

Lost amidst the chaos: The impact of Covid-19 on girls' education in Malawi.

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By

Pemphero Banda

2002303

Åbo, Suomi

Subject: Social Exclusion, Gender studies

Name: Pemphero Banda

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Supervisor: Ann-Charlotte Palmgren and Tarru Leppänen

Abstract:

This research paper examines the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on girls' education in Malawi. It provides a detailed analysis of the various factors that were exacerbated due to the pandemic, such as the digital divide, teenage pregnancies, early marriages, and child labour, which all play a role in negatively impacting girls' access to education. The study also considers the need to invest in quality education in emergencies, especially for girls and young women in order to ameliorate their educational opportunities and experiences. Through interviews, the paper examines the struggles that girls face in Malawi regarding education and how the pandemic has made it worse. The paper concludes that it is essential to invest heavily in digital inclusion and mental health services to ensure that girls are given quality access to education as their male counterparts.

Keywords: Girls, Covid-19, Girl's education, Malawi

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Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to aid in the understanding of the terms used in the study. This is necessary to enable the future readers of this thesis easily understand the contents of this study.

1. **Girls.** As used in this study, refers to young biological females from the ages of 6 to 19. I choose this age because it is the common age that students are in primary and secondary in Malawi.
2. **Girls' education.** In this thesis, it shall refer to the formal learning of young biological females from primary and secondary schools.
3. **Covid-19.** In this thesis shall refer to a contagious disease caused by a virus, an acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) that has affected the whole world.
4. **Malawi.** Refers to the Republic of Malawi, a landlocked country in South-eastern Africa.

Lost amidst the chaos: The impact of Covid-19 on girls' education in Malawi.

Chapter 1. Introduction

According to UNESCO's Global education coalition (UNESCO, 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic has caused one of the largest school closures and education disruptions in history. 1.5 billion students have been affected by the pandemic and 767 million of these are girls. According to UNICEF, 11 million girls from pre-primary to tertiary education will not be returning to school due to this unprecedented education disruption by Covid-19. According to Bisika, et al. (2009), this number threatens the decades of both global and national progress made towards gender equality and specifically puts girls at risk of early and forced marriages, violence and early pregnancies. For girls in Malawi, which is the context of this study, school is not simply a key to a better future, school is the lifeline: a way out of poverty, violence, and several social ills.

I title this study *Lost amid the Chaos: The Impact of Covid-19 on Girls' Education in Malawi*. The study aims to reveal the chaos that Covid-19 brought to Malawi and how amidst all this chaos education was greatly affected. To be more specific, I argue that girls' education received a heavy hit. By chaos, I refer to for example lockdowns, school closures, and job loss. Education is not only a fundamental right for the youth of today, but it is now seen as one of the many solutions to ending global poverty. Today, the literacy rate of children in Malawi is considerably higher than in its neighbouring countries in Africa, with 72 per cent of the youth aged 15 to 24 able to read and write (The Borgen project, 2018). But closer inspection of data reveals that the state of girls' education in Malawi is still in critical condition. In this thesis, you will witness that covid-19 pandemic has pushed many primary and secondary school students out of the school system and girls were affected the worst.

1.1 Research Aim and Questions.

To discuss the main aim of this study, I have employed the following questions to aid in the discussion:

- How did school closures/disruptions during the pandemic affect girls? To assess how school closures/ disruption has affected the progress of girls' education in Malawi?
- How did the digital divide impact girls' education during the pandemic?
- How else were girls excluded from education during the pandemic?
- How did the teachers help their students during the pandemic?

My study discusses how COVID-19, a contagious disease caused by a virus, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has affected girls' education in Malawi. More precisely, I aim to examine the various factors that Covid-19 exacerbated to negatively impact the educational opportunities and experiences of girls in Malawi. Being a first-generation female student from Malawi, I am aware of the various struggles that girls persevere to attain an education in Malawi. In addition, being in Malawi when the Covid-19 pandemic first hit, made me see firsthand how terrible the experience was for me while seeking to start my masters in Finland. I, therefore, believe that the experience for girls during the Covid-19 pandemic was worse and possibly not conducive to their education. Through this study, I hope to emphasize the importance of investing in quality education in emergencies, especially for developing countries like Malawi. With the same intensity that governments are putting into issues like climate financing, it is crucial that they also invest heavily in girls' education because as the saying goes "when you teach a girl child, you save an entire generation".

My hypothesis throughout this study is that the Covid-19 pandemic did have a great impact on the education of girls in Malawi. This Covid-19 crisis did set national and global efforts toward girls' education back decades and if we must get those efforts back, we need to invest heavily in quality education in emergencies, especially for girls and young women who in most patriarchal countries like Malawi are considered lesser being than their male counterparts. and therefore, socially excluded and relevant for a thesis in social exclusion.

Chapter 2: Background and earlier research

This section will discuss the background of the Republic of Malawi, its location, its education system, Covid-19 in Malawi and education during the Covid-19 pandemic. This section introduces you to various studies discussing education in Malawi and surrounding countries. The studies shared here give you an overview of the quest for attaining sustainable development goal number 4 which is education. A reference is also made to how Covid-19 affected some initiatives.

2.1. The state and culture of Malawi.

The Republic of Malawi is a small, landlocked country located in southeast Africa, it is a 530 miles narrow country, about 100 miles wide with artificial borders as a result of colonial treaties (McCracken, 2012: 8). It is bordered by Mozambique, Zambia, and Tanzania. It is home to a population of approximately 20 million people and its capital is Lilongwe (Worldometers, 2023). Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a GDP per capita of just \$1,092. Malawi is a predominantly agricultural country, and its economy is heavily reliant upon the production of maize, tobacco and tea. Malawi is also known for its vibrant culture and colourful festivals.

The country is home to a variety of ethnic and religious groups, and there is a strong sense of national pride and unity among the Malawian people (McCracken, 2012). Malawi has a long history of democratic rule. Its first democratically elected leader, Hastings Banda, came to power in 1966 and was succeeded by President Bakili Muluzi in 1994 (McCracken, 1998). Malawi held its first multi-party elections in 1994 and has since held several more peaceful and successful elections. Malawi has made significant progress in recent years, with a focus on healthcare, education and economic development.

2.2. Education system in Malawi.

The government of Malawi places a strong emphasis on education, with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology responsible for overseeing the educational system. In Malawi, the formal education system follows an 8-4-4 structure: 8 years of primary school, 4 years of secondary school, and 4 years of tertiary education. After completing primary school, students are required to take the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE) to gain admission to secondary school. Once students finish their four years of secondary schooling, they sit for the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) examination (Saka, 2021: 8).

The Malawian education system is composed of two separate systems: the public and the private. Public schools offer primary education for free, however, learners in these schools are asked to contribute to the school development fund in order to provide for the school needs. Private schools on the other hand, require learners to pay school fees in order to attend classes. Both public and private schools play an important role in providing quality education to the citizens of Malawi (Saka,2021:8). Malawian students must pass a set of national exams to receive their diplomas. These exams are overseen by the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB). The board also certifies and accredits universities and other higher education institutions in the country.

The Malawian education sector has made tangible progress in the past decade, with primary school enrolment increasing by 16% between 2008 and 2013 at an average annual growth rate of 4%. Despite this progress, it faces multidimensional challenges such as inadequate school facilities, high pupil-teacher ratios, low learning achievement, and a huge capacity gap in school inspection and supervision, with more than 70% of eligible children not having access to any form of early childhood education, the average primary student to classroom ratio increasing from 105:1 in 2011/2012 to 124:1 in 2012/13, the pupil qualified teacher ratio

worsening from 92:1 in 2011/12 to 95:1 in 2012/13, and the pass rates for the Primary School Leaving Certificate of Education (PSLCE) declining each year between 2006/07 and 2011/12 from 74.4% in 2006 to 68.9% in 2011. To address these issues, Malawi has developed its Education Sector Implementation Plan II (2013/14 – 2017/18) to improve the education sector and ensure that all children have access to quality education (Global partnership Education, 2019).

2.3. An Overview of Covid-19 in Malawi

According to Forbes (2020), many countries are still facing the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic which include economic constraints hindering them from protecting the health and well-being of their citizens. The constraints are even worse for African countries like Malawi many of which might not have the resources and capacity to cope with the impact.

According to Global Fund and World Health Organization, as of 13th December 2021, Malawi had recorded over 62,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19 with over 2,300 deaths since the first case in April 2020. According to the Malawi Ministry of Health's Covid-19 database, as of 30th October 2022, the country had recorded over 87,999 cumulative Covid-19 cases and 2,683 deaths (“COVID-19 Response in Malawi”, 2021). Despite many confirmed cases being from the big cities and urban areas like Lilongwe and Blantyre, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the lives of many Malawians including those in rural areas.

