



Learners' Voices on Socio-Ecological Risks Faced During the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown in Kenya

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown imposed unprecedented challenges to societies worldwide, disrupting daily routines, economies, and social interactions. Governments implemented various containment measures, including lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus. While these measures were essential for public health, they also led to socio-ecological risks that profoundly impacted individuals, particularly learners; altering their educational experiences and well-being. Thus, this study's main purpose was to explore socio-ecological risks faced by learners during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The study was guided by Freire's empowerment education theory which specializes in encouraging individuals to become vocal about their needs and those of the community. This study took a qualitative approach, a phenomenological critical paradigm, and a participatory visual approach. Data was generated using drawings, memory accounts, unstructured individual interviews and a focus group discussion. The study involved working with 26 participants including 3 Parents Association (PA) members, 3 teachers and 20 learners (aged 15-24 years) enrolled in Form 1 and 2 in secondary schools in Kenya. The data was triangulated and thematically analysed. The findings revealed that learners were affected by sexual, family and criminal related risks during the pandemic lockdown. In conclusion, learners faced risks in their socio-ecological setting during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown whereby these risks had devastating effects on their lives, their families, schools, and the communities at large. It was recommended that stakeholders should prioritize equitable access to technology and resources and enhance support for mental health and well-being. There is a need to strengthen social support networks, build resilience and adaptation strategies, and foster interdisciplinary research collaborations to address the multifaceted challenges faced by learners in times of crises thereby creating more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable educational ecosystems.

Keywords: Learner Voices, Socio-Ecological Risks, COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted many scopes of our lives. The interruption

highlights issues that arise as a result of a pandemic. Consequently, schools closed, and millions of learners transitioned to remote learning modalities, basically changing the dynamics of education. However, beyond the immediate challenges posed to academic continuity, a deeper exploration revealed the complex socio-ecological risks faced by learners during the pandemic lockdown period. As countries enforced rigorous lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus, communities dealt with multifaceted challenges ranging from health, economy, environment, and society. Within this complex period of uncertainties, learners emerged as key victims, encountering unique perceptions of risks designed by their social, economic, and environmental settings. Understanding learners' voices on socio-ecological risks faced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is crucial for developing effective strategies to alleviate adverse effects and foster resilience. There is a need to be conscious of these risks and to make reasonable supportive guidelines. This exploration probes into the complex relationship between learners and their settings, shedding light on the nuanced dynamics that influence risk perception and response. As such, future occurrences are averted while learners are assisted if the risk pathways are already recognized.

Research Objective

The objective of this study was to investigate how socio-ecological risks affected learners during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Kenya.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of seeking to enact learner voice practices. By elevating learner experiences in culturally responsive and sustaining ways, it creates space for learners to think deeply about their communities and bring various locally based, social issues to light. The learners experienced several socio-ecological risks during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown that had dire consequences. The breakout of the pandemic did not only lead to unexpected closure of all learning institutions disrupting the learning process but has also triggered a lot of uncertainty on when learning would resume. This implies that learners, guardians and parents were caught unaware. This was an economic, social and a psychological unpreparedness. While the efforts by different governments were admirable in controlling the spread of the virus, the risks connected with confinements and lockdowns were not fully considered (Memiah et al, 2020; Flowe et al., 2020). In matters of education, the Kenyan government developed an online approach to aid the continuance of learning remotely. However, the lockdown and lengthy institutional closures had long-term difficulties, particularly for the marginalized and most vulnerable young people who already experienced barriers accessing the online education (Ngwacho, 2020; MoE, 2020).

Muzungu (2020) says that the closure of schools and places of worship, which act as safe havens for many young people meant limited access to reach trusted adult figures who often can detect early signs of abuse. It was proven that protracted closures of schools heightened with restricted movements with serious challenges around space among households intensified cases of exposure to pornographic materials, drug and substance abuse, increased rape, Gender Based Violence (GBV) among other risks (Massiot et al., 2022; Olingo, 2020; MOE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020b). During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, pornography consumption was perceived as a helpful coping behaviour to overcome pandemic-brought dullness and fear of the unknown (Grubbs, 2020; Lehmilller et al., 2020). MOE (2020) and UNESCO (2020b) also posit that school closures intensified with constrained movements, exacerbated cases of exposure to pornographic materials among the young people. Domestic violence heightens during times of crises, including epidemics (Sety et al., 2014) and can lead to other severe cases associated with violence.

