



# “Since the market is closed, there is no more money, there is nothing we can do”: Voices of adolescent girls in Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone on poverty and COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to widen inequalities and hamper the SDG commitments of gender equality and poverty reduction. In Africa, it is feared that the social consequences of the pandemic will undo the progress in gender equality achieved over the last two decades. Through in-depth qualitative telephone interviews with 37 adolescent girls in Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone this paper sheds light on the economic consequences of the pandemic on girls. Adolescent girls' experience of the pandemic is strongly mediated by their household configuration, resources and geographical context. Our data identifies three groups: i) sheltered from the economic impact of the pandemic, ii) coping or adjusting, and iii) severely affected. We also identify a fourth group of girls, found only in Burkina Faso, whose lives have been affected by conflict and who perceive the impact of the pandemic to be minor compared to enduring violence and trauma. Our analysis shows the unequal impact of COVID-19 and the measures implemented to contain it is likely to increase economic inequality, particularly in areas with longer-lasting restrictions, as coping mechanisms erode over time. Furthermore, the pandemic is likely to accelerate marriages and the end of schooling thus increasing gender inequality. Such effects are also mediated by resources girls have access to. We argue that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) ideals requires innovative, appropriate and sustainable solutions with the combined effort of governments and the development community that respond to the lived experiences of adolescent girls. Finally, necessary attention to the consequences of the pandemic should not detract from addressing ongoing issues affecting adolescent girls, including poverty and conflict.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities. The UN predicted 42 to 66 million children could fall into extreme poverty worldwide following the pandemic (United Nations, 2020). In Sub-Saharan Africa the pandemic and associated contention measures slowed growth and resulted in increased poverty rates (Lastunen et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022). Those working in precarious informal sectors such as petty trade, subsistence farming or commercial bike riding are particularly vulnerable to the effect of job losses and often excluded from social protection systems (Lastunen et al., 2021; Darkwah, Thorsen

and Wayack Pambé, 2022). While informality is common in Africa, women are overrepresented in the informal sector, dominated by agriculture (Ataguba, 2020; Khan, 2020).

The initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic counted relatively few cases in both Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone, and incidence has overall been comparatively low according to global estimates (Dong, Du and Gardner, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Both countries implemented strict restriction measures in spring 2020 that included school closures and limitations on movement. An estimated 63 % of households in Burkina Faso and 82 % in Sierra Leone experienced a drop in income in the first three months of the pandemic and many missed or reduced meals (Egger et al., 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> However, COVID-19 cases are likely to be underreported and numbers have increased over time.

School closures further increased food insecurity as school feeding programmes stopped across the continent: the [World Food Programme \(2021a\)](#) estimated more than 3 million children in Burkina Faso and over 830,000 in Sierra Leone missing on meals at the peak of the pandemic (April 2020). Thus, while the direct impact from the disease (in terms of number of infections, hospitalisations and deaths) was comparatively limited, contention measures (lockdowns, curfews, school and market closures) had a strong economic (and education) impact. While governments put forward contentment and mitigation measures, such as income replacement schemes or electricity and water subsidies, women and women headed households are less likely to have been able to benefit from these, as they are less present in the formal sector and have less access to utility services ([Darkwah, Thorsen and Wayack Pambè, 2022](#)).

It is also feared that the social consequences of the pandemic will undo the progress in gender equality achieved over the last two decades ([Peterman et al., 2020](#)). Indeed, the impact of the pandemic is gendered: women are primary carers for both children and the sick ([Darkwah, Thorsen and Wayack Pambè, 2022](#)), and make most of the healthcare force worldwide (although not in Burkina Faso) which increases their labour burden and puts them at increased risk of catching the virus ([Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020](#)). Pandemics are also associated with increased violence against women and children ([Bandiera et al., 2020](#); [Peterman et al., 2020](#)) and increases in unsafe and transactional sex as growing economic pressure and limited alternatives push women and girls to exchange sex to cover basic needs ([van Blerk, 2008](#); [Shand, van Blerk and Hunter, 2017](#); [Oxfam International, 2020](#)).

In this context, girls face a double risk due to their vulnerability as both female and children ([Ramawamy and Seshadri, 2020](#)). The socio-economic effects of pandemics and the measures out in place to confront them have been associated with increases in early transitions to sexual behaviour, teenage pregnancy, school attrition and in early marriage ([Davies and Bennett, 2016](#); [Onyango et al., 2019](#); [Bandiera et al., 2020](#); [Peterman et al., 2020](#); [UNFPA, 2020](#)). Indeed, school closures can have long term effects on girls' trajectories. Evidence from the impact of Ebola in Sierra Leone suggests that more than 18,000 girls got pregnant during the epidemic ([UNFPA, 2020](#)), while [Bandiera et al., \(2020\)](#) report a 17 pp drop in school enrolment among girls. The authors also remark that some of the effects were contained in areas that implemented safe space policies, indicating a potential for targeted interventions to reduce negative effects.