The first case of Covid-19 was confirmed on the 2nd of April 2020 and as of 31 August 2020, 5566 cases had been confirmed and 175 deaths had already occurred. The first cases were registered as imported cases, and later as of 1 July 2020, local transmissions surpassed the imported cases. Of the registered cases, the average age of the confirmed Covid-19 cases was 36 with 66.9% being male and the average age of all confirmed deaths was 56.7 with 82.5 being male victims (Mzumara, et al. 2021:6). It can be seen that the first and second waves of

the pandemic greatly affected the order population while the third wave went straight for the younger generation between the ages of 18-35 (“COVID-9 Response in Malawi”, 2021).

With the global disarray that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused to every aspect of life around the globe, it can be argued that one of these greatly affected areas was education. In 2020, the Covid-19 had caused over 190 countries to implement temporary school closures as a policy response to mitigate the risks of more transmissions (UN, Policy brief on education during COVID-19 and beyond, 2020). These closures have had several impacts and challenges on governments, schools, and communities around the world.

The Malawian government declared a state of national disaster because of the pandemic on 20th March 2020 (Mzumara, et al. 2021:6). There was resistance to the implementation of the stringent lockdown policy which then demonstrated the need for epidemic response policies that are supported by public health laws in mitigating both direct and indirect Covid-19 effects. As it has been uniformly around the globe, during the pandemic, there have been various unintended consequences. Among the major ones that this thesis will dive into were the incorporation of digital platforms in education through remote learning (Mzumara, et al. 2021).

Another unintended consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic response policy in Malawi was a huge increase in teenage pregnancies seen highly during the school closures (Mzumara, et al. 2021) that were employed by the government to limit/reduce the direct spread of Covid-19 in schools. According to UNESCO, (2021), Malawi has almost 7.8 school-aged children. Schools closed on March 23, 2020, and re-opened between September and October 2020. They however closed again in late January 2021. These prolonged school closures resulted in 7 months in which 7.8 million children were out of formal schooling.

It is fair therefore to conclude that almost all learners at all levels of education have been affected by the pandemic. Many countries across the African continent made several efforts to

support learners in their education through digital inclusive efforts in learning through social media, radio, and television, etc (Mcclain-Nhlapo et al. 2020). Even though we can argue that these efforts were progressive and with good intentions, there is little to no evidence indicating that they were helpful to the students and the institutions during the pandemic, instead, there seem to be many indications revealing a digital divide currently at play, which is one of the many limitations of learning girls have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic as this thesis will reveal.

In conclusion, it is evident that the Covid-19 pandemic became a thorn in the flesh of so many people around the globe and specifically exerted a heavy blow on the education sector in Malawi. This thesis will dive deeper to reveal the many challenges girls experienced in their education during the school closures, and overall, how Covid -19 affected their quest for education.

2.3.1. Education before and during the Pandemic

This section discusses various studies previously conducted regarding how covid-19 has affected learners in Malawi. These studies range from only affecting girls, university students, nursing students, and students' mental health and economic standing, and various effects of social ills in the society like unwanted pregnancies.

In Malawi, research has revealed that students (inclusive of girls) faced a myriad of challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. The study titled "Coping with Fears of Covid-19 Pandemic among nursing students during clinical practice: Malawi's Perspective by Baluwa et al (2021) revealed that nursing students in Malawi experienced intense fear of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some nursing students from the Mzuzu University in Malawi working to fulfil their clinical practice during the scary times that were the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic between September and December of 2020. The overall aim of the study was to find out what students feared during the Covid-19 pandemic. These nursing

students already face several challenges in the clinical segment of their nursing studies than in their theoretical part and the Covid-19 pandemic worsened an already worse situation.

Like other countries around the globe, Malawi did respond to the Covid-19 pandemic guidelines by the World Health Organization that were outlined in 2020. The country officially declared a state of national disaster while the university took initiative and provided preventive measures equipment (PPE). In addition to the provision of personal protective equipment, students were also offered Covid-19 orientation before the commencement of their mandatory clinical practice. At the end of this study, four overall themes were drawn, and were the following: staying positive amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, applying the pandemic preventive measures and the role of religion and its use of avoidance strategies.

In this article titled the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the Life of higher education students: A global perspective, by Aristovnik et., al (2020) presented the views of university students on their perceptions on how the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic affected their lives at a global level. The article found that female students who were full-time students were generally more affected by the pandemic. In the findings, the female students expressed that the Covid-19 pandemic affected their emotional life and other personal circumstances.

Similarly, the article titled the secondary impacts of Covid-19 on Women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa focused on identifying the evidence of the secondary impacts of Covid-19 on women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa. The circumstances of women and girls in the region were meant to help in identifying and providing effective assistance throughout the whole duration of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. With the help of evidence, the article explored the impact of the pandemic on girls' education, unintended pregnancies, girls' and women's informal employment, their access to water and sanitation (WASH), poverty and access to health services.

This article found that with the past evidence, many women and girls will be exposed to extreme and various multifaceted secondary impacts of the pandemic. These will include a high number of school dropouts, unplanned pregnancies, poverty and child labour among women and girls. The article "Risks, dissemination and Opportunities for education during the times of the Covid-19 pandemic" by Titus Corlatean (2020) opened with an acknowledgement that Covid-19 has been a serious challenge to mankind around the globe. As further argued by Corlatean (2020) Covid-19 has caused not only trauma, loss of lives and economic shocks but has also greatly affected education.

Corlatean (2020) further argued that students, teachers, and others found themselves in a position to change how they conducted their daily school business. These changes included their teaching and learning techniques. These new techniques that they employed proved difficult and inaccessible to many students, especially those from what would be considered less developed parts of the world. The study also revealed that there were numerous cases of discrimination against young women and girls. Young women and girls found themselves in very unfortunate situations of domestic and sexual violence, one of the many magnifiers glass of inequalities. This was a sad reality for the victims whose only desire was to advance in their education.

According to UNICEF (2020), being a student can be very challenging for young people and the Covid-19 pandemic made the reality of getting an education and life in general for young people very difficult. Similarly, in the paper "Covid-19 school closure and adolescent mental health in sub-Saharan Africa." by Asante et., al (2021), the authors discuss the school closures that were implemented in most African countries in West Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. The authors were of the argument that adolescence is a period mainly characterised by more time spent with friends than with parents (Viner et al, 2021). During the pandemic and the school closures that followed, adolescents were forced to stay at home with their parents.

The paper shows that undoubtedly the Covid-19 pandemic school closures presented a big impact on the mental health of these young people since they could not physically interact with their peers in their various school settings. The paper concluded that the mental health of adolescents must be a priority for all parents and guardians who are supposed to be empathic allies of these young people, especially during such times as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Enhancing girls' access to high-quality education is both a global and national priority in Malawi. In 2017, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) conducted an education sector review in Malawi to identify the key factors contributing to gender inequalities in educational access and outcomes (Robertson et, al. 2017). Stakeholders from the government, donor organizations, NGOs, United Nations (UN) organizations, and community members provided insight on the successes, challenges, and future priorities for girls' education. The research found that a holistic approach was needed, as well as processes and structures to facilitate a coordinated and collaborative approach. Funding was identified as a priority to ensure girls have access to quality education, as well as evidence-based decision-making. These themes are relevant to furthering quality inclusive education for the girl child and are even more important during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing structural risk factors, such as poverty, pregnancy, and child marriage, that have been linked to school dropout, and may be accelerating major life-course transitions related to family formation. Reports from Malawi indicate a rise in teen pregnancies compared to pre-pandemic levels and one in three girls citing pregnancy as the reason for not returning to school after closures, further highlighting the need for interventions to protect education during this critical time (Kadzamira et al, 2021).

For the past three decades, widening access to education has been a major policy goal in most developing countries. Donor and government interest in gender inequalities in education have arisen and governments and aid donor agencies worldwide acknowledge the importance of female literacy as a prerequisite for development. At the Jomtien Conference in 1990, the importance of universal education was delineated in the policy Education for All (EFA). EFA is seen as a strategy for introducing children, especially girls, to conventional schooling. Whilst some progress has been made, retention of girls in schools presents a major obstacle to the fulfilment of the EFA vision, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa including Malawi.

A study that explored the challenges that the Malawi government has faced whilst trying to implement a policy of Free Primary Education (FPE), looked at various social-cultural constraints on girls' education (Munthali, 2004:45). These included initiation ceremonies in both the central and southern regions of the country. The study also revealed how the HIV epidemic affected Malawi's education system. According to the study, teachers were absent from school because they were infected and sick. Many girls were also absent from school to take care of sick relatives while their mothers cared for patients at hospitals. It was notable in the field also that child labour had increased due to HIV/ AIDS epidemic as young girls were taking more responsibilities for looking after younger siblings after a death of a mother. This has increased the number of child-headed households.