Kenya has a long history of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which is exacerbated during times of nationwide crisis (Chagema, 2023). While the actions taken to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 undoubtedly curbed the spread of the disease, they appeared to be compromising the comfort and well-being of individuals. During the lockdown period, there was a significant increase of reports of the upsurge in domestic and sexual violence (Chagema, 2023; Rockowitz et al., 2021; Flowe et al., 2020; Mutiso et al., 2020; Memiah et al., 2020). The absence of teenage girls from school, tied with the absence of auxiliary safe spaces or shelters, was associated with increased vulnerability to sexual violence from family members and others such as guardians, neighbours, and other community members. Young people were more likely to be attacked than adults during the day (Barchielli et al., 2021).

The prevalence of teenage pregnancy and early marriage among adolescent girls in Kenya continues to pose problems for the girls, limiting their ability to complete school and maximize their potential (MoH, 2020; WHO, 2017). Almost one out of every five girls aged 15-19 years old is reported to be either pregnant or has had a child already. Additionally, an estimated that approximately 14 percent of all births in Kenya befall teens aged between 15–19 years (MoH, 2020), with the majority being unplanned. Research indicates that the pandemic and financial constraints were contributory factors why adolescents opted for early marriages. Notably, adolescent pregnancy undermines achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, hence, it is imperative for the country to embrace a human centred approach to better address this issue since it derails a country's economic pathway (MoH, 2020). It is however distressing that the Ministry of Health revealed that between January and February 2022, they handled 45,724 cases of pregnant teenagers aged between 10 and 19 years (Standard Newspaper, April 8th, 2022).

The implementation of FGM law and its execution remain a challenge as stated in the National Policy for the Eradication of FGM, 2019 (Mutual et al., 2021; Mohamud et

al., 2021). The emergence of COVID-19 greatly impacted on the progress made both globally and nationally in eliminating FGM (Musa et al., 2021). In Kenya, it is projected that four million women and girls have undergone FGM. Of this, 11% are young girls aged between 14-19 (UNFPA, 2020; MoE, 2020). Pandemic lockdowns executed by the pandemic covertly drove to FGM practices making young girls more vulnerable (Riley et al., 2021). Most of the teenage girls were locked out of the support systems that were critical in addressing their issues. In addition, the local community took advantage of the lack of surveillance and law enforcement during lockdowns (UNFPA, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Economic hardship also contributed to the rise of FGM in Kenya. According to a report by the World Bank, the unemployment rate in Kenya experienced a twofold increase, reaching 10.4% in 2020 with an average decline in income by 3.3% during the same period. This report indicated that women and youth were hardest hit, making some of the people who had previously abandoned the FGM as a financial venture to revive the practice to supplement their income (Esho et al., 2022; World Bank, 2020). The loss of livelihood also pushed families to marry off their teenage girls in exchange of money and other domestic supplies.

Pornography addiction may prompt young people to undesirable behavioural and emotional patterns and subsequently affect their psychosocial well-being. Pornography watching in Kenya is becoming extensive due to its accessibility and affordability. The young people's exposure to pornography increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as their access to the internet increased due to the provision of computers and smartphones purposed for online learning (Daily Nation, 22 January 2021). This is because most young people did not have the knowledge or skills to keep themselves safe online and to distinguish and respond to apprehensions.

In recent years, Kenya has experienced a significant prevention success story of HIV and AIDS in the region as evidenced by a substantial decline in new infections (UNAIDS, 2020; NACC, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought along setbacks in the success stories in Kenya. In 2020, roughly 5,000 young girls and young women aged between 15 to 24 years were facing new HIV infections on a weekly basis, with teenage girls living with HIV outnumbering teenage boys. The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the economic and social disparities that drive such trends (Standard Newspaper, 8th April 2022). Given the objective of the Kenya Aids Strategic Framework II to achieve a 75% reduction in HIV infections by 2025, there is a need to explore and develop interventions that would effectively contribute to realizing this goal. Additionally, these endeavors must place the young people must be at the center (NACC, 2020).

