



Picture illustration by Ruramai Musikewa

POLICY BRIEF: TEENAGE PREGNANCY IN ZIMBABWE

By Education Coalition of Zimbabwe (ECOZI)

Introduction

The Education Coalition of Zimbabwe (ECOZI), established in June 2009, is a network of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), Teacher Unions, Faith Based Organizations, Community Based Organizations and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Zimbabwe with an interest and working within the education sector. ECOZI is an apolitical and nonpartisan coalition that unites civil society in the common pursuit of the right to quality, free basic education for all, with emphasis on public funded education. ECOZI is a Private Voluntary Organization registered under Private Voluntary Organization Act (Chapter 17.05). In 2021, ECOZI completed the Results to Education Index (RTEI) Questionnaire. RTEI is a global accountability initiative that aims to ensure that all people, no matter where they live, enjoy their right to a quality education. It is a global index built out of the international right to education framework to monitor country progress towards its fulfillment. In order to obtain these results, Results Educational Fund (RESULTS) partners with civil society organizations, research institutions and governments to collect data on a wide range indicator explicitly derived from the international right to education framework. The primary tool of the RTEI is the RTEI Questionnaire which is a

comprehensive survey of close ended questions and answered with supporting documents. Each question has an explicit basis in one or several international human rights instruments.

ECOZI is expected to do a Country policy brief as a deliverable after completing its RTEI Questionnaire. This Country policy brief will focus on teenage pregnancy as an emerging issue. Although not a new phenomenon, teenage pregnancy is getting attention of all actors due to its increased prevalence. Zimbabwe like other Covid-19 hit countries witnessed an increase in teenage pregnancies during lockdowns. At first, actors were reporting Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) but statistics later proved that teenage pregnancy was also becoming rampant. Teenage pregnancy has also contributed increased school dropouts by girls which in turns affect girls' education.

Overview of RTEI Results

The overall score of Zimbabwe in the Results to Education Index Questionnaire for 2021 is 66%. In terms of girls' education, Zimbabwe is one of the highest scoring countries with 92%, largely due to its strong legal and policy environment. The worry has been on the prevalence of increased teenager pregnancies and early child marriages. This has also resulted in low female survival rate in most parts of the country as a result of high school dropout rates of girls. Despite the myriad of factors surrounding high teenager pregnancies in Zimbabwe, efforts are being made whilst some have already been put in place to ensure that girls who would have dropped out of school continue to access education. In addition, the overall score for Free education is at 62% whilst participation in education is at 61% thus according to the Results to Education Index Questionnaire for Zimbabwe (2021). It is important to note that lack of free education translates to relatively low participation rates in the education sector and this also becomes another cause for teenage pregnancy. In addition, it also becomes a barrier to pregnant girls and young mothers to continue their schooling due to lack of strong supporting systems. In other context, this can be noted as a contributing factor to weak implementation of the School Re-entry policy for pregnant girls and young mothers.

Impact of Covid-19 on the Right to Education

The Education Sector of Zimbabwe is one of the key sectors that was greatly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, following the school closures on 24 March 2020 and then the nationwide lockdown instituted by the national government. The school closures affected 4.56 million learners nationally¹ and 4.46 million learners in the basic education system (Early Childhood Development, Primary and Lower Secondary – Form 4) and it created new challenges for a sector that was already grappling with the impact of the national economic challenges and recovering from Cyclone Idai that hit the country a year ago in March 2019. With the fragility of the economic situation of Zimbabwe, the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 was felt hardest by the most vulnerable children in the country, plunging them further into hardship.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic extends far beyond the sphere of physical health. The Zimbabwe Child Helpline reported that the calls to its helpline had risen in the days of the lockdown period. The Childline Bulawayo Call Centre for the period between 24th March to 2nd of April saw a 43% increase on the daily average calls. Of these calls 41% were directly related to violence against children and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), with 75% of the perpetrators being people within the child's home environment. It is known from previous shutdowns that school children, and especially girls, who are out of school for extended periods of time are much less likely to return to school when classrooms reopen. Children who dropout of school as a result of this crisis, will face not only a high

¹ Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Annual Statistics Report of 2020

risk of child marriage, child labour, and teenage pregnancies but will see their lifetime earnings potential precipitously falling.