Through in-depth interviews with adolescent girls in Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone, this paper reflects on girls' experiences of the pandemic with a focus on its economic impact and illustrates some of the processes through which COVID-19 is likely to increase economic and gender inequality. In doing so, it contributes to the literature in a number of ways. Research that amplifies the voices of girls is rare. In a systematic analysis of the literature on the gendered impacts of COVID-19, the gender and COVID working group highlights the existence of a gap on research that reports on women's experiences ([Raj et al., 2020](#)). A similar gap exists more broadly on the literature on the gendered impact of epidemics ([Peterman et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, the paper applies an intersectional lens ([Crenshaw, 2017](#)) to untangle how girls' experiences are shaped by gender, their household's socio-economic position, relatedness to the household head and geographical context ([Grieve, 2016](#)). Poverty affects all children, but due to gender assigned roles it has a specific impact on girls, shaping their trajectories to adulthood which in turn affects wider structures of gender inequality. Equally, girls are likely to have different experiences based on the resources and opportunities available to them. Understanding the intersections of inequality compounded by the pandemic is key to design policy responses adapted to the needs of adolescent girls.

## 2. Background

Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso are among the poorest countries in the

world. In 2020 they jointly occupied the 182nd position out of 191 countries in the Human Development Index ([UNDP, 2021](#)). Both countries have experienced humanitarian crises in the recent past. After a decade-long civil war (1991–2002) Sierra Leone was among the countries hardest hit by the 2013–16 Ebola outbreak. The outbreak had a severe impact on the economy, and particularly on women as it erased the recent gains in maternal and infant health and increased early pregnancy and violence against women and girls ([Abramowitz, 2019](#); [Bandiera et al., 2019](#); [Onyango et al., 2019](#)). In Burkina Faso the action of armed non-state groups in the North and central areas has intensified since 2018. By April 2020 the conflict had translated into almost 848,000 internally displaced people: 84% women and children ([Oxfam International, 2020](#)). In spring 2020, 3.3 million people out of a population of 20.4 million lived in acute food insecurity as a result of both the conflict and the pandemic ([World Food Programme, 2021b](#)). Currently it is estimated that around 2 million people are internally displaced in Burkina Faso ([Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023](#)).

Gender equality remains a persistent challenge although progress is observable ([UNDP, 2021](#)). Both countries have recorded marked increases in girls educational enrolment over the last two decades ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). Burkina Faso achieved parity in primary enrolment and recently reversed the historical gender gap in lower secondary education ([World Bank, 2020](#)). In Sierra Leone more girls than boys are registered in primary education while the opposite is true for secondary schooling ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). These figures are accompanied by high rates of early marriage, gender based violence and gender discrimination ([Engebretsen and Kaboré, 2011](#); [Bandiera et al., 2020](#); [Oxfam International, 2020](#); [Devine et al., 2021](#)). Legal reforms in the last three decades have implemented some improvements around the legal status of women. In Burkina Faso the 1990 Persons and Family Code, prohibited forced marriage and gave women the right to work without spousal consent. There is however no law pertaining to domestic violence. Sierra Leone has sought to address sexual and gender based violence and curb teenage pregnancy through a range of interventions including the declaration of a national state of emergency over sexual violence ([Denney, Gordon and Ibrahim, 2015](#); [Bash-Taqi et al., 2020](#)). Progress is slow and gender norms that position women primarily as mothers, wives and/or daughters remain prevalent ([Konaté, 2006](#); [Engebretsen and Kaboré, 2011](#); [Oxfam International, 2020](#); [Devine et al., 2021](#)). Early marriage and childbearing are common, particularly in rural areas ([Engebretsen and Kaboré, 2011](#); [Devine et al., 2021](#)). Girls tend to contribute significantly more to household chores compared to boys ([UNICEF, 2016](#)), such gap can widen during school closures ([Bakrania et al., 2020](#)). For example, in Sierra Leone during the Ebola epidemic adolescent girls increased the time spent on chores by over 5 hours from a baseline of 42 weekly hours ([Bandiera et al., 2019](#)).

Like Ebola, COVID-19 also resulted in school closures. Both countries had their first COVID-19 case and implemented restrictions to reduce transmission in March 2020, around four months before data collection.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the interview, borders were closed in both countries, limiting mobility and trade. Schools were also closed although students due to sit exams in were allowed into school. The restrictions were stricter in Burkina Faso where markets remained closed during data collection, although some small trade had resumed. In Sierra Leone, while travel restrictions and a curfew were in place, some business were open.

There are concerns that the pandemic may undo some of the progress in gender inequality ([Darkwah, Thorsen and Wayack Pambè, 2022](#)). Being out of school increases girls' risk of child marriage and abuse. During the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone schools were closed for a whole academic year, exposing girls to sexual assault and early sexual

<sup>2</sup> The first restrictions were introduced on March 14th in Burkina Faso, with a decree ordering the closure of all schools from the 16th. Sierra Leone declared the state of emergency on March 25th and schools closed March 31st.

initiation, this translated in an increase in teenage pregnancy rates (Denney, Gordon and Ibrahim, 2015; Abramowitz, 2019) which coupled with laws that prevented pregnant girls from returning to school (now reviewed) depressed girls secondary enrolment (Bandiera et al., 2019). In Burkina Faso due to the security situation over 2.500 schools were closed already before the pandemic. Burkina Faso's government sought to implement measures to support education such as expanding distance learning, although children from rural areas and those living in poverty may have encountered additional barriers in accessing distance learning due to a lack of equipment (TV, radio, computer, electricity) and connectivity. Ultimately, COVID-19, the associated restrictions as well as a conflict situation that has involved attacks on schools have stalled education for many (HRW, 2020).