In conclusion, this section has shown us the realities of Covid-19 and its effects on students' education experience (inclusive of girls) around the world. In as much as experiences cannot be completely the same, it is clear that students including female students faced numerous difficulties during the Covid-19 pandemic period. At the end of this research, and with the help

of these studies, we will see the similarities in girls' experiences while studying during the Covid-19 period.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Frameworks and central concepts

In this section, I present three theoretical frameworks and central concepts, which function as analytical tools that have been used to help understand and analyse the data collected for this study. These are namely: gender norms, patriarchy, and inequality, intersectionality theory, self-determination theory, and cultural relativism theory.

3.1. Gender, patriarchy, and Inequalities in Malawi

Through a gender perspective, I aim to understand the nature of gender inequality and examine women's and men's social roles and experiences (Gilligan, 1977) and the themes this perspective explores include discrimination, oppression, patriarchy etc. The gender perspective argues that inequality between women and men originates in the present patriarchal structures of society. Through the gender perspective, we are introduced to feminism which also claims that inequality between the sexes has been differentiated throughout history (Gemzöe 2014:53) and has a strong connection to both economic and political factors. The power relationship between the sexes infiltrates all areas of society and in many cases is considered the norm. Already as young girls, females are educated into this ideology of patriarchy through different factors in the community such as schools. These ideals envisioning women as lesser beings are internalised by both women and men and become part of an invisible structure, which mostly ranks women and girls as subordinate to men (Gemzöe 2014:50).

It is important to understand that both men and women and the society at large in Malawi place specific gender roles and norms on both sexes. Malawi has been described as a highly patriarchal society, where women are subordinate to men, where the family as a social institution is strong and sets precedence on the treatment of men and women at home, school, and community (Lovell, 2021). The gender perspective offers an understanding of the structural gender inequalities in Malawi, which is important knowledge when analysing the obstacles and initiatives to tackle them. The patriarchal structures have a significant impact on

how female education is perceived, the different roles of the sexes, and even how women and men are treated differently according to different cultures.

This gender perspective will not provide me with a framework of how the norms should be but will aid in our understanding of the patriarchal structures in Malawi. This gender perspective will also help analyse the cultural patriarchal norms that may or may not aid our understanding of its possible effect on girls' education in Malawi. This perspective has greatly influenced the shape and structure of the interview questions emphasizing gender equality in education, empowering girls, and patriarchal societal norms. The gender perspective has been applied in this thesis to get an understanding of the struggles which girls face in the Malawian education system. The use of the gender perspective provides a way of understanding the suppression of girls in Malawi not only in terms of education, which is the focus of the thesis but in other spheres of the society which have a direct effect on their successful educational experience. The decision to interview only women provided a female perspective that reveals the struggles girls faced during the pandemic.

We should acknowledge that a gender perspective on girls' education is an important area of inquiry in understanding how gender inequality can affect girls' access to and experience of education, especially after knowing that almost two-thirds of the 862 million illiteracy rate among women is on the increase in regions like Africa and Asia (UNESCO 2005: World Bank 2007). Various feminist theorists have highlighted the need to be aware of the unequal power dynamics that do exist between girls and boys within educational spaces. This includes recognizing unequal access to resources, how gender stereotypes can lead to the marginalization of girls in educational activities, and how gender norms can limit girls' opportunities for educational success.

The gender perspective will therefore be used to examine the effects of COVID-19 on girls' education. The application of such a theory will help uncover the gendered implications of the pandemic on educational systems and the underlying power dynamics that shape the educational experience for both genders in Malawi. For example, the disruption of education caused by the pandemic has had a much larger impact on women and girls than on men and boys, with the latter continuing to outperform their female counterparts. This demonstrates the persistent gender disparities in educational access and opportunities that we must acknowledge and strive to improve to make the educational experience accessible and enjoyable for both genders.

Additionally, using this gender perspective I will analyse the gendered nature of the pandemic on its own to uncover how the girl-child in Malawi has been disproportionately affected, and how the pandemic era has had a knock-on effect on their educational opportunities, as many possibly struggle to afford educational costs that possibly included access to appropriate technology for online learning. Furthermore, through feminist theory, we analyse how the pandemic has also highlighted the need for a more inclusive educational system in Malawi that considers the different needs and experiences of girls, for instance, it can be argued that there is a need to recognize that girls have different lived experiences and perspectives from their male counterparts and that these lived experiences should be considered when designing educational policies and programs in emergencies.

3.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality was coined by American civil rights advocate, Kimberle Crenshaw who described how various interlocking systems affect the marginalized in communities (Cooper, 2016). This is an analytical framework for understanding how the aspects of a person's social and political identities come together to create different versions of discrimination. This approach identifies various factors like gender, class, religion etc. For this study, I will focus on gender, age and class as overlapping and intersecting social identities. According to Zinn and Dill (1996), these intersecting and overlapping social identities may be empowering and oppressing depending on various contexts. Intersectionality is very essential to the understanding of the need for inclusive education in emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic era.

The intersectionality approach according to Atewolugun (2018) provides the language needed to examine the various overlapping and interdependences of social categories which may include social demographic categories, in this case, gender and class of the girls in Malawi. This approach to understanding social inequality considers different interconnected dimensions of identity like race, gender, class etc and is based on the idea that marginalised people experience greater oppression and discrimination due to their multiple identities.

This approach is used to analyse how systems of power and privilege intersect, thereby creating different levels of oppression and privilege. This approach seeks to understand how different forms of discrimination interact with one another and how they can be addressed through policy and practice. For this thesis, this approach will focus on how different aspects of people's identities interact to create unique experiences of oppression, privilege and discrimination in this case gender and class.

It is important to understand that Malawi is a patriarchal society that places women as being subordinate to men and family as a whole and places much more importance on male education

than females. Patriarchal structures have a significant impact on how female education is perceived in society, therefore the intersectional theory offers us an understanding of how factors like gender and class of the majority of the girl population in Malawi intersected and increased the exclusion of girls and worsened their educational experience during the Covid-19 pandemic in Malawi.

The intersectional theory places much emphasis on the unique challenges faced by girls from different backgrounds, such as those living in pervasive poverty which is the reality of a majority of female students in Malawi. This theory helped this thesis acknowledge that girls from different backgrounds might be less likely to face unique challenges and obstacles to accessing education and reveals to us that a one-size-fits-all approach to education is unlikely to be found effective in a country with less economic muscle like Malawi. By acknowledging the marginalisation of girls in education specifically during the Covid-19 period, we open up possibilities to address the specific needs of marginalised girls and increase efforts to ensure that girls from marginalized backgrounds are not excluded from the education system due to their gender, class or disability. Girls mustn't be left behind or forgotten during emergencies, instead, we must heavily invest in inclusive education.

3.3 Self-determination theory

The self-determination theory is a theory of motivation where individuals are viewed as proactive. This theory focuses on the social contextual conditions that facilitate various natural processes of self-motivation and healthy learning (Ryan and Deci, (2017). The self-determination theory suggests that individuals need three basic psychological needs to be motivated and successful in any Endeavor: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

According to Guay (2021), the self-determination theory claims that all humans are born with the tendency of dealing with challenges and adapting to their new experiences. Students

need an environment where they are supported but sometimes in many school environments, this is not always the case. Lack of such motivation may lead to disengagement and other behaviours that do not support a positive educational experience.

In self-determination theory, the interaction between students and their social environment explains how they develop and learn. According to Ryan and Connell (1989), the more autonomous student's motivation is the more chance their experience becomes positive. SDT has the potential to not only understand students but also increase their motivation to participate and do well in school (Ryan and Connell, 1989). This theory was used in this thesis to understand the girl's motivation or lack thereof in the educational experience during the times of the school closures implemented to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite the self-determination theory being applied to students, I have used it to analyse how if teachers had applied the theory during the school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, could have helped the female students remain motivated and engaged in their learning. According to Reeve (2002), applying the self-determination theory comes to two conclusions namely that: autonomously motivated students thrive better in education and lastly that students benefit from teachers' support of this autonomy. Seeing how in-person class interactions were cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic in Malawi, it is important to understand if and how educators strive to provide autonomy to students in their learning outside of school by allowing them to choose how they interact with learning materials and how they spend their time. This experience could mean providing learning materials along with a list of activities for students to choose from or allowing students to pick their topics to explore outside of the school environment yet encouraging their educational experience.

Secondly, self-determination theory helps to analyse how educators provided opportunities for students to demonstrate their competence in their learning during school closures. This

could include providing challenges that are appropriate for the student's level of understanding and allowing the student to track their progress. Finally, how teachers worked to create a sense of relatedness in their students during the school closure. However, it is realistic to acknowledge that for all this to be possible, teachers and schools should have provided frequent opportunities for students to have access to support systems such as peer support groups and mental health to aid in the success of their educational experience during these school closures.

3.4 Cultural Relativism

Various scholars have defined cultural relativism in various ways that others have also critiqued over the years. In the 1990s some anthropologists abandoned the understanding of culture as "a homogenous, integral, and coherent unity, instead, it changed the perception of cultures to be "complex, variable, multivocal, and contested" (Donnelly 2003:86). Donnelly further argues that culture is mostly used in a lot of human rights in the ways which it was perceived before 1990s, which often lead to "spurious explanation based on false essentialism and excessive aggregation" (Donnelly 2003:86).

