mean that girls and their mothers must fall into prescribed gender roles and perform all the chores in the home, including caregiving to the young and the elderly. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE 2020) reports that especially in rural areas, with their high poverty rates, girls are usually expected to work to increase the family's income. In cases where the family is unable to manage with its meagre income, local tradition dictates that girls be married off in exchange for bride price to help offset financial insecurity.³

Having access to adolescent health information is important to the girls in peri-urban settings. This could indicate the higher risks they may be facing, in that they are less engaged in domestic chores and so more easily lured into sexual behavior in exchange for money. The SWTs have been instrumental in providing confidential counseling and guidance in this respect and in telling girls where they can get referrals if they need any help on issues related to sex and adolescent health. Many health centers have been forced to close because of the strict government lockdown. As pointed out by Peer to Peer Uganda (PEERU) (2020), only one or two youth-friendly centers have remained open, and only in the larger urban centers that are far from rural and peri-urban areas. This leaves girls with

no one to turn to for the adolescent health information that the SWTs can readily provide.

Being faced with domestic violence was listed as a challenge by 11 percent of the girls. This does not come as a surprise, with so many reports of increasing gender-based violence taking place in homes during the COVID-19 lockdown. Julius Omona (2020) states that people are undergoing stress, fatigue, and depression linked to insecurity and worries about diminishing income, and that this has fueled domestic violence. From 31 March to 14 April 2020, 328 cases of domestic violence were reported to the police nationwide (ibid.).

In relation to the girls' failure to identify the police as one of their referral points in the community, there was no mention of early marriage or sexual harassment as an issue in their submissions. This is surprising because of the increasing number of media reports of defilement and early pregnancy in girls. In the article "191 Defilement Cases Reported in Albertine Region During Lockdown" (2020), the *Independent* reported that the police had raised a red flag over the escalation of defilement cases in this region since COVID-19 struck.

This study provided a clear message from 81 percent of participants that the girls lack sanitary pads and that their parents and guardians are not providing them with any. They were also able to identify the support they usually expected in school from the SWTs, who teach them how to make reusable ones. Girl Up,⁴ an NGO in Uganda, recognizes this need and explains the risk that adolescent girls face during COVID-19 regarding accessing menstrual products. Girl Up goes on to explain the dynamics of COVID-19's effect on family income and supply chains around the world, resulting in sanitary pads being more costly and less prioritized by heads of households during the current crisis. The SWT could play a great role in supporting girls by having subcounty and village girls' clubs emulate the clubs in schools, where girls are taught to make reusable sanitary pads (Girl Up n.d.).

Guidance and counseling, both for girls and their parents, is another part that the SWTs can play in their role in the community; 72 percent of the girls indicated that they would love regular visits by the SWTs to their homes, and 67 percent indicated that what they would appreciate about visits by the SWT is that she would be able to bring the girls and their guardians together and go through a variety of issues related to supporting girls, as well as mediate on any issue related to bringing up an adolescent girl that arose.

Agnes's Story

I offer Agnes's story here by way of illustrating the role that an SWT played in a young girl's life.

Agnes is a fifteen-year-old girl in primary 7 who lives in Masaka district with her mother and three siblings in a peasant family that depends on subsistence farming for a living. Like any other teenage girl, Agnes has dreams, and she wants to be a nurse. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of all the schools, Agnes's mother took her to Kampala to help her aunt with household chores.

In the house to which Agnes was taken, there was a male visitor who set up a routine of defiling her. When she was asked about him, Agnes said, "I do not know the man and I do not even know his name. I do not know where he came from. He was a visitor in that home, and I could not tell anyone that he was defiling me."

Agnes came back to Masaka to find that school had reopened and that her classmates were in school and preparing to take their primary leaving exams, but Agnes was sick and was then found to be pregnant. The school contacted Agnes's mother and explained to her the importance of having her daughter take the primary leaving examinations. Since Agnes was to give birth before the exams, the school was willing to support her in taking her exams after she had had her baby.

Agnes went through a very difficult labor and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Unfortunately, after only two days she was unable to manage caring for the baby's umbilical cord and the child bled to death. Agnes, still only a child herself, underwent the kind of trauma through which no young girl should ever have to go. The SWT began making routine visits to Agnes at home and helped her with her studies while providing her with counseling and guidance. The SWT ensured that Agnes was sufficiently stable emotionally and psychologically to take her exams, which she managed to do.

Agnes's mother was her only support system during this hard time, but given the family's limited finances, education, and information, she could only try to support her daughter within the given circumstances of her poverty and illiteracy, which limited her ability to seek justice for her. She also did her best to guide and counsel her daughter as she went through these hard times. Here, the SWT played an important role in supporting the family with information about the laws and referrals for the support for teenage mothers.