### 3. Literature review

The differential impact of the Ebola crisis on girls, evidences some of the ways in which experiences of childhood and adolescence are gendered. Examining the lived experiences of the pandemic using an intersectional lens draws attention to the forms in which structural inequalities combine, creating distinct burdens and experiences for those in the intersections (Crenshaw, 2017). We argue that the pandemic affects adolescent girls in unique ways that are likely to have wider social implication in terms of gender equality, educational attainment and social inequality.

The focus on adolescent girls is particularly suitable for the study of social change, as adolescents are immersed in a process of transition - from the dependence of childhood to independence and full adult status (Galland, 1991; Punch, 2015; Shand, van Blerk and Hunter, 2017). Some conceptions of transition have been challenged for their limitations in representing the experiences of children and young people in the Global South (Payne, 2012; Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi, 2016). We acknowledge that the meaning associated with specific milestones as well as their timing varies across and within countries as well as over time. Despite such variations, adolescence and youth are periods which concentrate key decisions, around education, work, marriage, housing and family formation, which will form young people's future individual lives and the countries collective futures (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Punch, 2015).

The historical moment in which young people live shapes their transitional experiences. The literature identifies a multiplicity of pathways through which context, opportunity structures and shocks contour transitions to adulthood, and how these processes intersect with gender relations. For instance, economic vulnerability is associated with increased probability of early marriage (Avogo and Somefun, 2019; UNFPA, 2020), and risky sexual behaviours (Madise Nyovani, Zulu Eliya, and Ciera James, 2007; Smith et al., 2021) particularly among girls, who tend to marry and initiate sexual activity at an earlier age than boys. At the same time, the childhood studies literature has highlighted the agency of children and young people in shaping their own lived experiences, particularly when faced with adversity (van Blerk, 2008; Payne, 2012; Thorsen, 2014; Esser et al., 2016) as well as their key role in family livelihood strategies (Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi, 2016; Grieve et al., 2020; Devine et al., 2021). In her research on child-headed households in Zambia, Payne (2012) highlights the mismatch between portraits of orphaned or otherwise vulnerable children as extraordinary, and their own depiction of themselves where adaptation to crises and demands is often perceived as ordinary, part of their everyday. Notwithstanding, economic stress puts an additional burden on young people in terms of trade-offs between covering current needs and investing in the future (e.g. through education) (Wood, 2003). This paper adds to the evidence base on how girls experience the economic impact of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and their role in their households coping strategies, highlighting some of the mechanisms through which economic shocks are intertwined with processes of gender and economic inequality.

Economic shocks are a key factor associated with poverty entries. Households adapt to economic shocks by mobilising and reallocating available resources. When faced with health related income shocks households in rural Burkina Faso adjust by depleting savings, reducing consumption and selling livestock, the impoverishment caused by shocks often extends in time (Yaya Bocoum, Grimm and Hartwig, 2018). Some of the poverty literature has signalled the existence of poverty traps where limited assets, ecological and environmental factors make it harder for households to overcome poverty (Wood, 2003; Naschold, 2012). Simultaneously poor households experience high income mobility across higher and lower income countries (Whelan, Layte and Maître, 2002; Bastos and Machado, 2018; Khosla and Jena, 2020). For example, Radeny et al., (2012) report substantial income mobility among rural households in Kenya with only 11 % of them remaining in extreme poverty for four consecutive years. Households adapt to shocks but not without constraints.

The literature on intra-household inequality has shown that not everyone in the household has the same access to resources, nor are they affected by shocks to the same extent (Quisumbing, 2013; Lanau and Fifita, 2020; Egger et al., 2021). In a review of intra-household dynamics in Africa Brown et al. (2018) found both women and children to be more exposed to poverty than would be expected from household level measures, although with some cross-national variations. For instance, Hadley, et al. (2008) found girls in Ethiopia to be more exposed to food insecurity, while Masa et al. (2020) find boys in Ghana and South Africa to be more food insecure.

Pandemics, poverty and other shocks affect society at large, but also have a specific impact on girls, shaping their trajectories to adulthood which in turn affects aggregate gender and social inequalities. This paper aims to amplify the voices of girls in Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone, highlighting the diversity of their experiences, but also their commonalities.

### 4. Methods

This paper is based on 37 in-depth qualitative interviews (17 in Sierra Leone and 20 in Burkina Faso) with adolescent girls aged 14 to 18. Interviews were conducted between July and September 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grieve et al., 2020). Safety considerations and containment measures that limited mobility required adjustments to our fieldwork at short notice. We replaced face-to-face encounters with telephone interviews as a data collection method. Recruitment had to rely on pre-existing professional networks using purposive sampling. In Sierra Leone, participants for the study were identified through existing networks and institutions (schools, youth-led organisations) working with adolescent girls in Kambia district. To ensure that participation in the research is diverse, researchers were also able to identify participants through existing relationships built in the communities during the Ebola Vaccine trials' (EBOVAC) research work in Kambia in the north-west border with Guinea (Tengbeh et al., 2018), and five participants through snowballing. In Burkina Faso female resident investigators of an existing research platform (MPA2020) recruited girls in all 13 regions of the country. In both cases, the samples included girls with diverse socio-economic backgrounds living in urban and rural areas. Socio-economic position was assessed on the basis of qualitative information on family background (e.g. their parents' or carers' professions), references, interviewers notes on initial contact calls (e.g. on household amenities, whether they are orphan) and girls' descriptions of their everyday lives before the pandemic. A key advantage of this qualitative approach, compared to using a standardized single indicator or classification is the ability to build a detailed image of girls' socio-economic position and their positionality to access household resources.