Zimbabwe were further at disadvantage in terms of access to digital and distance learning since only 30.3% of households have access to the internet by any by any device from home and only 40% of households have a radio set, with 35.7% having a TV set². The early closure of schools in March 2020 and the subsequent national lockdown instituted by the Government in response to the Covid-19 outbreak disrupted the teaching and learning programmes in the Education sector. Teaching and learning for the first school term were not completed, the second term was also not opened due to the further extended national lockdown. Scheduling for national examinations was affected and learners who were scheduled to take the examinations were not able to prepare adequately for the examinations without the support of their teachers.

Data availability

Despite the varying statistics being reported, even the cases being reported by the different media houses are clear evidence that something is really taking place. In addition, some cases of teenage pregnancies and early child ‘marriages’ are not reported since they are taking place in some of the most marginalised communities where religious and traditional practices seem to be controlling the daily lives of many. According to the Education Management Information System (EMIS) of (2019), 128 learners dropped out of primary school due to early pregnancy, 2 933 learners dropped out of secondary school due to pregnancy, 201 dropped from primary school due to early marriage, and 3 928 dropped out from secondary school due to early marriage.

Issue one: Teenage Pregnancy

Adolescents fertility has been on the increase in Zimbabwe from 99 live births per 1000 women in between 2005 and 2006 to 115 live births per 1000 women between 2010 and 2011 (Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey (201/11). MICS (2019) reports that almost a 24,1% of women age 20-24 years had live birth before the age of 18 of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years in Zimbabwe have begun childbearing. These pregnancies are often unintended, due to early marriage, sexual abuse or risky sexual behavior (Ministry of Health and Child Care, 2016). The most cited reasons for first pregnancy among female adolescents age 15-19 years were unplanned (48%), wanted a child (45%), did not think they would fall pregnant (23%), early marriage (19%), did not know about condom use/contraceptives (10%) and sexual violence/abuse/rape (8%). Cultural and religious practices have also played a strong role in driving teenage pregnancy, and sacrifice lives of female adolescents at the “altar” of religion of tradition. Some of the practices that put adolescents at risk of pregnancy include child/early marriage, traditional cleansing, wife pledging and HIV cleansing ceremonies.

Adolescent pregnancy in Zimbabwe leads to dropping out of school (19.4%), being abandoned by friends (4.9%) and the person responsible for the pregnancy (9.1%) and or being forced to leave home (57.7%) and marry at a young age (24.5%)³. Teenage pregnancies drastically increased during the Covid-19 induced lockdown which came into effect in 2020 and resulted in most school going girls being forced to drop out of school. ⁴Statistics from the period January and February 2021 indicate that about 4959 teenagers fell pregnant in those two months and about 1774 entered into matrimonial union. This comes as a double tragedy as these girls not only lost their right to education

²Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT) and UNICEF (2019). Zimbabwe Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report. Harare, Zimbabwe: ZIMS TAT and UNICEF.

³Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency. Zimbabwe multiple indicator cluster survey 2014: final report. Harare: Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency; 2015.

⁴ Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) (2021). Covid-19 lockdown sees spike in teenage pregnancies: Should contraceptives be distributed in schools? <https://kubatana.net/2021/04/01/covid-19-lockdown-sees-spike-in-teenage-pregnancies-should-contraceptives-be-distributed-in-schools/>

but also became subjected to worsened poverty, marriages, Gender Based Violence among others. Zimbabwe's teenage pregnancy rate of about 22% places the country in position 28 out of 54, with number 1 being the worst, on [UNICEF's early childbearing list](#).

Issue two- Girls' education

[Education Amendment Act of 2020](#) section 68C posits that 'No pupil shall be excluded from school for non-payment of school fees or on the basis of pregnancy'. Zimbabwe is not yet fully implementing free basic state funded education as a result of the absence of domestic education financing framework. This continues to affect girls' education in Zimbabwe considering that the burden of paying school fees is left as a responsibility for parents some who are in the rural areas and unemployed. As a result of lack of finances by parents to pay for school fees, girls education become the last options whilst boys are prioritized. All this emanates from the government's failure to provide basic state funded education for all.

Recommendations:

In light of the above highlighted issues, the policy brief makes the following recommendations:

- Enforce constitutional and legal provisions on child protection in the Marriage Bill
- Criminalize child marriage (through stiffer penalties for child rights violators)
- Engage religious and traditional leaders and at-risk communities in addressing child protection violations
- Eliminate harmful cultural and religious practices
- Harmonize policy and legislation across sectors to address drivers of teenage pregnancy
- Strengthening the implementation of basic state funded education through harnessing supporting the establishment of a framework for domestic education financing