For this thesis, Cultural relativism will be defined as the position in which local cultural traditions determine the experience and scope of civil and political rights enjoyed by the individuals in a given society (Tesón 2001:380). There is a need to consider culture when dealing with gender equality. In this case how culture affects girls' access to education. Since often many of the obstacles which girls face are bound to cultural and societal norms and traditions such as a preference for sending boys to school over girls. Cultural relativity, therefore, becomes an undeniable fact; moral rules and social institutions show astonishing cultural and historical variability, which means that culture is a visible part of people's everyday experience throughout the history of mankind (Donnelly 2003:89).

Cultural relativism is the belief that the values, beliefs, and practices of a culture must be understood and judged in the context of that culture. Strong cultural relativism holds that some basic rights are universally accepted, but that these rights are already part of the culture. Radical cultural relativism goes even further and views culture as the only source of validating a moral right. Weak cultural relativism considers culture as a secondary source of the validity of a right. Cultural relativism is often used to protect the culture in most post-colonial countries like Malawi to maintain the roots of both their culture and traditions, while at the same time trying not to be influenced by other cultures. Post-colonial states in most African, Asian, and Muslim communities, there is a certain sensitivity to how culture is perceived by others. Cultural relativism hereby is rooted in a desire to foster and express regional, national, cultural or civilisation pride (Donnelly 2003:90, 99).

In a nutshell, through cultural relativism, we tackle the collision that is present between human rights and cultural norms. According to Donnelly, there is no moral reason for societies, and communities not to accept moral and political commitments such as the basic human right to education. Even though culture is a primary consideration in the validity of a rule, human rights are based on human nature and the fact that one is a human being, thus culture cannot be a sensible moral reason for not accepting and implementing universal human rights (Donnelly 2003: 90-91).

Malawi, despite having a small matrilineal community, is a highly patriarchal society in which traditional and cultural practices are considered normal and are often unfortunately harmful to women and girls and are heavily inconsistent with gender equality (Local governance performance index, 2017) in all spheres of life. The cultural relativism theory proved to be ideal to analyse how cultural norms and traditions in Malawi affected girls' education, especially during school closures.

The focus of this thesis, covid-19 pandemic on the one hand and the access to education for girls on the other hand have both separately been global issues, with the latter being caused by culture and pervasive poverty. Cultural relativism in this case provides firstly, an understanding of how the communities and people understand the education of girls as a universal human right and secondly how culture affects this perception, providing an understanding of how to solve issues of cultural norms which hinder girls to education such as early marriage, and a lack of desire for guardians and communities to invest in girls education with the same measure as that done for boys.

3.5 Social Exclusion

Social exclusion has been defined differently by different scholars over the years, a collective understanding is that it is a process in which individuals or communities of people are restricted from enjoying functional areas of their society. This process has the potential to block people from participating in the economic, social, political and cultural functions of society, thus separating them from enjoying various rights, opportunities and resources in the said society. This exclusion can either be a partial or full exclusion depending on the social context. Walker and Walker (1997) defined this process as one where people are 'shut out' from or denied access to social, economic, cultural and political systems. This process precludes people from their "full participation in the normatively prescribed activities of a given society and denied access to information, resources, sociability, recognition, and identity, eroding self-respect and reducing capabilities to achieve personal goals" (Silver, 2007). This systematic process of preventing people from enjoying their rights, resources and opportunities pushes them to the peripheral where poverty, deprivation, and vulnerability become the norm. As a process, social exclusion can manifest itself in multiple ways, including restricted access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, or even the right to vote. This process has the potential

of having a lasting impact on an individual or a group's social and economic well-being, as well as the overall quality of their life.

For the context of this thesis, social exclusion is viewed from a multidimensional angle. As a multidimensional process, social exclusion can be viewed as an interdisciplinary approach that considers multiple and intersecting factors that contribute to social exclusion. Rather than viewing social exclusion as a single issue, the multidimensional approach looks at the social, economic, political, and cultural factors that contribute to social exclusion (De Haan, 1999) in this case the approach helps to analyse how these factors culminated to the exclusion that girls in Malawian schools faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through this approach, we examine the complex interplay between factors like gender, class, and social norms, and how they led to the exclusion of girls from the educational opportunities, and resources that would consequently be available to them upon completion of their studies. This multidimensional approach can be employed to identify the major underlying causes of exclusion among girls in education emergencies overall and help develop strategies for addressing them, by emphasising the need for collaboration and collective action to tackle structural exclusion and reduce its effects and ensure the inclusion of those who are experiencing said exclusion.

Chapter 4. Methodology, method, and material

This section discusses the process that was employed to collect and analyse the data used in this study. This study is qualitative and phenomenological. Data was collected using email interviews and was analysed using thematic analysis.

4.1 Research methodology

This is a qualitative study. A qualitative study is a kind of research where non-numerical data is analysed to understand people and society (Clair 2022). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), qualitative research examines phenomena in their natural habitat and attempts to understand them through the meaning that people give to them similarly Clair (2022) further argues that qualitative research is commonly used to understand people's experiences and is very useful when trying to uncover the reasons behind people's behaviour. I, therefore, choose qualitative research because it is in line with the objectives of my research, which is to understand the experiences of school-going girls during the Covid-19 pandemic in Malawi through their female teachers and to uncover how the school closures and Covid-19 pandemic affected their educational experience.

This study uses the phenomenology approach to qualitative research. According to Neubauer & Witkop et al. (2019), a phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world and allows for research informants to describe the lived experiences in as much detail as they want without imposing any concepts or categories. Using this approach, I aimed at understanding how the girls in Malawi experienced Covid-19 and make sense of the world around them as Lester (1999) points out, the phenomenological approach aims at identifying and illuminating a phenomenon through how it is perceived in a situation.

Being a girl from Malawi but still having not been a student in Malawi during the covid-19 pandemic and the school closures. My personal and prior knowledge helped me to ask the right questions which helped my participants to understand the objectives of the research.

4.2. Data analysis

I analyse the data collected in my research using thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, the researcher identifies, analyses and interprets patterns of meanings/ themes from the data collected (Jeanne et al. 1997) from the participants' descriptions. I choose thematic analysis because, as argued by Braun and Clarke (2013) I can employ thematic analysis to explore questions about the participant's experiences and perspectives that influence a phenomenon I am studying, the implicit and explicit norms that govern various practices in their communities and the social construction of various meanings within their contexts.

4.3. Method and data

In-depth email interviews were the data collection tool used in this thesis for two reasons namely: distance, and cost. Since I live in Finland, and my research participants live in Malawi it was difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews. The other option was conducting an online interview using Zoom. however, the online interviews would have required my research participants to have a smartphone/assess to a computer and a stable internet connection. Based on my experience, this would have been difficult for my participants. As a result, I opted to use email interviews because it would be easier for my participants to respond to my interview questions using this method.

4.3.1 Email Interviews

E-mail interviewing refers to conducting interviews via e-mail, asynchronously, which allows the respondent to answer questions at their own pace and over a relatively long period (Gibson

2010). This method of data collection became popular during Covid-19 when social distancing was the norm.

This type of data collection has several advantages. The written responses of email interviews, which are easily converted to transcribed data, save a significant amount of time and money over the typical expenditures for transcribing an oral interview (Gibson, 2010). Another advantage of the email interview is that the participants can respond at their convenience to email interview prompts at a time that is suitable for them (Gibson, 2014). Also, the unique asynchronous nature of email interviews allows the participant more control over participation level and time invested. In an email interview, participants are not limited to the time constraints of a scheduled interview. Participants have time to reflect on their answers before crafting written responses. Their written responses can be read and edited for clarity before sending. Therefore, email interviews allow for iterative, back-and-forth email conversations to clarify descriptive data, pursue further discovery, and ensure accuracy in describing the phenomenon from the participants' perspective.

I believe that the data I collected through email interviews were of good quality, as could have been if I used any other data collection technique. According to Densombe (2003), the quality of data generated using the electronic research method does not differ in any way from those collected using traditional ways of collecting data, and as argued by Ratislavova & Ratislav (2014) participants in email interviews have ample time to think through and review their responses and this reflection helps both parties engage in a fruitful communication.

4.3.2. Research Informants

Finding participants for my research proved to be a tasking chore for me. According to Meho (2006) when using email interviews, participants can be found through individual solicitation or snowballing. In this case, I decided to employ both individual solicitations of the participants

using random sampling. From the first participant I engaged with, I then moved on to include the snowballing method to find other additional people to participate in my research interview.

In total, my research has 3 participants. These participants are all female teachers, teaching girls and boys in primary schools and secondary schools. I choose to interview teachers on all levels of education in Malawi because I believed that this technique would give me a broader understanding of girls' experiences of all ages in the country.