The use of telephone interviews required adjustments in comparison to in person interviews. Multiple calls per participant were necessary to obtain consent (if under-age first from caregivers, then from the girls) and to establish trust in the absence of face-to-face interaction. We relied

on experienced interviewers, who were flexible to accommodate the girls' availability and established relationships with them over several calls. Interviews were adapted so that they could take place over several shorter sessions to maintain focus. Interviews were sometimes interrupted as family members entered the room or requested help. In those cases, the interviewers relied on their experience to assess whether the interview should be stopped and/or rearranged to maintain an open (and confidential) dialog. Some sensitive topics such as sexual health could not be addressed. Despite these limitations, overall the telephone interviews resulted in rich detailed data where the girls shared meaningful and intimate events and thoughts.

Girls were asked about their experiences in education, health, safe and unsafe spaces in their communities and their hopes for the future, as well as the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and those of other girls close to them (Grieve et al., 2020). The interviewers used open questions focusing on girls' own perceptions and experiences, seeking to enhance rather than obscure girls' voices. With this aim in mind, the analysis proceeded in three stages: an initial analysis conducted as the interviews progressed, which allowed researchers to check for understanding in a confirmation call, followed by in-depth analysis by the lead author and a revision by the rest of the team.

The questions were drafted in English and then translated and adapted to suit the geographical context and age of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Krio in Sierra Leone, and in Mooré, French and Dioula-Bwaba in Burkina Faso, and where necessary translated to English or French by experienced researchers for analysis. All interviewers (3 in Sierra Leone and 2 in Burkina Faso) were experienced in conducting research with adolescents. We operated under a double strategy of consent and assent. Informed consent was obtained from parents/caregivers, as well as adolescents aged 18+, assent was obtained from interviewees under the age of consent. Researchers explained the purpose of the study, methods and right to withdraw or not to answer questions in using age and culturally appropriate language. Ethical approval was obtained at a UK University and from the Sierra Leone ethics and scientific review committee.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Findings

The interviews illustrate how girls experience of the pandemic is shaped by their gender, background and context. In the data, we distinguish three groups according to the severity of the economic impact of the pandemic and contention measures on their lives labelled as: sheltered, shifting and struggling. Additionally, we identify a fourth group, present only in Burkina Faso whose experiences of the pandemic are mediated by exposure to conflict. For this last group, COVID-19 did not bring notable changes to their everyday lives. Below we describe the characteristics and experiences of each group in more detail. While the focus is on girls' experiences of the pandemic, we describe the situation of their families and the households where they live, as these shape girls access to economic resources.

### 5.1. Sheltered

The first group is formed by girls who have been largely sheltered from the economic impact of the pandemic. Some girls come from relatively well-off backgrounds, their families work on import and export, larger scale trade (own business) or the professions, and some receive international remittances. Some girls live in families that could be categorised as managing, whose incomes depend on salaries but who generally manage to cover everyday expenses. The girls are aware of the pandemic, but at the time of research it had not affected their

<sup>3</sup> As part of the ethical procedure under pandemic conditions, the PI took part on a workshop on researching under social distancing circumstances and subsequently provided training to the team on safety procedures.

households economically, or not enough to require adjustments in their everyday lives. A young girl summarises it as follows: 'Well nothing has changed at all. We are living happily and even my friend, we are playing together' (SL5, 16, student, stable income).<sup>4</sup>

Some girls, even identify positive outcomes of the pandemic. When asked about how the pandemic had affected her family a girl stated "it was the best thing that could happen to us two, I'm talking about my sister and me. It brought us closer to our parents" (BF8, 18, student, well-off family). From the relatively sheltered position offered by her parents' professional employment (a doctor and a social worker), BF8, experienced the pandemic as an opportunity to get closer together with her family. Spending longer periods at home has meant increased time together, and an opportunity to take a break, learn and perhaps develop relationships.

Not all girls were as optimistic or spoke in such positive terms. In fact, in line with research that has highlighted the negative mental health impact of the pandemic (Bakrania et al., 2020; Ares et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2021) most girls across social backgrounds, shared feelings of isolation, loneliness and unhappiness about the mobility limitations. Students often discussed concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their schooling be it in terms of falling behind on their learning, or being unable to complete their exams and/or grade progression. Many also report fear of the illness and how it could affect their and their families' health. The lives of girls in the sheltered group were still affected by the pandemic and contention measures, however, unlike the other groups they did not have to significantly adjust to cope with its economic ramifications, which potentially offers a degree of protection against long term effects on their education and transitional trajectories. We return to these issues in the discussion.