Today, Agnes is still traumatized by this experience, but with the continued emotional and psychological support provided by the SWT, she is now awaiting her primary leaving examination results and looking forward to progressing with her education.

Recommendations on How to Engage SWTs in Communities to Support Girls

Using the already-existing structures, the SWT role could easily be supported by the probation and gender offices at district level. Through these offices the SWTs could receive guidance and support as they undertake their roles, and they could get the necessary support and information on training and any supplies available to girls from government and non-governmental organizations. According to the Uganda Violence against Children in Schools (VACIS) survey conducted by the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development (2018), the SWT would maintain the reporting procedures and ensure that the most vulnerable girls receive support.

The SWT would work with the existing structures to set up a referral system for any cases of violence against the girls in the community, as recommended in the guidelines for the roles of SWTs (MoES 2020). The LC1 chairperson, police, probation, and gender offices would all be available to support the work of the SWT and would be aware of her roles. By linking up with these referral points the SWT would be able to provide some services to the girls beyond her jurisdiction, for example in instances where a girl is defiled, since this would require immediate intervention by the police.

The SWT, together with the women representative, could set up days on which girls could come to the subcounty headquarters for counseling sessions. There could also be group sessions like the girls' clubs at school where girls can be registered in groups of no more than fifteen to attend sessions on adolescent health, COVID-19, and skills and finance sessions.

Joining Forces Coalition (2020) recommends supporting teacher networks with apps such as WhatsApp and other social media platforms. The article points to the potential of bringing teachers together in virtual groups to share resources and methods for teaching remotely. This could be very helpful to the work of the SWT in the communities. Through social media platforms they could provide connectivity for the girls and

set up virtual clubs, provide information, and share learning with them. Their fellow teachers and other staff members, too, could be helped to understand how better to support girls and where to get referrals for different problems experienced by the girls.

The SWTs would not only be serving girls from the schools to which they are attached, but all girls in the community area within their localities, so it is important that each be identified and introduced as the SWT in a specific locality.

Conclusion

The fact that the government has institutionalized the position of the SWT and included it as one of the basic requirements and minimum standards in schools means that every school that has girls at both primary and secondary level is required to have a SWT (MoES 2009). This is an indication that there are at least as many SWTs as there are girls' schools in each village or subcounty. This is a trained workforce with the ability to support girls. Since the SWTs could cover girls from different schools, there will be a need to set up an association to coordinate their efforts under the gender unit of the district local government. The SWT is already part of the VACIS reporting procedure and so can maintain this role in the community to cover all issues affecting girls.

The activities of the SWT in the community could mirror what they have already been doing at school level. This would include offering guidance and counseling, advocacy, adolescent health advice, role modeling, and skills development. However, because of the current lockdown and the fact that students will be at home and in the community, home visits would be needed along with group sessions. Radio and television messaging could be used to reach as many girls as possible. In this way the value of the SWTs would be maximized to the advantage of hundreds of girls.

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cently completed a residency at the Brookings Institution focusing on the rights of girls to education. She initiated guidelines for the strengthening of the role of Senior Women Teachers in Uganda.

Notes

1. The National Strategy for Girls Education (NSGE) provides for a national implementation framework, laying out strategies to achieve the goal of narrowing the gender gap in education, and in this way to accord the girl child the right to equal access, an equal chance to take part and share in the education system, and equal educational results and outcomes. The prioritized areas of focus in the NSGE are: an effective policy implementation framework for girls' education; harmonization of education sector programs in this area; commitment of requisite resources to girls education; institutionalized/routine research in this area; and capacity enhancement and involvement for all critical actors in girls' education.
2. In 2001 the MoES issued the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards Indicators for Education Institutions (BRMS) to schools and other relevant stakeholders to guide the organization and management of educational institutions.
3. According to MIFUMI, an NGO and women's rights agency that worked with Gill Hague and Ravi Thiara (2009), bride price consists of a contract by virtue of which material items (often cattle or other animals) are handed over or money is paid by the groom to the bride's family in exchange for the bride, her labor, and her capacity to produce children. This usually results in girls being married off early, domestic violence, and these girls being reduced to slaves whom the husband and his clan feel they have bought as a labor resource to add to their community.
4. Girl Up Initiative Uganda launched the "COVID-19 Survive and Thrive Fund" to help families in our communities to purchase basic necessities, and important among these were sanitary pads for girls. The schools serve as meeting places for parents and girls to collect supplies, and the Girl Up staff are on hand to talk to girls if they need counseling or support.

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