

**Building Education Resilience for Girls in Kenya****Florence Kisirkoi****Maasai Mara University, Kenya**[kisirkoflorence@gmail.com](mailto:kisirkoflorence@gmail.com)**Michelle D. Cude****James Madison University, Virginia, USA**[cudemd@jmu.edu](mailto:cudemd@jmu.edu)**Abstract 694**

Education disruptions caused by poverty, insecurity and negative traditional practices in rural communities in Kenya were escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic when Narok county was reported to be leading in teenage pregnancy. Such a trend would delay achievement of the international Sustainable Development Goal 4 .1 by 2030. The purpose of this study was to investigate the strategies which some students employed to continue learning amidst education disruptions. It was guided by the research questions: What were their experiences in education during COVID-19 pandemic school closure? What made some of them continue learning amidst disruptions while many did not? What do they propose as useful solutions which builds education resilience? Using interview schedules and guided by interpretivist paradigm, voices were captured where 29 girls, 44 boys; later 21 girls and 2 teachers were interviewed to express their perspectives on their experiences during COVID-19 disruptions. Some of the experiences were harassment and lack of learning resources; some suggestions which could build education resilience for inclusive learning were provision of innovative, learning technology tools, libraries, and socio-emotional support groups.

**Key words:** pandemic, Maasai, resilience, socio-emotional, school closure, strategies

## Building Education Resilience for Girls in Kenya

Education is an enabler of wellbeing and progress and must be protected from disruptive negative cultural practices and crises such as COVID-19 pandemic by building learning resilience leading to attainment of equitable, quality education for all by the year 2030, as spelt out in SDG4.1 (UNESCO, 2017). This study examines evidence of cultural practices and impact of COVID-19 which escalated the existing disruptions, a situation which calls for education resilience strategies. This case study is based on voices of Maasai girls from different schools in a semi-arid region of Kenya who faced education interruption. It seeks to find out why certain girls were able to sustain learning despite the challenges of school closure. The final outcomes, then, are voices from the local community and schoolgirls themselves, as they suggest models and solutions for sustainable education.

### Statement of the Problem

The Maasai community in Narok County suffer from lingering negative traditional cultural practices and attitudes which hamper girls' access to education, giving them a bleak future if an intervention is not implemented for inclusive learning. The problem was worsened by COVID-19 crises which forced learning institutions to close (Global Education Coalition, 2020). Reports indicate that during the COVID -19 pandemic, Narok County was leading in teenage pregnancy and forced child marriage which threatened both education and meaningful development (Partridge-Hicks, 2020).

Yet, amidst the crisis of school closure, some girls continued learning. The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that led to their success which might be built into a plan for education resilience for pastoralists in Kenya and other such communities globally. The following research questions guided the study: What were the students' experiences in education during the pandemic school closure? What made them succeed and continue with their education amidst disruptions? What do they propose as useful solutions which build education resilience?

### Review of the Literature

Literature from two areas was collected in order to situate both the problem and the solution amidst the existing research.

#### **Problem: Recent Literature on Girls' Education**

Current research illustrates how the problem of inequality in education access has been well documented, but is now exacerbated by comorbid issues including the pandemic's forced school closures, food insecurity, mental health, teenage pregnancy, in addition to stalled educational progress (Global Education Coalition, 2020; Partridge-Hicks, 2020). Van der Berg and Spaul (2020) conducted a study in South Africa which measured the impact of school closure on children. One factor identified was loss of consistent nutrition in school, negatively impacting the already poor state of children's health and wellbeing.

Rafaeli and Hutchinson (2020) and Amplify Girls (Oulo, 2021) documented the negative impact on girls' education, identifying that girls' suffer disproportionately compared to boys and will likely continue to suffer for decades to come as long-term effects of school closures emerge. The magnitude of impact of Maasai culture on girls' education is told by Parsitau, a Maasai girl who managed to succeed and acquire quality education against all odds (Parsitau, 2017). Such success stories give urgency and motivation to create education resilience by identifying what best helped some students continue learning amidst disruptions.

#### **Solution: Technology for Education Resilience**

Still there is hope. UNESCO (2020) publicized that despite the challenges of quality assurance and assessment, use of radio and television broadcast could offer a distance learning sustainable solution which bridges the digital divide and reaches the most unreachable and marginalized individuals and communities. Distance learning through various technology such as radio and television tools could support learning during crises. In Kenya, distance learning was introduced around 1961 for teacher professional development and providing learning to populations difficult to access (Odera, 2022; Wambaria, 2003).