### 5.2. Shifting

The second group which we have labelled as 'shifting' live in households who experienced loss in income and/or livelihood as a result of the pandemic and contention measures. Their families are small traders, small-scale farmers or owners of small family businesses. In some cases, they live in extended households with multiple earners and an enhanced ability to share and shift resources. The girls describe a range of strategies to mitigate income and livelihood losses such as cutting household expenses, using stored resources and increasing labour intensity. Unlike in the third group, at the time of the interview, the girls did not struggle to cover basic needs, but they did miss on desired items, such as new books or a second pair of shoes. 'I do not have a shoe to go out with. But anything with regards education they will give it to me' (SL16, 16, orphan cared by sister). While SL16 is confident about covering her education needs, other respondents were concerned about being able to pay school fees once schools reopen, and the impact that may have on their education. Some households were able to cope with reduced income by using savings or stored resources, as illustrated by this quote from BF12 a 16 year old living with her extended family (parents, siblings and partners), in a rural area:

*'My sister she sells condiments, she can no longer sell condiments, and my mother, she could not go to the market to buy. I. And when markets were closed, did you manage to eat well? BF12 Yes. (...) We had old condiments, that is how we managed' (BF12, 16, small-scale farmers)*

Households pooled their resources and used stored items to cope with those periods when the restrictions were most severe. At the time of interview, while markets were closed in Burkina Faso, the interviews suggest that small trade had resumed, at least in rural areas. In Sierra Leone, the markets were open at the time, which would have reduced

<sup>4</sup> To contextualise the quotes the following information is provided: pseudonym formed by country code SL Sierra Leone or BF Burkina Faso and a number, participant's age, position and family or household characteristics.

the economic impact of the restrictions on girls whose households sustain themselves through the sale of agricultural produce. Border closures in both countries created challenges for those who rely on trading with neighbouring countries.

Besides savings and stocked items, households also sought to reinforce or diversify their sources of income by mobilising their human resources. Some girls started to work in the family business or increased their time commitment following school closures. For example, BF6 had started selling beer with her mother, an activity she usually did only during the holidays. Girls work in the family business can free adults to do other tasks, reduce costs (e.g. from employees) as well as keep girls' occupied and safe. Other girls who were already working increased their hours. SL14 lives with the step-mother in a small village. Before the pandemic she studied Senior Secondary in the district headquarter town and earned some money on the side by selling salt and nuts. During the pandemic as schools were closed and business was not good she spent most of the day trading with friends, while at night they studied. 'We go trading and at night we take our books and study so we will not forget our lessons' (SL14, 18, works as street trader). Her story is one of adaptation and commitment to education.

The examples discussed here, and others in the data, illustrate the central role girls play in their families' adaptation and survival strategies through increased work and/or decreased spending. They also point at some of the ways in which the pandemic is likely to shape girls' trajectories. For some, these adaptations may be a temporary solution to exceptional circumstances. If and when families recover their income they will be able to resume their previous plans. For others, the pandemic may mark a break in or the end of their educational careers if the financial struggles persist and their families are unable to pay for school fees or employee salaries.

Even when families can afford education, the work experience at a critical time in their transitions may lead to changing priorities for them and/or their families. BF6, explicitly mentions how the experience working at her family business made her reconsider her pathway: 'It disrupted my lessons, so I was decided to continue with my education, now it discouraged me eh, it slows down school' (BF6, 17, small business). While most girls we interviewed strongly valued education, the increased cost of schooling, in terms of both money and time, can disturb girls' trajectories and ultimately their educational attainment.

### 5.3. Struggling

The third category is formed by girls who have had their livelihoods severely affected by the pandemic. They and their families worked chiefly as small farmers and in petty or border trade. Some of the girls were cared by their next of kin following parental death or family difficulties. One of the Sierra Leonean girls was expelled from the parental house after becoming pregnant. Their interviews reveal extreme poverty, inability to cover basic needs and hunger, as the households did not have sufficient resources to cope with an economic shock. In the quote that gives title to the paper 'Since the market is closed, there is no more money, there is nothing we can do' (BF17, 17, small-scale farmers) describes a feeling of powerlessness at market closures, which she directly connects with lack of food for her family and others.

BF20 also explicitly linked her economic hardship with COVID-19 and mobility restrictions. She is the elder child in a migrant family. Her and her younger siblings, lived with their step mom. Their dad lived in their country of origin, where he worked in a plantation. Since the borders closure he had not been able to visit. While at the beginning of the interview BF20 stated she was satisfied with her life and her needs were met, later on she discussed the effect of the pandemic in her area and in her own household as follows:

*Before it was ok but because there has been lockdown (...) Because of the illness people are not working (...) We manage, we prepare the rice, we put the rice in the pot, we boil, we put the salt, we go to the shop, pay for*

*oil, we mix them, give them and they [siblings] may eat. Me, I do not eat. (BF20, 16, cared by kin)*

The reduction in family resources, has led to the prioritization of the needs of younger siblings, while her as an older sister, often went without food herself. These positions of responsibility as caregivers bear an impact on adolescent girls wellbeing.

Border areas were severely affected by the economic effects of restrictions. SL7 lived with her mom in a small village near the border with Guinea. When asked about the impact of the pandemic she simply replied 'Even to survive is difficult' (SL7, 16, lives with single-mom). Her mother made a living trading goods across the border. Since borders closed in Sierra Leone, they struggled to meet basic needs. She highlighted that her situation is shared by many in her area whose livelihoods depend on border trade.