Pseudo Name	School level	Region	Experience
Angela	Primary school	North	More than 7 years
Naomi	Secondary school	South	More than 4 years
Mrs Tina	Secondary school	Central	5 years

4.3.3. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are said to be crucial to the success and authenticity of any research. In this research, I employed Bryman and Bell (2007) take on ethical considerations in research. These can be summarised as ensuring research participants are not subjected to harm in any way, respect for the dignity of research participants should be prioritised, their full consent has been obtained before the study, the protection of the privacy of research participants has been ensured, an adequate level of confidentiality of the research data is ensured in this case through a signed legal privacy notice shared to all participants before the interviews and similarly, the anonymity of all individuals participating in the research has been ensured. I did this by using pseudonyms instead of their real names, and I mentioned the level of the schools they teach to focus on the age of their students.

All participants in this research signed consent forms before participating, authorising me to use the information they shared with me in my research without revealing their identities. According to Saunders & et, al (2012), the principle of informed consent is essential to any

research that involves any interaction with participants. Informed consent involves researchers providing sufficient information and assurances about taking part in the research to allow individuals to understand the implications of their participation and to reach a fully informed, considered and freely given decision about whether to do so, without the exercise of any pressure or coercion. In the same light, any deception or exaggeration about the aims and objectives of the research must be avoided, all communication about the research has been done with honesty and transparency and any type of misleading information, as well as representation of primary data findings in a biased way, must be avoided.

4.4. Research Process

I contacted each research participant through WhatsApp. I informed them about my research. I collected their email addresses and promised to send them money for internet access. The idea here is that I wanted to pay for their internet access because I understand that most of these participants would need more money for internet access for my research. I sent each participant 10 euros, an amount of money that would get them 6 hours of Internet access in Malawi. I proceeded to send them the interview questions (see appendix). The interview questions were sent on 25th January 2023, and I received all the data for my research by 13th February 2023. I did not have to do transcription. This saved me a considerable amount of time.

Chapter 5: The Impact of Covid-19 on girls' education in Malawi

Girls from both local and urban areas in all districts of Malawi had different experiences in their educational journey during the Covid-19 pandemic; thus, it is impossible to make an acute generalization of their experience extending it to all the girls. In as much as I was once a girl attaining education in Malawi at the same level as the girls this thesis is focusing on, my analysis exempts me from presenting my own experience or generalizing the experience of every girl in Malawi; instead, my analysis is based on the data I collected from my research informants during this research.

In this chapter, I will present qualitative data on "Lost amidst the Chaos: The impact of Covid-19 on girls' education in Malawi". When conducting this research, I gathered information concentrated on the school closures that were implemented during the Covid-19 period, how they affected the girl's education, the efforts teachers made to help the girls stay in school and lastly how poverty and society worsened the situation for the girls. My research informants shared information about the various initiatives the schools put in place to help the girls stay in school, how guardians and the society worsened the situation and what should have been done differently during the whole Covid-19 era in Malawi.

My analysis and discussion will reveal how Covid-19 affected girls' education in Malawi, why and how the school closures were implemented, how negatively they affected girls' experience at home, the efforts schools made to help girls stay in school and lastly how the girls' guardians and the society at large worsened the situation for the girls during the school closures. I have divided this chapter into 3 sub-sections handling the 3 themes that were present in the data that I collected from my research participants. These themes are as follows: Covid-19 and the school closures, pervasive poverty and lastly, gender and social-cultural fuelling.

5.1. Covid-19 and the school closures in Malawi.

This section sets out to discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic and the school closures that were implemented in Malawi affected the education of girls. As of 20 March 2020, 105 countries had implemented school closures nationwide to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has spread and affected all districts in Malawi from the northern, central and southern regions. Motivated by this fact, I chose informants from all 3 regions of the country to show how all 3 regions were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though these school closures were temporary measures, they caused both social and economic costs for the citizens of Malawi. When asked if the research informants were teachers at schools that experience school closures, the informants responded as follows:

I live and teach at a secondary school in the Dowa district in the central region of Malawi. Tina

I live and am a teacher at All Angels primary school in Senga-bay Salima, A district in Malawi and Our school is one of the institutions that experienced closure due to COVID-19. Angela

I live in Mangochi, and I teach at Mangochi girls' secondary school which was Also closed due to Covid 19. Naomi

These texts show that the school closures that were implemented by the Malawian government to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic were experienced by all the research participants. These responses are in line with the UNESCO map on school closures (2021) which revealed that schools were indeed closed in Malawi from March 23, 2020, and re-opened between September and October 2020. They stayed open for a few months and closed again in late January 2021. These formally adopted school closures amounted to 7 months of which 7.8 million children were out of formal schooling.

The implementation of said school closures to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic saw governments and schools concurrently finding other means of ensuring continuous education through various alternatives. As shown by McClain-Nhlapo et al (2020) many countries across the African continent including Malawi made several efforts to support school-going children in their education through various digital inclusive efforts like social media, radio, and television to necessitate learning throughout the school closures. When asked what initiatives the schools implemented to ensure learning continued during the school closures, the informants had this to say:

Several distance learning measures were implemented. There were education radio programmes produced and aired for primary learners and the government set up online learning materials and non-digital learning sets for secondary school students. Naomi

Online learning was encouraged to necessitate the students' learning process. WhatsApp groups were for instance created for different subjects and school levels. Tina

Unlike the experiences of the informants above, the following paragraph reveals a different reality of students living and studying in the Senga-Bay area of the Salima district in Malawi.

There were no strategies to let schooling continue here. Both teachers and learners went on a full leave since people were not allowed to meet up they were advised to stay indoors as a measure of preventing COVID-19. Angela

The text shows how different the experience was for students in some schools in the Mangochi district. This does reveal that the experience of digital learning as an alternative option for learning was not as equally implemented across the country as it should have been.

5.2. Gender and Social-cultural fuelling

This section examines how the presence or lack thereof of gender equality and other several cultural norms impacted the girl child learners, especially during the school closures. In discussing the gender perspective, Gemzöe (2014) revealed that the power relationship present between men and women is visible in all areas of society and in many cases is sadly considered the norm to the extent that young girls live with this ideology of patriarchy through different factors in the community such as schools and cultural way of life.

5.2.1. Teenage pregnancies and early marriages.

Through the gender perspective, we witnessed the presence of unequal dynamics that exist between girls and boys, this includes recognizing the unequal ways in which gender stereotypes can lead to the marginalization of girls in education and how gender norms in society limit girls' opportunities to go further with their education. This same difference in the treatment of girls and boys is also seen when girls are forced into early marriages compared to their male counterparts. This patriarchal norm of treating boys as more important citizens than girls influences families to heavily invest in the education of boys compared to girls. From a cultural relativism standpoint, I see that cultures in communities in Malawi have a strong influence on who society chooses to invest in among the genders when it comes to education. As defined by Tesón (2001:380) local cultural traditions usually determine the experience and scope of civil and political rights enjoyed by groups of people in this case a Malawian patriarchal culture chooses which rights the girl child are worthy of enjoying as seen from the interview narratives. When asked how the girls were affected during the school closures the research participants responded as follows:

Most girls were turned into vendors by their parents as a way of preventing them from just staying idle at home. This contributed to close relationships between them and fish sellers which ended up in early marriages. By the time schools had to be reopened lots of girls didn't return. Angela

Not only the fish sellers but also their fellow learners (the boys) found chances to marry the girls since the restrictions that schools give were no longer there. Some could even elope.

Most girls reported back while pregnant. This decreased the number of girls in schools since even after giving birth they never returned to school. Angela

Since the students stayed at home for quite some time doing nothing and many of them involved themselves in sexual activities which led to many girls dropping out of school some got married others found themselves pregnant during the period they stayed at home. Tina

Because of the loss of learning opportunities, we experienced a high dropout rate of girls, teenage/ early pregnancies, and child marriages. Naomi

Through these responses, it is clearly seen that teenage pregnancies and early marriages increased during the school closures implemented by the Malawi government to reduce the spread of Covid-19 in Malawi. UNFPA Malawi reveals that 47% of women in Malawi are married before the age of 18. This experience is a serious violation of their human rights as it consequently denies them their universal right to education since many are expected to drop out of school and focus on taking care of their new household. Even though from the responses it is not mentioned that society contributed to the girls being affected negatively during these school closures, it is safe to argue that the view of girls as being lesser beings, which is fueled by patriarchal norms in Malawi as pointed out in the gender perspective is one of the reasons that made the society not to support the girls to either not get pregnant or return to school once schools opened instead of forcing them into early marriages. As a society, we need to prioritise girls' human rights to education and now allow culture to be a sensible moral reason for not accepting and implementing universal human rights (Donnelly 2003: 90). The fact that the communities did not support the girls is a clear depiction of the terrible realities faced by young women and girls in Malawi and the closure of schools that are supposed to be a haven for girls and help to keep them away from teenage pregnancies and early marriages created a hell right on earth for them.