#### ***Use of Radio***

Save the Children organization delivered distance education programmes to the children in the Daadab refugee camp in Northern Kenya through radio arguing that when children lost access to education, they became victims of child labour and forced child marriage (Dzame, 2020). Odera (2022) conducted research to find out the contribution of World Space Radio in Kenya in improvement of quality of education in Primary schools. It reaches students in remote areas where students have no alternative to receive education or supplement teachers' work. Odera, outlines shortfalls in use of radio for teaching since it does not allow for personal contact, nor immediate feedback, which are critical in effective teaching. Trucano (2010) presents a radio instruction programme which addresses the need for interaction by engaging teachers and students in instructional activities such as question and

answer and singing. Innovations could leverage radio for learner - centred instruction in Kenya, including the teaching and learning of Competency- based Curriculum through the means of the radio (Kisirkoi & Cude, 2021).

#### ***Use of Cell Phones***

Smart phones could be used widely in learning for audio, video recording, calling, communication through text, emailing and messaging through multimedia and short messaging services (Litchfield, 2010). Ford and Batchelor (2007) called the cell phone “the most powerful universally-accessible computing device in the hands of Africans” (p. 116). Findings by Ayoub (2014), in a study conducted in Tanzania, found that 60 % of school students had access to mobile phones. A study by Iqbal and Bhatti (2020) indicated that smart phones are effective tools for communicating with students, sharing course work through text, and video communication, with the drawbacks of disruptions in the classroom and teachers’ lack of training. However, these are not insurmountable obstacles for their effective use.

In a speech at the ninth Pan-Commonwealth Forum (2019), the President of the Republic of Seychelles, Danny Faure, called for countries to harness the potential “of open, distance and technology enabled learning, which are tried and tested mechanisms for ensuring that learning can take place at any time and in any place... if we mean to achieve SDG 4 by 2030” (pp. 2-3). Ford and Batchelor (2007) predicted that cell phones would erase the digital divide in Africa by solving issues of access and affordability and suggested that mobile network providers could offer a lower e-rate for schools use in distance learning.

### **Methodology**

#### **Methodological Approach: Interpretivism**

The study is a qualitative case study looking in-depth at two locations in Kenya to capture response of the schoolgirls to education disruptions. It employs interpretivism paradigm which according to Dudovskiy (2016) allows participant observation and interpretation for in depth investigation. To Dudovskiy, interpretivism involves dialogue reasoning, interaction between researcher and subjects and multiple interpretation, principles which are key to this study. The researchers interacted with research subjects, interviewed them and gathered qualitative data guided by an interview guide.

#### **Context and Participants of the Case Study**

The locations for this case study were among the pastoral Maasai of Kenya in Narok County, selected because, besides the COVID -19 disruption of learning, the Maasai culture presents further education disruptions due to female genital mutilation and forced early marriage which are typical of many pastoral communities. A pastor had gathered 300 children and youth aged 10-21years for mentorship where the initial data was drawn in order to investigate issues of education disruption and work towards building learning resilience. At that location, data was collected from 29 girls and 44 boys which pointed out the problem that there were learning disruptions occasioned by negative cultural practices and escalated by COVID-19 restrictions; girls were the most affected. At the second phase of data collection, upon which this paper is primarily based, 21 girls and 2 teachers were accessed and interviewed during a Girls’ Empowerment Summit in a different location in Narok county

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The research subscribed to IRB standards and was accepted as IRB Protocol # 22-2699. Data was collected in the form of questionnaires and interviews in both individual and focus group settings, using interview guides. These were coded and themes drawn from them in line with the research questions. Member-checking with those interviewed, as well as the primary researcher being a resident and intimately familiar with the culture, helped to preclude any misinterpretations.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings established that girls faced many challenges during school closure which only intensified those caused by economic, cultural practices and COVID-19 restrictions. They were, however, able to rise above the challenges, learn at home and return to school and continue learning. They offered details about their hardships as well as solutions to build resilience for themselves and others in face further challenges ahead.

#### **Findings and Discussion about the Problem**

The girls in schools in Narok county face similar barriers in their education as their peers in many places around the globe, as discussed in the literature, but for girls in Narok their challenges are compounded with negative cultural practices. The students’ voices themselves, echoed the constraints faced by others, but also added another barrier which has not been well documented in research thus far: emotional stress.