While in some cases the source economic hardship is directly traced to the pandemic and contention measures, in many others these merely intensified existing hardship. This is evidenced in discussions around transactional sex. While none of the girls reported being involved in transactional sex themselves, when asked about the situation of girls in their community interviewees in both countries shared accounts of friends and/or neighbors resorting to sex work or exchanging sex for goods. Those involved in transactional sex were sometimes described as amoral, materialistic or disobedient. However, many shared an ambivalent sentiment towards them as illustrated in the following statement 'sometimes (...) they don't listen to the parents and then sometimes it's also when you don't have enough to eat, you would like that a boy gives you food' (BF7, 15, lives with aunt). Thus transactional sex was acknowledged as a survival strategy for girls who are experiencing severe hardship, live in the streets, and/or have no family. The respondents felt that the pandemic had made girls involved in transactional sex more vulnerable to exploitation.

*Boys are fooling them with small amount of money and they give themselves to them and later become pregnant. That's what is happening presently in my community and they are seriously suffering, even though we are all suffering together due to the COVID-19 (SL12, 16, mother is small rural trader)*

Her words illustrate how the pandemic exacerbated the vulnerability of those at the bottom. This is in line with what was observed in previous epidemics such as Ebola where the increase in transactional sex is seen as one of the main contributors to the rise in early pregnancies in Sierra Leone (Onyango et al., 2019). The frequency with which girls spontaneously reported girls in their area exchanging sex for favours suggests that the practice (and its consequences) is both common and well known to adolescent girls. In this context, enhanced sexual education and girls only spaces have been proposed as measures to reduce the risk of unwanted and/or early pregnancies (Bandiera et al., 2020). Economic support is also needed for those experiencing extreme economic hardship, such as orphans and girls living in the street, whose options have been further limited by the pandemic.

### 5.4. The toll of violence and conflict

The last group is constituted by girls who live in or have escaped conflict areas in Burkina Faso. Only three girls among our interviewees fall into this category but their experiences are distinct. Two of the girls lived in a conflict area. The third became an internal refugee after terrorists killed her father and took their land forcing them to live in poverty and leave school. These girls did not feel the pandemic affected their lives. In fact, they were already experiencing some of the key issues associated with COVID-19 before the start of the pandemic. Violence translated into decreased economic and mental well-being, with the three girls describing feelings of loss, fear and frustration. Experiences of violence were markedly gendered. Asked whether they think the pandemic or terrorism has had more of an impact on her family BF11

responded as follows:

*(T)errorism. Because they come to threaten people randomly (...) when they come in, and they see that there are boys, they kill them and then they leave. They only leave the women (BF11, 17, student, unemployed parents).*

Terrorism and violence are overwhelming experiences and key conducting lines for these girls' life trajectories. All three were out of school. Among the two girls who stayed in their villages, in one case schools had been closed for a while, another one of the girls was married at 15 and her husband opposed her continuing education. She states that forced marriage had become common with girls made to leave school at 15 or 16. Their interviews constitute a reminder that COVID-19 is one of multiple pressing issues, and that challenges persist that have comparable if not stronger impact on economic and gender inequality.

There is also an economic component to their experiences as illustrated by BF10:

*Those who have money have sent their children away, those who do not, their children have stayed. (...) I am scared, but I have nowhere to go, what can I do? (BF10, 17, married).*

The girls are well aware of the role that economic resources can play in protecting families and children from the effect of negative events. Similar reflections appeared in other interviews, often in relation to inequalities in access to health. Poverty and wealth intersect with other forms of inequality delimiting the possibilities available to girls.

### 5.5. Unequal effects

All in all, the economic impact and more widely the experiences of the pandemic are mediated by gender and age as well as by girls socio-economic and geographic position. For those with more resources and/or reliable income from employment the economic ramifications of the pandemic have had little impact in their standard of living. Many who attended private institutions were able to resume classes early (through online delivery), decreasing the effect of the pandemic on their schooling. That does not mean that they were unaffected, as many girls across the socio-economic spectrum report feelings of isolation and fear about the future.

Adolescent girls are key components to their households coping strategies, including through the provision of additional work, caregiving and in some cases the reduction in own consumption. Through a range of strategies, the shifting group, the largest in our sample, managed to avoid the worse consequences of the pandemic. However, households' ability to cope erodes over time, as they use their savings and resources, and their networks become strained due to income losses and in some cases sickness. Indeed, many of the girls spoke of family members and friends who had lost their sources of income following COVID-19 restrictions. Some girls had lost family members or close relatives to the pandemic. Some of those who had to seek care for themselves or family members will have accumulated debt or experienced severe reduction in household assets where they had to sell to finance hospital expenses. Thus, as the pandemic and the associated restrictions extend over time, households coping strategies may be increasingly limited. Furthermore, the interviews also showed how some of the support networks available during non-pandemic times became out of reach. Some girls discussed not being able to share food with their neighbours or their school mates for fear of being accused of infecting them. These issues highlight some of the mechanisms through which the pandemic directly and indirectly increased vulnerability in the midterm.