Similarly, a study conducted in Kenya and Uganda concurs with the experience of girls in Malawi. This study was done to explore what led to more early marriages and teenage

pregnancies in Kenya and Uganda during the Covid-19 lockdown period. The analysis of this study identified that school closures and loss of jobs by parents and guardians of children were the main drivers of this predicament. According to Masaba et al, (2022), since the implementation of the lockdown led to the closure of the schools which are a haven for children, teenagers found the time to engage in sexual acts voluntarily while others were exposed to sexual predators in their homesteads. Furthermore, like the case of the girls in Malawi as revealed by the research informants, teenagers in Kenya and Uganda resorted to depending on their older sexual partners since their parents and guardians had lost their means of livelihood, this resulted in many girls engaging in sexual acts and falling pregnant while some entered early marriages.

Despite coming from another continent, my analysis concurs with the findings of a study done in India by Pintu & Dinabandhu (2020) titled "Child Marriage in India: A human rights violation during the Covid-19 Pandemic". Like Malawi, any marriage or union below the age of 18 is considered child marriage and therefore a violation of human rights in India. Pintu & Dinabandhu (2020) states that India is home to the largest number of child brides, and this prompted organizations to make significant progress in reducing this practice. The study revealed that with the coming of Covid-19, school closures were implemented in India and this period has tremendously affected the impact that various local and international organizations had made in their quest to reduce child marriages. Furthermore, it was revealed that in addition to child marriages, sexual abuse and domestic violence were on the rise. With many families losing their jobs and sources of income, poverty is on the rise and the fear that this new reality will further escalate the risks of child marriages for the girls.

In addition, an emergency call to action by Hossain et al, (2021) revealed how Covid-19 had exacerbated the child marriage crisis in Bangladesh. The study revealed that child marriage between teenagers and older men has been a long outstanding socioeconomic crisis in the

country, to the point of being the highest in Asia. The country heavily invested in the fight against the practice and saw a significant reduction in cases from 66% to 59%. Sadly, the practice flared up again during the school closures implemented to mitigate the spread of Covid-19. During this time, the study noticed that the prevalence of child marriage increased by at least 13% with many however being unreported. This study urged the Bangladeshi government to quickly address this issue so that the progress previously made on ending child marriages should not be lost entirely.

It is safe to conclude that many girls in Africa, Asia and possibly other parts of the world as shown above, experienced varying forms of sexual and emotional abuse during the school closures. The increase in teenage pregnancies and child marriages during this time should stand as a reminder that school is not only about education for girls but also a safe place where girls are sheltered from teenage pregnancies, child marriage, sexual abuse and all forms of abuse that are prominent in their households and surrounding areas. It is everyone's responsibility to make sure that girls are protected, and their human rights respected, our cultural traditions must not be prioritized in dictating which rights girls are worthy to enjoy in Malawi.

5.2.2. Child labour.

This section reveals the reality of girls being forced into child labour during school closures. In questioning the experiences of girls during the school closures the research informants revealed that some girls in the northern region of Malawi were forced into child labour which indirectly also led girls into early marriages and teenage pregnancies. When asked how the school closures affected the girls, the informants had this to say:

The closure affected learners in a lot of ways and will point out just a few; Most girls were turned into vendors by their parents as a way of preventing them from just staying idle at home. This contributed to close relationships between them and fish sellers which ended up in early marriages.

Angela

School closures contributed to an increase in child labour not only happening in Malawi but worldwide. As revealed by the Human rights watch (2021) report, the unprecedented economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic combined with the school closures that were implemented by many African countries, did fuel child labour in other African countries like Ghana and Uganda. To concur with this and the experience of girls in Malawi is a study conducted in Ghana by Mohammed (2022). This study examined the impact of school closures on child labour in Ghana. Since the government implemented the school closures from the 15th of March 2022 to January 2021. The study revealed that children from poor households especially in rural communities between the ages of 8-13 were forced into child labour on either farm or selling foodstuff along the side of the roads. As a result of these school closures and their experiences during them, children did not have any time to engage in any learning during the school closures.

In as much as child labour has always been a global challenge, this sad reality is clearly among the many social ills that society accepted for girls to endure during school closures. Radical cultural relativism is the view that culture is the sole source of the validity of a moral right (Donnelly 2003:90, 99), so if the Malawian society allowed for child labour to be considered moral during the Covid-19 pandemic, it reveals to the world where human rights and child protection stands regarding children and labour. Instead of families encouraging the girls to still focus on school while at home, they took advantage of these young people because of the family's economic predicament, showing the world the little that is thought of girls in society. In whatever situation girls find themselves, culture must be one with human rights to ensure that society upholds the safety and fulfilment of the girls.

5.3. Pervasive poverty

In this section, we discuss the rate at which poverty has greatly influenced the negative impacts that Covid-19 has had on the reality of girls' education in Malawi. In discussing this, this section

will look at the different experiences' girls in rural and urban areas face. In addition, this section will also address the difficulties that the girls experienced in accessing the Internet and any online schooling opportunities that were made available but needed the Internet to access them.

5.3.1. Rural vs urban learners.

The following paragraphs discuss the research informant's response when asked if there were any differences in how girls in the rural and the urban areas experienced the school closures differently and how the following were some responses that show us what girls experienced during this Covid-19 era. In narrating the different experiences girls from rural and urban areas faced during the school closures, the informants had this to say:

The main difference was that girls in the urban areas had access to radio programmes and online learning materials whereas those in rural areas could hardly access such programmes. Naomi

However, this didn't affect urban and village girls in the same way since girls from villages weren't strictly indoors because life in the villages is different...girls would still travel a distance fetch water firewood and more. Some urban girls had chances to continue learning through phones which didn't happen to those in villages. Angela

The rural areas were affected more than the urban. Most of the girls in the rural areas did not have access to the internet and had no gadgets. No airtime hence many failed to participate in online classes unlike those in the urban. Tina

The text above shows a repetitive difference in the way girls living and pursuing their education in urban areas experienced the school closure period compared to their fellow girls living in rural areas. In these responses, I paid attention to how pervasive poverty is a clear umbrella to the realities of the girls in rural areas compared to their counterparts in urban areas. It is clearly shown from the responses how access to the internet and in some cases access to gadgets was a huge determinant to whether the girls would continue with school during the school closures. From these responses, we see those rural areas, unlike urban areas, lack access to the internet making it difficult, if not impossible, for girls to access alternative online learning opportunities (WhatsApp lessons, radio programs, materials etc.) that some schools

provided. In many cases, these girls living in rural areas did not only have access to the technology or infrastructure that they need to access the internet, but they also did not have access to the financial resources needed for the internet connection. These realities made it all difficult, and even more, impossible for girls to access online learning opportunities, which consequently had a significant negative impact on their education. However, this was a perfect time for schools and teachers to employ the self-determination theory. As discussed in Chapter 3, this theory is used to motivate students to work hard on their studies by themselves. According to Ryan and Connell (1989), the more autonomous student's motivation is the more chance their experience becomes positive. However, since there was little interaction between teachers and students during the schools' closures, especially for those living in rural areas, the girls did not find any motivation to work hard despite the crisis that the world was in.

Istemic (2021) argued that the access to information and communication technology in and of itself is an indication of the digital disparity present between learners from high and low-income communities seen from both the internet coverage and the access to computers in households. This inequality in the access to education between rural and urban learners was also revealed in Ethiopia. Tiruneh (2020) in discussing Covid-19 and school closures in Ethiopia acknowledged that pre-covid-19 inequalities in the access to education existed between learners in rural and urban areas in Ethiopia, however, the Covid-19 pandemic did increase these already existing inequalities. Similarly, to Malawi, the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia implemented the school closures and encouraged parents and guardians to ensure learning is continuing during the school closures. However, unlike Malawi, Ethiopia identified that there were limited mechanisms to ensure there was equal and inclusive learning for both rural and urban learners. Temporally learning platforms like satellite television and radio lessons were implemented however like in Malawi this initiative revealed the inequality that already existed between rural and urban learners since over 80% of people in Ethiopia live in

rural areas where electricity is not available so accessing radio and satellite television aired lessons proved impossible. In the urban areas however, Tiruneh (2020) reveals that learning continued with the use of several online platforms like socio-media platforms, WhatsApp, google classrooms and emails. In as much as Malawi and Ethiopia are both developing countries whose experience of Covid-19 may not completely be identical, we can see a similarity in the experiences of learners in rural and urban areas during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is safe to conclude that there was an inequality in the access to education between the girls in rural areas from those in urban areas in Malawi and other countries. Despite learning not be possible for many especially those in rural areas, the provision of internet access enough to only interact with their teachers for a short period would have allowed these girls to be motivated to choose to continue reading and working on their various school projects so that learning continues. The autonomy that the self-determination theory stresses would have been possible for the girls if their environment, in this case, parents, guardians and teachers were supportive in making sure that despite schools being closed, they still could continue being students by being self-sufficient in their learning and studying while at home.