Family related issues ranging from parenting styles to family conflicts were experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. These issues had detrimental effects on the young people as they were exposed to a diverse range of risks in the socio-ecological environment. Children from such families often become susceptible to peer

manipulation due to family problems; their sense of self-worth is more likely to be negatively impacted upon and their academic performance in school is affected (Vasiou et al., 2023). In dysfunctional families, parents and guardians may be reckless alcoholics, young people from such homes tend to mask their emotional scars by resorting to substance abuse themselves. They affiliate with peers who are anti-social and violent and are prone to risky behaviours.

The given literature sheds light on the socio-ecological risks that arose because of domestic related issues as experienced by young people during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach located within a critical paradigm and a phenomenological research design. Purposive and convenient sampling was used to select participants in the study. Three teachers handling Life Skills programmes as well as three PA representatives in the same schools were selected. Also, participants consisted of learners in Form 1 and 2 as these classes consist of learners from the ages of 15-24 years. Again, the Life Skills curriculum is taught in their classes. Three schools were selected (Private and Public schools, two of single sex and one mixed sex) purposively. Five learners were included per school, and consideration of equal gender representation in the mixed sex school was made to avoid research bias. So, in total, data was generated from twenty-six participants. Drawings, memory accounts, unstructured individual interviews and a focus group discussion were used to generate the data on socio-ecological risks faced by learners during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Kenya.

According to Haug (2015) memory accounts provide a deeper understanding of life experiences through a narration of lived stories of the participants; well written narrative gives the reader a sense of what the speaker is feeling while building trust, setting aside enough time and letting things unfold naturally. Memory accounts were written by participant learners in the three selected schools in this study. The participants took about 30 minutes to expressively and openly put to writing their feelings. For the success of data generation exercise, the researcher made every effort to establish a rapport with the participants. The written accounts gave rich data that was useful in understanding the varied risks the participants faced/experienced during the pandemic lockdown.

Drawings are part of the visual participatory methodology used in social research. Data collected in form of drawings are captioned to provide meaning to the drawing made (Mitchell et al., 2011; Motalingoane-Khau, 2010). This method was selected to shed light on issues of learners' experience that are difficult to articulate. By using drawings (Mitchell, 2017), young people can also structure and facilitate their reflection on painful and often silenced subjects in a safer way. Drawings were used with learners to generate data on

socio-ecological risks that affected learners during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in selected secondary schools in Kenya. Eleven drawings with elaborate captions were analysed in this study.

In this study, unstructured Individual interviews were used with the teachers and PA representatives. Interviews involve an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest (Yin, 2015). The interviewer must have effective communication skills to manage an interview (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). These skills include clearly structuring the interview questions, listening attentively, pausing, and probing where necessary and encouraging the interviewee to be free to respond (Yin, 2015; Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). The interviews were done individually on a one-to-one basis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) with the 6 participants in this study: 3 PA members and 3 teachers. Each interview lasted between twenty (20) to thirty (30) minutes. The venues for the interviews were agreed upon by the researcher and the participants. The researcher sought permission from the participants to record the interview, each interview was recorded using an audio recorder (Denzin, 2017).

A focus group discussion was used with learners in this study. Focus group discussions are useful in eliciting information from participants by enabling them to express their feelings and their thoughts about an issue in a comfortable space (Creswell, 2014). The focus group discussions were useful in eliciting information from learners' written explanations on their drawings, memory accounts, and cellphilms (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Through reflective discussion, meaning regarding the visual depictions and accounts were developed within the group and discussions audiotaped. The recordings were later transcribed and analysed. The various data sets were then analysed thematically. The researcher then took time to write the units of meaning as derived from the data. The units of meaning formed the basis to carefully generate the categories. Finally, the categories were used to create and name the themes that are presented and discussed as findings of the study (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results and Discussion