The data also showcases some of the pathways through which the pandemic and contention measures are likely to accelerate girls' transitions and exit from education. Such effects were stronger for the poorest girls (for instance, those unable to keep up with school work due to increased work and caring responsibilities or girls involved in

transactional sex), but also felt across social backgrounds. The delays in achieving qualifications and uncertainty as to results could also have a discouraging effect as seen in the quote by BF6 above, who now is keen to remain in work. A well-off Burkina Faso respondent reported how her friend had recently been forced to drop out from university in order to marry. While this girl from Sierra Leone whose parents are professionals, reports on the gendered effect of the pandemic on schooling as follows:

*'Corona has made us become dropout, it has brought our education to a standstill and pregnancy is a major cause for school drop out (...), the boy that will impregnate us will continue to go school while we will sit at home'* (SL17, 17, parents work in the formal economy, sheltered)

The analysis of the four groups allows to identify some factors associated with increased capacity for coping and adaptation. Households who had economic resources in the form of savings or who at the time had stock (e.g. if they had recently harvested) were able to cope with the first months of the pandemic better than those who did not. Similarly, girls living in households with a diversified income base, with multiple earners and sources of income and those with members working in the formal economy (particularly in urban areas) were more likely to be in the sheltered or shifting groups. In contrast, households who depended on a single source of income, such as small-scale farming, and households depending on border trade fared poorly as their activity was severely reduced or even stopped by the restrictions. Households pre-existing resources play a key role in mediating the economic impact of the pandemic and associated restrictions, suggesting that COVID-19 accentuated existing inequalities.

## 6. Discussion

The data has shown the value from creating a space where adolescent girls can safely share their experiences and concerns on issues that matter to them. Their perspectives and lived experiences do add a nuanced understanding of the impact of the pandemic on their lives, their families and their communities. Complementing previous research that has highlighted the gendered effects of pandemics (Bakrania et al., 2020; Peterman et al., 2020) girls narratives illustrate the specific changes to their lives brought by school and border closures, loss of family members, loss of livelihood, violence, fear and more. While these effects are likely to be felt by many if not most girls, the analysis uncovered substantial variations in girls' experiences in terms of the economic impact of the pandemic both between and within countries. Girls in Burkina Faso, where the restrictions involved market closures, as well as those living in areas where border trade is a substantial part of the economy were more directly affected and less able to shift resources to ease hardship. The experiences of girls living in or having escaped conflict areas were so distinct that required a separate analytical category. The comparative lens illuminates the ways in which girls' experiences are shaped by locality and geography. In giving a hearing to their voices the analysis also uncovered some of the mechanisms and processes that exacerbated inequality. At this respect, existing resources emerge as key dividing lines. Thus, the pandemic both exacerbates and is amplified by precariousness and economic vulnerability.

Experiences of poverty are gendered (Brown, Ravallion and van de Walle, 2018) and so is the poverty impact of the pandemic. A common theme in the data is the prevailing uncertainty and considerable resilience adolescent girls display in face of it. Indeed, disruptive events like COVID-19 are not new for many of the participants, who lived through conflict and the Ebola pandemic in the case of Sierra Leone. In this situation, the girls often found themselves in positions of care, which are more often taken by women (Oxfam International, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020). Girls in all groups display a range of behaviours, from increasing work, to smoothing consumption and providing (additional) care, that situate them as key elements in their households' adaptation and survival strategies. Such centrality has both short and long term implications. In the short term, girls in the most economically vulnerable

households experience severe hardship, that perhaps is more accused than that of other household members. In the long term, some of the strategies that help ensure survival today – entering or increasing work, selling sex, taking up household duties, marrying – may act as factors that hinder their return to education. Indeed, school closures have increased girls' participation in housework, care and to supplement women in their economic activities (e.g. petty trade). This increased time commitment has potentially limited their ability to keep up with education, accelerating their exit from the school system.

The girls rarely referred to the economic context in which they lived, although these issues were often discussed when they were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their families as well as in their community. When asked about the effect of the pandemic on their lives, the girls tended to highlight its impact on their everyday such as their schooling, the people with whom they spend their time (e.g. isolation or the opposite, increased time shared with family members) and their family and household. This was particularly salient in Burkina Faso where the restrictions were more severe. The separation between the self and the family, where the income sphere belongs, was particularly salient in the Sierra Leone sample. This division between the personal and the family and income spheres highlights some of the difficulties to identify macro-processes from personal interviews. Individual narratives often focus on personal events (e.g. job losses, deaths, marriages), that mark individual lives rather than large scale events (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Furthermore, the role of macro-factors such as unemployment rates or economic growth in one's life is often hard to assess in both qualitative and quantitative studies, not least because households' economies are shaped by a multiplicity of interacting factors (Egger et al., 2021). Thus, while we have made an effort to identify the impact of COVID-19 in girls economic wellbeing, the pandemic is one of many issues, such as seasonal change, droughts, violence or instability, shaping girls lives. For girls living in conflict areas the pandemic emerged almost as a non-issue in comparison to the difficulties in their everyday.

That said, the COVID-19 pandemic is to date unique in its scale and likely consequences. While COVID-19 is seen by the girls as one of many shocks and events shaping their lives, the global scale of the pandemic and the length and scale of contention measures mean that the negative economic effects of COVID-19 are likely to be substantial and sustained. Indeed, quantitative evidence indicates that the pandemic and contention measures resulted in many households in Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone experiencing failing living standards (Egger et al., 2021). Responses are needed to match the scale of the challenge.