5.3.2. High school dropouts.

In this section, we discuss the school dropouts that resulted from the several factors explored in the paragraphs above. According to Frankenberg & Kotok (2013), school dropouts are heavily associated with social exclusion as seen lately during the Covid-19 period. Frankenberg & Kotok (2013) states that socio-political and economic conditions are among the factors that increase the chances of children facing deprivation and unequal participation in society. Concurrently, Basher (2010) points out that in the discourse of global education, the exclusion of children in education to the point of dropping out of school is fuelled by various socio and

economic factors. From my analysis, it is clear that we need to include the Covid-19 pandemic as another factor that influenced the dropout of many children from schools.

As seen in the responses of the research participants, it is visible that many girls did drop out of school for various reasons that included teenage pregnancies and early marriages. We may not know the exact number of girls that have dropped out of school during or after the school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. UNICEF however estimates that over 24 million girls will not be returning to school at the end of the school closures. This is sadly a very high number of female learners, and it is not good for the global and national goals of keeping girls in school. When discussing the number of girls dropping out of school, the informants had this to say:

The closure of schools surely caused several dropouts of girls. This was due to pregnancies; some girls threw themselves into marriages and some just felt bored to repeat classes.

Maimba

They dropped out of school and some girls got married while others found themselves pregnant during the period that they stayed at home. Namboya

5.4. A Malawian utopia

This section looks at the various realities that my informants reflected on as being essential to achieving a better educational experience for girls during the school closures caused by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have framed this section as a Malawian Utopia because in as much as these things are a necessity for every student to enjoy their school experience, they have been next to impossible to achieve in Malawi, hence the informants need to single them out in their responses.

5.4.1. Digital inclusion

In this section, I discuss the importance of ensuring that digital inclusion becomes a reality for all female learners in Malawi. In response to the school closures implemented by governments worldwide, UNESCO (2020) recommended that schools use distance learning and open

educational platforms for learners and teachers to use remotely to ensure education is not fully disrupted. Digital inclusion would involve ensuring equitable access to the use of information and other communication technologies for participation in social and economic life like education. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, digital inclusion, digital literacy and internet access are crucial to even the health of all people (Sieck et al 2021), including female learners. This process includes ensuring that access to internet devices and all internet services is affordable for not only those in urban areas but also those living in rural areas as suggested also by the informant below:

Making sure girls have access to the internet and providing them with virtual lessons. Tina

The lack of digital inclusion was one of the inequalities that were brought to light during the school closures. The inequality in access to information and communication technology obstructed the process of learning in many countries around the world (Bonal & Gonzalez, 2020). Here I see a clear intersection of gender, age and class as one of the factors that are present in the digital divide. From an intersectionality theory of understanding inequality, the interconnected identity of the girls (class, gender, and age) made them more vulnerable to exclusion in education. Digital inclusion and internet access are key to ensuring that girls have the chance to access school learning during school closures. Governments must ensure that all the necessary infrastructure is in its proper place to provide Internet access in all schools and that students have devices to access the Internet. In addition, governments must heavily invest in digital literacy, making sure that digital literacy programs are in place to help girls use digital technologies to access school learning. Finally, the government should provide adequate support to ensure that digital resources, such as online libraries, are accessible to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Not very far from Malawi, in Gauteng South Africa, a study was conducted to explore the extent to which the digital divide was revealed during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Chisango & Marongwe (2021), many schools during the school closures in Gauteng province suffered from a lack of Information and communication technology, and this led to an information and learning divide between learners. As a result of this, most schools could not successfully implement online learning and learners fell behind while others dropped out. Similarly, to my analysis, this study urged the government to invest in buying ICT infrastructure and training both teachers and learners on how to use technology for such emergency times as the Covid-19 era.

On the other side of the world in China, a study was also conducted by Liu (2021) aimed at revealing the repercussions of social and digital exclusion through distance learning caused by Covid-19 and the school closures pointed out that the unequal access to learning technology was a huge barrier to learning. The study was of the view that if these barriers were not addressed the following generation will fully feel the impact of both Covid-19 and digital exclusion. In line with the argument of this paper, the study by Liu (2021) further recommended that policymakers should quickly address the digital divide in the country specifically for such times as the Covid-19 emergency.

After witnessing the similar digital divide experienced in other countries in Africa and Asia, it is clear that many governments were not prepared the school closures and online learning. It is imperative now that governments across the globe must choose to heavily invest in acquiring the infrastructure and training both teachers and students to be always ready to continue the learning and teaching process even in times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.4.2. Decongesting classes.

Decongesting classes and keeping schools open instead of implementing school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic period would have been a much better option. From the

responses given by the research informants below, decongesting classes, building more classes and employing more teachers would have sufficed instead of removing girls from what is too many a haven compared to their homes where they are prone to all kinds of abuse:

with a huge sum of investment in the education sector that is to construct temporary tents to be used as extra classes and provide schools with enough equipment to be used as preventive measures such as face masks, hand sanitisers, water taps, hand washing soaps and buckets for all teachers and learners. This equipment should be available throughout the pandemic.

Angela

The government could have just put in measures to decongest the classes for example, bringing in more resources, recruiting more teachers, some could learn in tents. Emphasize following the Covid-19 measures already put in place in schools, disinfecting the schools regularly other than closing them. Naomi

Opting for decongesting classes and keeping schools open during the Covid-19 era, would have been a better option since it would have allowed the girls to continue their education while also keeping them safe. By reducing the size of the classes and increasing the spacing between students for example, the risk of infection would have been minimised and the spread of the virus would have been slowed and contained. This situation would have been beneficial for all the learners and teachers since it would allow more personalised instruction as well as social distancing. Furthermore, by keeping schools open, students would be able to normally access the resources they need to succeed in their education; like school materials, mental health services, tutoring and other services. Finally, by keeping girls in school during the pandemic and eliminating the school closures, a sense of normalcy for the students would have been maintained thereby limiting the chances of them dealing with the many social and emotional effects of the pandemic.

5.4.2.1. Constructing more classes and employing more teachers.

Investing in constructing more classes and employing more teachers and keeping schools open during the Covid-19 pandemic would have been ideal for multiple reasons. To begin with, this being a better option would have allowed students to continue to receive an education in a safe

and secure environment. This is important for students to continue to learn and develop the skills they need to be successful in their lives. In addition, it does help to combat the negative impacts of prolonged school closures that we discussed above. Students may experience gaps in their learning, and long-term closures can also damage their emotional and mental well-being. Keeping schools open and employing more teachers is a great way to ensure that students remain safe and healthy while still receiving an education. Finally, it helps to maintain a sense of normalcy in life during an otherwise chaotic time. Allowing learners to stay in school, can provide girls with a continued sense of stability and continuity, which would be beneficial to both their academic and emotional development, something that may not be available in their homes. When asked what would have made the situation better for the girls, one of the respondents answered:

The government could have brought in more resources and recruited more teachers, some could learn in tents. Emphasize the Covid-19 measures already put in place in schools regularly other than closing them. Naomi

As shown from the text above, building more classes to ensure social distancing is achieved instead of implementing the school closures would have been ideal for multiple reasons. First, this option would have provided students with a better opportunity to continue their education and stay on track with their academic progress. Additionally, it provides a safe and structured environment for students to socialize and interact with their peers, while providing a sense of normalcy. Finally, it also allows parents to continue to work without having to worry about taking care of them. All these benefits would be ideal for ensuring that the girls have access to all the resources they need to be successful.

5.4.3. Provision of mental health services.

In this section, I discuss the provision of mental health services to girls during the school closures to motivate them to continue with whichever mode of learning was available, so they do not drop out of school. From the following responses from the research informants, it is clear that mental health counselling should have been a top priority during the covid-19 era whether schools were closed or not. This initiative would have helped keep girls in school and reduce the high number of girls that UNICEF estimated will drop out. When asked what she believed would have been a good initiative for the girls, one informant had this to say:

Providing virtual lessons and frequent counselling sessions to the girls during the school closures. Tina

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the mental health and well-being of girls around the world, and the intersecting identities of the girls in this study (gender, age and class) meant that they were also at the periphery of society. These interconnected identities according to the intersectionality theory make girls who have already marginalised members of society even more alone and further disconnected from reality and excluded in education. Peer social isolation and the inability to attend school and engage in activities have all taken a toll on girls' mental health. With the lack of in-person social interaction, the girls were prone to experiencing feelings of loneliness and possibly anxiety. Providing mental health counselling to girls in schools during the pandemic can help them to cope with their emotions and provide them with the tools to navigate this difficult period.

A study by Chaabane et al. (2021), titled "The impact of Covid-19 schools' closures on Child and adolescent health" revealed that young learners lost access to school-based healthcare services and nutritional programs that were crucial to their well-being. Furthermore, the study revealed that school closures also led to loneliness, anxiety, stress, sadness, frustration, and hyperactivity among learners. Similarly, to what the research informants suggested, this study

recommended that support be provided for learners to reduce the high risks of mental health and learning impairments.