The participants expressed their experiences which have been summarized in three themes, which include participants experiences on sexual related risks (theme 1), the experiences on family related risks (theme 2) and the experiences on criminal related risks (theme 3) (See Table 1)

Table 1: Summary of the findings

Theme		Categories	
1. Sexual related risks	i.	Contracting STIs and HIV and AIDS	
	ii.	Teenage pregnancies and abortions	
	iii.	Addiction to pornographic videos	
2. Family related risks	i.	Domestic violence	
	ii.	Alcoholism and drug abuse	
3. Criminal related risks	i.	FGM, forced early marriages and sexual and gender-based violence	
	ii.	Suicide	

Theme 1: Sexual Related Risks

These refers to the sexual acts and behaviors that affected learners during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and led to unintended results. It emerged from participants views that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown came along with sexual related risk issues that affected the young people. The young were affected in several ways as they faced risks including: (i) contracting STIs, HIV and AIDS, (ii) teenage pregnancies and abortion, and (iii) addiction to pornographic videos (see Table 2).

Table 2: Theme 1 and its categories

Theme 1		Categories	
Sexual related risks	i.	Contracting STIs and HIV and AIDS	
	ii.	Teenage pregnancies and abortions	
	iii.	Addiction to pornographic videos	

Contracting STIs, HIV and AIDS

Whenever young people engage in sexual activities, they inevitably encounter potential risks associated with sexual indulgence. HIV and AIDS, as well as STIS are contracted/transmitted through sexual intercourse. Research has it that Kenya has the joint third-largest HIV epidemic in the world (alongside Tanzania) with 1.6 million people living with HIV in 2019 (UNAIDS, 2020). This means that the young, middle aged and the old people in Kenya risk contracting HIV and AIDS and related STIs when they indulge in unprotected sexual intercourse. According to UNAIDS (2017), Kenya has had success stories in the recent past in the fight to zero rate HIV and AIDS. However, the COVID-19 pandemic came with setbacks over the same. The participants views seem to blend with

these facts as evidenced from the following responses: Ben in his drawing captions that:

During the COVID-19 holiday because of my environment which was always party, I once engage in sex with an infected woman suffering from HIV and AIDS. But luck is on my side because I am still alive ...I know I am HIV positive; I spend a lot of money for my medicine.*

Wiseman's caption of his drawing of money in coin and note forms wrote that he felt that he was very important as he was admired by many women and fell victim:

I use coin and notes to mean that during the holiday, I was something important. I was admired by many ladies and girls making me engage in sexual relationship making fell sick due to STI and HIV and AIDS.

Of a similar experience is Justin, whereby she explains her experience of her drawing saying:

Men were looking at me with lustful eye and I fell in their traps. I contracted STIs.

Gaddafi's memory account captures the devastating risks affecting learners because of having multiple sexual partners. He wrote:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the risks of getting STIs were high because you could even have 20 girlfriends, and they will love you and give you any time.

Traf in her account wrote that sexual activities brought about several risky issues on the young people:

Sexual abuse was one of the most arising factors which led to ...and transmission of sexually transmitted infections.*

In an interview with a participant, John, a PA member in one of the participating schools, he was of a similar experience as he said:

Cases of STIs and HIV and AIDS were on the rise as we heard and saw these cases in the neighborhood.

From the responses of the participants given, they affirm that the learners were affected in different ways by the socio-ecological risks during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Stanford (2011) mentions that people who are 'at risk' are seen in terms of vulnerability, and those who are 'a risk' are considered in terms of their dangerousness. Basing on Stanford's research, some of the young people were at risk of being infected because they fell in the traps of those that were a risk to them leading them to contracting STIs and HIV and AIDS as a result.