Doing research under pandemic conditions required adjusting research methods. Using phone interviews allowed the team to conduct research while complying with movement restrictions and maintaining the safety of both the team and participants. It also adds new difficulties. Interviewers cannot directly observe where the girl is or whether she can be heard by others. The team made every effort so that the girls could speak freely including pre-arranging interviews at suitable times, conducting several shorter conversations and re-arranging when necessary. However, it is our assessment that telephone interviews are not a replacement for confidential face-to-face conversations in a safe environment.

Despite the challenging conditions the local researchers were able to generate detailed data where they built trust with the participating girls. In line with Payne's (2012) observations on orphaned children, girls appear to downplay economic struggles. Some girls had limited or no experience of economic hardship thanks to their household economic stance, others did openly reported struggling financially, including extreme hardship. However, several adolescents describe their situation as comfortable, having all their needs met, in the initial stages of the interview, only to report deprivation, including lacking essentials such as food, or indebtedness from seeking healthcare services, later on. Several factors can explain these narratives including reliance on local reference groups living in similar economic conditions when assessing

their financial situation, normalisation due to previous experiences of hardship, shame or reluctance to complain (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). This finding calls for care in interpreting data so as not to underestimate the impact of COVID-19 on girls.

## 7. Conclusions

Through a systematic analysis of girls' position and reported experiences, this paper has sought to highlight the impact of the pandemic on girls in Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso, as well as the potential implications of such effects for wider inequalities. Rather than proposing a clear cut and mutually exclusive classification of experiences of the pandemic across social groups, the analytical strategy was helpful to illustrate how the impact of the pandemic is mediated by adolescent girls socio-economic and geographical position, as well as by their status within the household (e.g. as orphans or older sisters). It is worth noting that while the focus of this article is on the economic impact of the pandemic, other impacts are equally important. Girls commonly report isolation, and feelings of fear and uncertainty and concerns about the future.

The findings illustrate some of the indirect and cumulative processes by which shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic foster inequality. The largest group in our sample, although still a minority, was that of girls who live in families who were able to shift resources and adjust to cope with the economic effect of the pandemic. Our interviews show some of the resilience demonstrated by girls and their households, as they use their economic and human resources to cope with economic difficulties. While this capacity for adaptation is positive, it is not a necessarily long term solution. Households cannot cope and adapt indefinitely, as networks and resources are both finite.

In the mid-term, the pandemic is likely to increase economic inequality. The most vulnerable are those whose resources were insufficient to avoid economic hardship even in the short term. Income losses and restrictions affected the poorest hardest. During the pandemic they experienced increased hardship, including food shortages. The economic impact of COVID-19 is likely to extend in time, as households resources decline and support networks become increasingly stretched. Income support should also be provided in the post-pandemic period for the most vulnerable, including those working in the informal sector and small farmers.

We join the recommendation of others in saying that pandemic responses must be gender sensitive (Bandiera et al., 2019; Oxfam International, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020; Darkwah, Thorsen and Wayack Pambè, 2022). To achieve so, policies should address women's immediate needs in terms of shelter, food, health as well as protection from violence (Darkwah, Thorsen and Wayack Pambè, 2022). Furthermore, previous pandemics such as the Ebola crisis have shown that school closures can translate into substantial decreases in girls schooling (Bandiera et al., 2020). Our data illustrates some of the processes by which this may happen. The pandemic is likely to deviate transitional trajectories accelerating end of schooling and/or marriage, increasing gender inequality. Despite their aspirations to get an education, many adolescent girls in Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso will not return to school because they are now working, married or pregnant, because income losses mean that they can no longer afford fees or need to care for others. Girls are a cornerstone of their families' strategies to manage economic hardship through economizing behaviors, work and in some cases marriage. School closures have increased girls' participation in housework, care and to supplement women in their economic activities (e.g. petty trade). This increased time commitment has potentially limited their ability to keep up with education, accelerating their exit from the school system. If we are to keep progress towards SDG4 young wives and mothers, pregnant girls, as well as those who have been working (both at home and outside) to support their families through the pandemic should be supported to return to school. One way of doing so is implementing financial incentives for girls to return to education.

This can be done through a range of instruments (e.g. cash transfers, paid apprenticeships, work experience) that allow the girls to continue their education while making a living and/or learning a trade. While such measures are not perfect, they are an important input as they address one of the key barriers for girls. The economic aspect is key as poverty intersects with gender inequality, and the poorest are often the most exposed to early marriage and school dropout (UNFPA, 2020).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic is not an isolated event. In the last decade the world has seen previously unknown diseases such as Ebola or Zika become international pandemics, with others likely to ensue. While this article focuses on the economic impact of the pandemic and its intersections with pre-existing risk factors (such as conflict in Burkina Faso and the Ebola in Sierra Leone), other aspects are equally important. Girls commonly report isolation, and feelings of fear and uncertainty and concerns about the future, which suggests the need for holistic interventions that go beyond the purely economic to address mental health and other negative effects.

The lessons learned on the impact of epidemics on girls extend beyond COVID-19 and should play a role in informing the design of future responses that are gender and age sensitive.

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### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Alba Lanau:** Methodology, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft. **Tigist Grieve:** Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. **Angus Fayia Tengbeh:** Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Luisa Enria:** Investigation, Resources. **Madeleine Wayack-Pambé:** Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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