



Picture illustration by Ruramai Musikewa

RTEI COUNTRY 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 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 Right 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) partnered with civil society organizations, research institutions and governments in 15 countries in 2021 to collect data on a wide range of indicators 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 closed ended questions and answered with supporting documents. Each question has an explicit basis in one or several international human rights instruments.

This country policy brief uses and analyses the information gathered using the RTEI questionnaire and will focus on teenage pregnancy. 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. Teenage pregnancy has contributed to increased school dropouts by girls which in turns affect girls' education.

Overview of RTEI Results

The overall score of Zimbabwe in the Right to Education Index Questionnaire for 2021 is 66%. In terms of girls' education, Zimbabwe is the second highest scoring country with 92%, largely due to its strong legal and policy environment. The worry has been on the prevalence of increased teenage pregnancies and child marriages (see below). This has resulted in a low female education survival rate in most parts of the country as a result of high dropout rates of girls. Despite the myriad of factors surrounding high teenage 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, according to the 2021 RTEI the overall score for Free education is at 62% whilst participation in education is at 61% for Zimbabwe, suggesting that accessibility to education in the country may still be a challenge for many families. Lack of free education can lead to relatively low participation rates in the education sector, further accelerating teenage pregnancy. In addition, it 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 earlier 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.

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 was further at a disadvantage in responding to school closures given the country's limited access to digital and distance learning. Only 30.3% of households have a device able to access to the internet 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. Schools were also not opened during the second term 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 them without the support of their teachers.

Data availability

Despite the varying statistics being reported, there are clear signs that teenage pregnancy and child marriage are significant problems in the country. In addition, official numbers may be an underestimate as some cases of teenage pregnancies and child marriages are not reported since they often take place in some of the most marginalised communities where religious and traditional practices influence 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 child marriage.

Issue one: Teenage Pregnancy

Adolescent fertility rate has been on the increase in Zimbabwe from 99 live births per 1000 women in 2005 and 2006 to 115 live births per 1000 women in 2010 and 2011 (Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey (2011)). MICS (2019) reports that almost a 24,1% of women age 20-24 years gave birth before the age of 18. These pregnancies are often unintended, due to child 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.

Results of adolescent pregnancy in Zimbabwe include dropping out of school (19.4%), being abandoned by friends (4.9%), being forced to leave home (57.7%), and marrying 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 many school going girls being forced to drop out of school.⁴ Statistics from the period January and February 2021 indicate that 4959 teenagers fell pregnant in those two months and 1774 entered into matrimonial union. This comes as a double tragedy as these girls not only lost their right to education but also became subjected to worsened poverty, marriages, gender-

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

³ Zimbabwe 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/>

based violence among other detrimental circumstances. 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 has not yet fully implemented free basic state funded education as a result of the absence of a 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, which are particularly onerous for those living in rural areas and the unemployed. As a result of lack of finances by parents to pay for school fees, girls education become the last option 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 to 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