Teenage Pregnancies and Abortion

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic remained a pain to society because it complicated the efforts of reducing teenage pregnancies. It caused an immeasurable disruption to every aspect of lives. Sexual behaviour was on the rise since the teenagers had little to nothing to do, and it seemed to be riskier where parents didn't really care what their children did while at home. According to UNFPA (2020), teenage pregnancies occurred because of limited capacity to negotiate for safe sex and consent, lack of protection against sexual violence, and the lack of access to contraceptive information and services to prevent unplanned pregnancy during the pandemic lockdown. In some situations, the girls resorted to unsafe abortions, which happened as personal or adult decisions imposed on them. In most cases, consequences of an unwanted pregnancy may be devastating for many young people, which may lead them to seek abortion in unsafe circumstances. The participants views suggest that most of the unplanned pregnancies and abortions occurred because of risks the young people were exposed to during the pandemic lockdown, as given in their responses.

Traf in his account wrote that sexual abuse led to unplanned pregnancies which further led to abortion:

Sexual abuse was one of the most arising factors which led to... which further lead to abortion...*

Glen found herself pregnant for a man that had pretended to rescue her family from poverty, since they had slept hungry in days during the lockdown. The man later offered her money to abort but she preferred to use that money to buy food for her family. This explains how she ended up as a young mother having been pushed by poverty. She wrote:

We had to sleep angry for one week till someone came and help us with some food for some three days. During that time, I met with a boy who just pretended to rescue my family from that problem and he told me that we can be *friendship partners as months move on, I got pregnant and the guy quiet the story of helping saying that he is not ready to have a kid he *lend me a thousand shilling for me to abort and I used the money to buy food for my family and carried on the pregnant...*

Arel shared a similar experience in her account as she wrote:

*Also, many of young girls were impregnated and the ones who gave them did not accept the pregnancy**

Jane felt that teenage pregnancies led some girls to commit suicide because of the shame of being in such a situation. She wrote:

**There were cases of pregnancy among young girls... some of the girls committed*

suicide because they fell shame in the community.

In her drawing of a boy and a girl in a relationship, she reiterates on the dire consequences of teenage pregnancies:

*I choose *these picture to represent relationship between boy and a girl. During corona pandemic their* was an increase in pregnancy rate. Many pupils of different ages were impregnated by different men from different places. This made the girls not to continue with their studies immediately.*

Jane's views are affirmed by the Kenya Ministry of Health (2021) records which indicate that over 328,000 girls got pregnant in the first year of the pandemic. As schools reopened, a percentage of girls did not re-enroll and sit national examinations because of unintended pregnancies.

ANPPCAN (2021) posits that Kenya was experiencing economic instabilities at the time of the pandemic lockdown. The pandemic increased and worsened the vulnerability of young people to sexual exploitation. Of the same opinion are some participants felt that many girls were trapped into getting pregnant. Some of them kept the pregnancies because they did not have the money to finance abortion while others engaged in unsafe abortions that were cheaply availed to them. This is illustrated in Liz's drawing and an Interview with Periz, a teacher participant:

Researcher: *In your own opinion, how did the risks affect learners during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown?*

Periz: *The participants were exposed to risks of poverty. The young people from poor backgrounds in our communities found themselves going against the odds to get food for their families. Some got impregnated and since many of them could not keep the pregnancy; opted to engage in cheap abortions that were risky to their health and lives in general.*

Liz drew a cracked phone to indicate a crack in life after being impregnated. She captions that:

*Life was like a crack *cause once a girl was pregnant, it was irreversible (keeping the pregnancy) and if it was reversible (abortion) the money to abort the pregnancy was not available, since the economy was not stable.*

Larin shares in her drawing that one risk associated with unsafe abortion is the aftermath of experiencing health issues and thereafter developing a low self-esteem because of the guilt:

I became pregnant because I was careless, and I had bad company. I decided to abort the child. The aborting has affected my health and somehow it has affected my*

education life. It has affected my self-esteem, and I can't even face my friends and family in peace.

From the participant data as well as the literature sources, there was an upsurge in pregnancy rates experienced as a risk issue that was brought about by factors ranging from poverty, inadequacy of contraceptive supply, idleness, parents, and guardian negligence. This led the young people to risk unsafe abortion, which brought about issues of shame, health related complications and low self-esteem of those affected.