#### **Common Barriers**

A close reading and coding of the questionnaires from the students demonstrates that these girls faced a wide range of barriers, both psychological and physical, which tried to derail their educational focus. Given their

economic status, lack of resources seems the most widespread barrier. When asked what would help them most, some responded with requests for the government to hand out laptops or phones (Students 1,4,8,9), books (Students 12,19,20), or bring food for starving children (Students 3,11). Three students (5,7,11) simply asked for someone to guide their learning, demonstrating that even the resources alone are not sufficient, as they desire human resources, someone to “help me learn.” Six students asked specifically for more libraries, or for the library in their area to be open. Student 17 offers, “What about adding library in villages so that we may be learning day and night?” as she noted that if you give her books, “we have no lights and most of us gets time at night [to read].”

The lack of resources, however, was not the only hurdle girls faced as they resiliently pursued progress in their studies. Student 21 recalled the most difficult part was not access to books but rather time to study: “I got a very big challenge, that is, I never had enough *time* for reading.” Table 1 records the hurdles girls reported to studying at home and pursuing their education, followed by the coded identities of the respondents in parenthesis:

**Table 1**

*Obstacles to Studying at Home*

Much work/ little time	Limited/lacked resources	Bad influence of peers/boys	Fear/stagnated with lack of hope/isolation
7 girls (#1,3,4,8,15,18,21)	5 girls (#6,7,10,17,20)	5 girls (#3,5,8,14,17)	5 girls (#7,9,11,13,17)
Hunger	Lack guidance	Lack motivation	
3 girls (#9,18,19)	3 girls (#5,6,17)	1 girl (#12)	

The data clearly indicates that these students face the common barriers to girls’ education, and often compounding factors less well recognized such as emotional stress. Their ability to overcome these barriers to keep learning and return to school deserved investigation.

***Emotional Barriers***

The girls made it clear that socio-emotional issues such as loneliness and fear during school closure took a toll on their emotional health. Student 5 predicted that if this were to happen again, she would want to “at least find someone to talk to about what I am passing through” realizing that sharing the emotional burden will lessen it. Companionship was a real support to several of the girls who reported that they did not see any of their peers normally, but took especial liking to times when they could interact with peers such as “when I went to the shop” (Student 6) or the market (Student 7), or “at the river to fetch water.” (Student 21). Five girls specifically mentioned the sadness and loneliness of the quarantine, such as Student 9: “My homeplace is somewhere in the bush so you can’t access anyone.”

Peers are not always positive. Many of the students clearly lived among others who did not share their commitment to education and often ostracized them for it. Student 9 continued to describe her difficulties with her peers: “My most difficult time was I felt lonely, since my friends were all against me. They said I was pride[ful] so they never talked to me.” Clearly having a peer group who share similar dedication to education would help mediate feelings of isolation. Student 16 reported that all her friends at home were now married, so they had fewer things in common; she was committed to pursuing education. Few research reports consider the emotional toll endured by girls who persevere and break cultural patterns to attend school instead of getting married at ages 14 or 15.

Student 18, a bright student in high school, commented about her peers having a different mindset since they were not going to school: “Most of the girls became pregnant and most of them [it was] their choice and desire, and most of them ended up being married.” The interviews with students revealed some of the difficulties they faced in operating in a world where one is on a trajectory contrary to most of their agemates, thus making it hard to persevere amidst criticism.

Not only did the girls have to stand up to criticism for their choices to stay in school but they also had to fight “the disturbance from boys” (Student 14). Student 11 reported that other girls were “wasting time with boys” and many got pregnant and “were not forced, it was their choice but other girls were raped.” Most girls reported a mix of the pregnancies and early marriages were by choice and others forced. Student 17 stated, “Some of them were forced to, for example, some were employed by women who work far from their home and they were left with the women’s husband.” Safety was a primary fear of girls even before the pandemic, especially going home over the long holidays, of which COVID-19 school closure was the longest. All the 21 girls reported to have seen many school girls who fell pregnant during the school closure. The hardships they endured during school closure were many and varied, but their persistence in holding onto their dreams, built education resilience in them.

### Findings about the Solutions

This case study included 21 girls who studied and returned to school despite the barriers and temptations, which begs the question, what made them succeed and continue with their education? And, what do they propose as useful solutions which build education resilience?