In the case of Malawi, mental health counselling can also help the girls to further identify any underlying issues that may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, such as family or relationship problems and provide them with the support they need to manage their mental health. Mental health counselling can help to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues, encouraging girls to seek help when needed and empowering them to take care of their well-being. When providing these mental health services to the girls, the intersection of age, and class should be considered because in as much as they are all girls, the differences in age and social class might dictate what mental health looks like to each girl child. In acknowledging the intersectional identities of girls, no one size fits all mentality should be adopted on any issues to do with girls, and even more so when it comes to issues of mental health.

5.4.4. Investing in education in emergency structures

In this section, I discuss the importance of investing in education in emergencies for such times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic that affected everyone around the globe. Education in emergencies is a process of promoting quality education for young people in crisis-affected areas like pandemics (UNESCO, 2015). Education on its own is a human right that all girls are entitled to, however in most emergency times states encounter difficulties in protecting this right to education, especially for marginalised people like girls (UNESCO, 2019). Education in emergencies is an important part of keeping girls in school, it helps build resilience and social cohesion across communities. This process involves various strategies and approaches to help ensure that girls are supported and have access to quality education in situations of crisis or conflict. This could include providing safe learning spaces, access to materials, qualified teachers, and protection from all kinds of harm. It also involves creating an all-

inclusive and safe environment for the girls, free of discrimination and violence, and providing the necessary psychosocial support to help them cope with the trauma of the crisis. Additionally, education in emergencies can involve providing access to educational opportunities that may not have been available before the crisis, such as accelerated learning or distance learning programs. Ultimately, education in emergencies aims to ensure that girls can stay in school and continue to learn, despite the challenges posed by a crisis or conflict.

Intersectionality herein refers to how various forms of oppression can intersect (age, gender and class as discussed in this study) and can be applied in education in emergencies. Through this theory of intersectionality, I recommend the need to adopt education interventions and policies tailored to meet the needs of girls from diverse backgrounds that find themselves impacted by any emergency in this case Covid-19. When responding to any emergency especially when it comes to education, we should acknowledge that individual girls have different realities, experiences and needs. By applying the intersectionality theory, we can acknowledge that girls have different access to education opportunities and resources in an emergency. We can also acknowledge that due to cultural norms, girls are more likely to be excluded from educational opportunities. Additionally, through intersectionality, we can identify unique physical, mental and any specialised help girls may need during any crisis. Finally, and more importantly, with intersectionality in mind, those in place of power can design interventions and educational policies that can ensure that girls access quality education in emergencies like Covid-19.

Chapter 6. Conclusion: Key findings and suggestions

In this chapter, I will present a summary of the main findings of this study and my reflections on the same and my suggestions for how we can move forward to create a better reality for girls' education in Malawi. This was a qualitative study whose data was collected solely using email interviews with research informants living and working in Malawi. The data collected was then analysed using both the thematic analytical framework and relating to previous studies from around the world. The following were the theories employed in the analysis: gender perspective, intersectionality, self-determination theory (SDT), and cultural relativism.

6.1. Summary of the key findings and suggestions.

To summarize my thesis observation, I have addressed the conclusions reached after having analysed the interviews I conducted with my research informants. In discussing the impact Covid-19 and the school closures have had on girls' education in Malawi, this study has shown that Covid-19 has had a tremendous impact on all school-going children and an even greater impact on girls. The patriarchal norm in Malawi that fuels the perception of girls as being lesser than boys and not worthy of a stronger investment in education did not create a conducive environment for girls to succeed in education during the school closures and Covid-19.

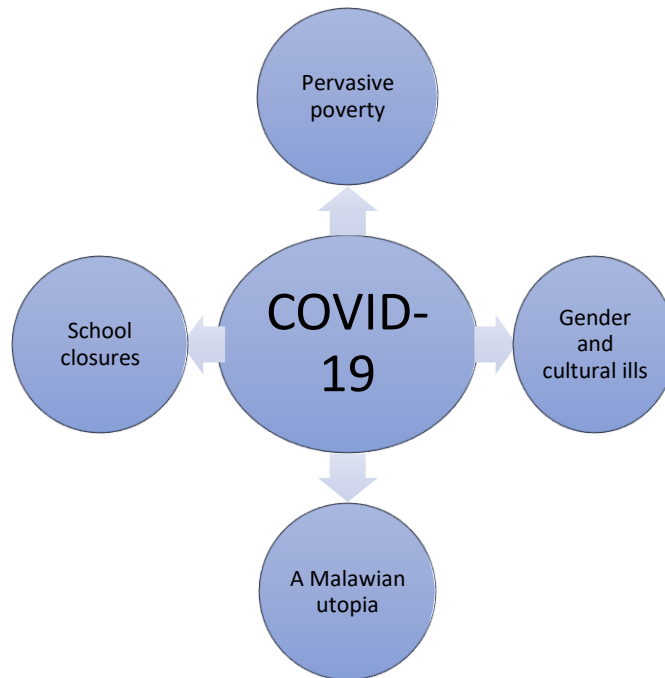
According to the narrative of the interviews, I witnessed that during the school closures that were implemented throughout the country, girls experienced several ills that were influenced by their gender and culture. To begin with, from the interviews, we see that during these school closures, many girls engaged in sexual acts that led to teenage pregnancies while others were forced into early marriages to much older men. In addition to teenage pregnancies and early marriages, many girls were also forced into child labour which also gave the girls an opening to engage with older men some of whom they were forced into marriage with.

Secondly, in this study, I also found that pervasive poverty was also identified as a strong theme during the school closures and Covid-19 that worsened the situation for the girls. In the narrative, we see that there existed an inequality in the access to online learning between that the girls in rural and urban areas, an inequality that was mostly caused by poverty: where girls in rural areas had no access to both internet and the technology to access learning like their counterparts from urban areas. This inequality experienced by the girls pushed me to advocate for the end to the digital divide revealed during the school closures, and for the government to heavily invest in digital inclusion, especially for education in emergencies such as Covid-19.

Through this study, I found that with all the ills that society allowed the girls to experience, a Malawian utopia is still possible. To begin with, digital inclusion must be prioritized to remove the digital divide that was revealed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the school closures were implemented to mitigate the spread of covid-19, decongesting the classes was a better alternative to closing the school. Similarly, investing in building more classes for the students and employing more teachers would have made it possible to teach a small number of learners without risking the transmission of Covid-19.

Furthermore, investing in the mental health of the girls and all learners should have been one of the top priorities. In this study, it was revealed that with the school closures limiting learners to the confines of their homes, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, and depression were on the rise. The provision of mental health counselling would have made the period of the school closures bearable for the girls. Investing in the mental health of learners and especially that of girls should be a priority for poor and patriarchal countries like Malawi where society perceives women and girls as second-hand citizens. This investment will be a positive initiative, since as the saying goes 'you invest in a generation by educating a girl child'.

Table 1: Selected themes



The table above is a pictorial representation of the various factors fuelled by Covid-19 that were discussed in Chapter 5 as having significantly impacted girls' education in Malawi. From this table and as discussed, it is visible that Covid-19 led to school closures, various gender and social ills and finally girls dropping out of school. The table also shows that the gender and social ills that were fuelled by Covid-19 (teenage pregnancies, early marriages and child labour) were influenced heavily also by the presence of poverty especially in rural areas. The same however is the case that the normalisation of these gender and social ills will in the long run continue to lead to pervasive poverty for them girls, a chain that needs to be addressed.

Similarly, I can conclude that since these school closures that were implemented around the country have resulted in a significant number of girls dropping out of school, in a context of a developing country like Malawi where girls are expected to work hard in school, be educated enough to have a career and escape poverty, the future seems dark enough that pervasive

poverty might be the reality for many girls if interventions are not introduced to deal with the educational damage Covid-19 has caused.

Additionally, the table also points out how from Covid19 we can see a Malawian utopia that if achieved is better for girls' education experience in Malawi. In this case, this Malawian utopia is one where inclusive education is a priority, where not only access but also the quality of education is available to girls from diverse backgrounds during emergency times like the one of Covid-19. This Malawian utopia is one where digital inclusion is prioritised, mental health services are available and accessible to the girls and educational structures and teachers are enough to continue learning despite any crisis.

Lastly, the Malawian government must invest in education for emergencies like Covid-19. The unfortunate coming of Covid-19 revealed how unprepared we as a country are for such crisis periods as the Covid-19 pandemic era. The Malawian government must acknowledge that education is a human right, therefore, the investment in policies that promote the provision and access to quality education during such a crisis as Covid-19 must be a priority. Making sure that both the environment and the process of education in itself are all-inclusive will increase the chances of keeping girls in school despite any crisis the country faces. As a community, and as a nation: we owe it to the girl child to make sure her right to education, and other similar rights like health and bodily autonomy are respected and protected while on her journey to attaining education.

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