



**Windle Trust  
International**

# The impact of Covid-19 school closures on girls' education in South Sudan: The case of Lakes and Unity states

A report on the impact of Covid-19 related school closures in Lakes and Unity states, South Sudan.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Windle Trust International (WTI) in collaboration with the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) works directly with 1,035 schools with a total of over 700,000 pupils and their communities in five of the ten States in South Sudan: Northern Bahr El Ghazal, Lakes, Unity, Eastern Equatoria and Western Equatoria. In addition, WTI is training 1,923 teachers through the Accelerated Secondary Education Programme (ASEP) in all ten States of South Sudan preparing those with no secondary education qualifications to take the national examinations. WTI works in partnership with Cambridge Education/Mott MacDonald, World University Services of Canada, Save the Children and Fin Church Aid and is funded by FCDO, GAC, UNICEF, ECW & the British Council. As it will be appreciated, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic led to interruptions in the delivery of these programmes as schools closed, travel was limited and the life of school-going children, especially girls, was disrupted.

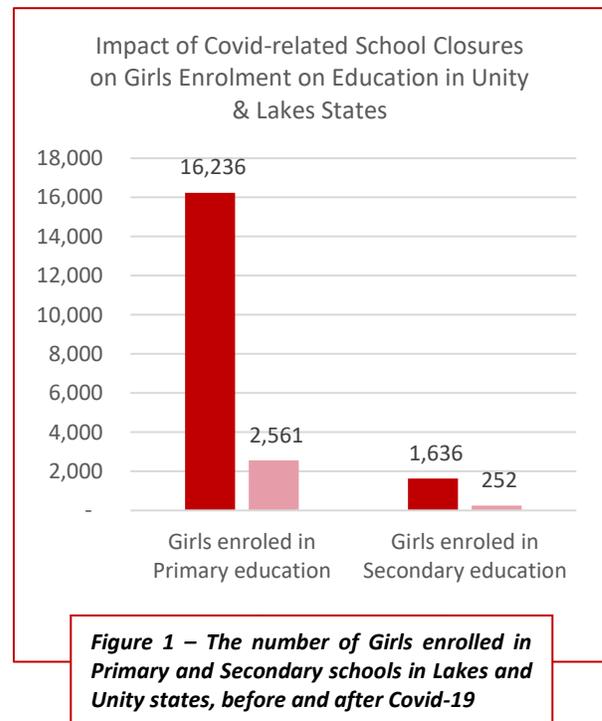
This article presents a brief report on the impact of the lockdown and resultant school closures due to Covid-19 on girls' enrolment and completion of primary eight (P8) and secondary four (S4) in two States, Lakes and Unity. The study employed qualitative methodology with data collected by WTI staff in selected schools with female candidates in (P8 & S4) classes in all the 15 counties of the two states. Data on P8 and S4 female enrolment at the beginning of 2020 and the gaps in data created by Covid-19-related school closure when schools re-opened in October 2020 were analysed. The data also looked particularly at the reasons for dropouts and the number of students who eventually sat the primary and secondary school national examinations in February and March 2021.

## 2.0 Data collection and results

In Lakes and Unity states, there are a total of 961 schools both primary and secondary, though only 205 primary schools provide a full cycle covering

eight years of primary education. From this subset of 205 schools, the study randomly selected 75. There are 37 secondary schools with the full cycle of S1-S4, out of which we randomly selected 17. Therefore, a total of 92 schools with final year candidate classes were included in the research. In Unity State, 51 schools in the 9 counties were selected, with 31 schools from urban areas and 20 schools from rural areas. In Lakes State, 41 schools were selected with 20 and 21 in urban and rural areas, respectively. In addition to readily available data in the school records, WTI staff also spoke to teachers and parents on the impact of school closures on the education of girls.

The results of the data collected shows that when schools opened at the beginning of 2020 before lockdown, there were a total of 42,066 primary school candidates. Out of which there were a total of 16,236 girls, about 39% of the total enrolment in P8. The data also showed that there was a total of 5,234 secondary school candidates with 1,636 girls, about 31% of the total enrolment.



In October 2020 when schools re-opened for candidate classes after seven months of lockdown, the total enrolment of pupils in the selected primary schools dropped to 5,271 with only 2,561 girls. In the selected secondary schools, the total enrolment in October 2020 dropped to 1,114 with only 252 returning to school, as shown in Figure 1.