What has helped them to succeed is certainly the character traits they exhibited in their interviews and questionnaires. When asked what personal values girls need to hold fast to their educational plan, they answered a broad spectrum of values which included determination, self-control, and being self-driven. "By educating them on the importance of having self-control. They should learn to value themselves better." (Student 17). Student 17 personalized it to the Maasai students, encouraging them to recognize that "a maa [Maasai girl] is worth more than cows." They demonstrated strength of character and "perseverance in any situation." (Student 9). The answers the girls gave in the interviews and questionnaires divulged a new level of self-confidence, self-knowledge, and courage.

Girls' voices asking the government to keep them safe and eliminate early marriages by "punishing rapists", and ending "mistreatment and kidnaping of the girlchild" (Student 9) demonstrate a strong sense of self advocacy. For these students, this becomes an issue of social justice to ask for protection and the chance to have their voices to be heard. This sense of self-worth and empowerment contributed to their success of resisting temptation to give up on their education.

Time with peers would help with processing those fears, normalizing them and getting support from friends. One student seemed quite paralyzed with fear from the pandemic itself: "Many people were dying and I was very shocked that I thought that even me, I was going to die, but I thanked God a lot" (Student 7). Of the 14 who described their proximity to friends, only three (21%) had sustained substantial peer contact for emotional support and engagement.

One of the ways to mitigate the emotional toll of the isolation and fear is to create ways for girls to be mentored and to find companionship and time to meet together. As Student 18 proposed, "A place should be set where most of the village children could meet and exchange ideas." That is precisely what the pastor who is Director of a local girls' school did by creating the solution of Girls' Empowerment Seminars where these girls came together to offer one another support and strength, to encourage one another to remain committed to their dreams of a brighter future through education while keeping to Ministry of Health safety protocols. The meetings could be blended and virtual. In addition to emotional support and mentorship, data reveals that girls proposed two solutions involving technology and access to books (library).

Distance education appears to be a possible solution to the disruptions at an institutional level. Distance education offers such disadvantaged groups a way to benefit from education by leveraging whatever technology is within their reach; in this case, cell phones were the most available. The questionnaire showed that approximately half (10/21) of the girls had a cell phone available to use for schooling. Another 24% (5/21) relied on books, teachers' notes and past papers. Twenty-nine percent (6/21) used the public broadcasting (television, radio) for lessons. Overall, only two girls (10%) reported not having any resources at all to use for study, but one met her class teacher and requested her to come home and help her with studies, the other used teachers notes and past papers. Of the methods available for studying, cell phones had the most availability or usage in the study area, making this a favorable and potentially effective option to pursue for further implementation of distance learning. Five students felt this would be the most useful governmental contribution for education: give every student a cell phone. An equal number sought government assistance in building libraries to make books accessible to all.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has illuminated the stories of these girls in Maasai-land in Kenya. Through their voices, we have seen the many dimensions of their challenges and roadblocks to their academic success. Yet, despite all their challenges, some girls continued learning through the school closure and now beyond. This study sought to investigate how such girls made it, and identify factors which might be built into a plan for education resilience for them and similar communities across the globe.

Fostering resilience will mean including the parents and community in the cultural changes necessary to support girls' education. According to the teachers interviewed, only about 50-60% of the girls' mothers supported their education. Further education of the community is needed to create educational opportunities for the girls. Yet the girls themselves have also become empowered to determine solutions for themselves. Their solutions are two-fold: 1.) create a time and space for girls to mentor and communicate with each other, supporting one another and building up those personal values they depend upon to resist discouragement and temptation to forget their dreams, and 2.) the government to subsidize a cell phone for every student to be able to access the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development education programmes in order to sustain learning amidst disruptions. The authors suggest

that wider cell phone access could combine solutions to both problems: availability of educational materials and social interaction for mentorship, in blended mode. Radio and television could reach the unreachable.

According to the girls, their successful navigation of the school closure resulted also from their faith, their values, and their positive outlook, all of which were nurtured at home then grew in their supportive local environment. These values were encouraged by role models such as successful girls and the founder of their meeting centre where they gather for inspirational speeches and share companionship with others. Technology tools such as cellphones could be used innovatively to support virtual or blended interactions in learning, as well as fostering relationships and mentorship to reduce isolation. The 21 girls with success stories could become role models and mentors of others who also mentor others and contribute to sustainable development. Success of this study could be tried by other pastoral communities around the world. Similar studies on boys and people living with disabilities could be conducted.

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