This drop in the number of female students is reflected in the number of students who finally sat the national primary and secondary examinations in the two states in February and March 2021. Out of the total of 726 girls who sat the secondary national examinations, 321 and 405 in Unity and Lakes respectively, only 263 girls were from the selected 17 secondary schools. Similarly, in primary schools, a total of 2,742 girls in the two States sat the national examination, of which 1,952 were from the selected 75 primary schools; a further drop in the numbers of students who reported in October 2020. This drop in the number of girls in both primary and secondary are not surprising as the impact of the school closures has had sweeping consequences on the girls. Lakes State alone reported that the seven months saw 400 schoolgirls reporting as pregnant with 11 of these giving birth during the examination period.



*Picture 1 – A 14 Year Old Girl who gave birth during her examination was allowed to continue to write her exams in Unity State.*

### 3.0 Parents and teachers' responses to drop in number of girls in schools

- A total 184 teachers and parents associated with the 92 schools were interviewed by WTI staff in the 15 counties on what in their opinion or experience led to drop in number of girls in both primary and secondary schools. The teachers and parents gave various reasons, and these included among others the following: -
- All the 184 teachers and parents said early and unwanted pregnancies were the biggest contributing factor that has led to the drop in the number of girls who returned to school in October 2020.
- 120 (65%) of the respondents said girls were forced into marriage due to poverty in their families, partly caused by the lock down. Giving the girls away in marriage gave the families quick income, providing temporary relief from their poverty.
- 30 parents and teachers (16%) explained that when the country went into lockdown, communities took all their children to cattle camps. These cattle camps are mostly far away from schools and it was not possible for their children to return in October when schools were re-opened.
- 18 respondents said that some of their students and parents moved away from their school locations due to hardship and the interruption in the provision of humanitarian support. These families moved to where they could find other means of survival.

### 4.0 General observation and recommendations

The work done by WTI and other actors in the area of girls' education saw its benefits reversed during the school lockdown. Our goal to increase the number of girls completing both primary and secondary schools and the gains made over the past several years was lost. The community mobilisation efforts to encourage both girls and

boys to go to school and the increased enrolment of girls in schools were greatly affected by the impact of the pandemic. This therefore suggests that efforts need to be doubled to achieve the goals and we make the following recommendations:

**Emphasise the role of central and state governments.** We would like to emphasise the role of central and state governments in revising policies and incentives that will get as many girls as possible back to school, both primary and secondary. The support of the national, state and county level governments are needed to get girls back to school. Otherwise the progress of the last few years will be lost, for example, we know that many children will have 'lost learning' and it might be necessary to devise short 'catch up' sessions to restore basic literacy and numeracy skills/knowledge. This could enable progression for example through nationwide programmes such as Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP) and Accelerated Secondary Education Programme (ASEP). Otherwise all the years of investment by families, government and partners will be wasted.

**Expand community mobilisation.** Expand, promote, and ensure the engagement of communities, including local leaders, families, and caregivers, and particularly girls and women, in response to Covid-19 related challenges and return to school. Urging churches and religious leaders to speak out in a united campaign to urge that girls should go back to school. Strengthen the leadership and meaningful participation of girls and young women in all decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and needs are met and create and expand space for debate on the importance of the role of girls' and women's education. We also recommend the development of a concerted campaign with government and development partners to get girls to go back to school as schools re-open in May 2021.

**Provide counselling and mentoring services for young mothers.** Counselling and mentoring services to be given to those who have become young mothers to go back to school. When girls are out of school, they struggle to access social support services, WTI is working at reaching girls in their communities for these services through its school mothers programme and back to learning campaigns.

**Recognise and resolve differentiated impact.** Work with authorities to recognise that Covid-19 affects girls and boys, women, and men differently to ensure that policies and interventions to prepare for and respond to the outbreak are equitable, gender transformative and protective of human rights. With this, we will advocate with the government and the community to ensure all married and pregnant girls are supported to return to school.

**Digitalise education provision.** Prioritise learning continuity in the period of school closures and ensure that adolescent girls' needs and lived realities are considered. This includes accessible and inclusive distance learning that will reach the most marginalised and limit inequalities in the education system. Digitalisation of education in South Sudan, a country with only 7% access to internet looks a distant attempt, however with the right investment and commitment, this is the direction the education sector needs to take.



*Picture 2 -Rumbek National Secondary School students writing their examination*