Addiction to Pornographic Videos

Pornography and its effects are a very provocative issue in both public and academic discourses. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, pornography consumption was seen as constructive coping behaviour to overcome pandemic-brought dullness and fear of the unknown (Grubbs, 2020; Lehmillier et al., 2020). In Kenya, as a response to school closures, the Ministry of Education established an emergency response strategy which charted the ministry's plan to endure provision of quality learning with an unbiased and inclusive online approach at home (MoE, 2020). The learners from well to do homes benefitted from the Ministry's plan but that was not the case based on Traf's memory account. Learners diverted from using the phones for academic work to watching pornographic videos which was a drive to sexual immorality and corrosion of moral values. Traf accounts that:

Due to introduction of e-learning. Most of the students used the phones in the wrong way like watching pornographic videos which lead to immoral behaviour and corrosion of moral values.*

Zack also feels that pornography affected their moral values as he shares in his account:

Our moral values were affected because you could find young people having boyfriend or girlfriend meeting and staying at the boy's place for more than 2 nights having sex watching pornography together

Wiseman shared the same sentiments with Traf and Zack as he wrote:

...parents were buying data or paying WI-FI for children making children to be free to do everything they want hence this led to high immorality.

Ela, a PA in the boys' school mentions the negative effects of pornography access using the learning gadgets as she said:

Researcher: *Within these experiences, what were the risks that learners faced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown?*

Ela: *In our school, we encouraged our fellow parents to enroll the boys in the*

online classes that had been started by the school. Little did we know that most of our children used these academic platforms to share porn videos, others used their mobile phones to watch pornography, while others engaged in sexting and sending sexual videos to their alleged girlfriends. It was such a bad experience for us as parents!

From the participants data, the young people were using their cellphones for the wrong reasons during the lockdown. This affected their moral values as they practiced what they watched. As mentioned earlier, Grubbs (2020) and Lehmillier et al. (2020) suggest that part of the reasons people watch pornography to keep off idleness. This is suggested by Zack's account that some young people would meet and spend up to two nights together while at that time indulging in sexual activities or rather watching pornography. MOE (2020) and UNESCO (2020b) also posits that school closures intensified with constrained movements exacerbated cases of exposure to pornographic materials among the young people.

Theme 2: Family Related Risks

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a severe risk to the well-being of young people due to challenges associated with social interruption such as financial insecurity, caregiving burden, and confinement-related pressure. During the pandemic, many young people were forced to beg for food or take risky jobs to provide for their families leaving them unprotected and exposed to violence, abuse, and exploitation. It emerged from the participants that the learners were affected by family related risks during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in ways including: (i) domestic violence and (ii) alcoholism and drug abuse (see Table 3).

Table 3: Theme 2 and its categories

Theme	Categories
Family related risks	i. Domestic violence ii. Alcoholism and drug abuse

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence encompasses acts of aggression that occur within the confines of a household, characteristically involving the violent abuse of a spouse, child, or a member of the family. Domestic violence heightens during times of crisis, including epidemics (Sety et al., 2014). From the data generated, families were facing heightened risks of domestic violence as family members spent most of the time together in isolation. Olingo (2020) posits that, businesses and schools' closures brought about many and diverse

challenges such as physical and psychological risks, widespread job and income losses, family confinement, isolation, and economic vulnerability. Correspondingly, Massiot et al., (2022) argues that the pandemic lockdowns and school closures, aggravated household financial difficulties, increased stress among parents and decreased convenience to external social support. Thus, domestic violence towards children was aggravated. Family members redirected their fears and stress to their loved ones therefore creating tension within the household. This is described in Wiseman's account:

Some of the families where everybody wants to give order/rules ...hence lead to conflict.*

The youth were entrusted in the hands of some hostile parents that caused them more harm than safe. According to Muzungu (2020), the closure of schools and places of worship, which act as safe havens for many young people meant limited access to reach trusted adult figures who often can detect early signs of abuse. This is given in Zack's accounts in that some children could not reach out for help and ended up being beaten to death by their own parents:

Parents used to beat their children when they did wrong. Parents beat one of the children until he became paralyzed and died.

A similar experience was shared by Judy, a teacher in one of the participating schools that:

Parents were hostile to their children and most of our learners when asked, preferred being in school than staying at home. Some reported that they consistently got beaten without valid reasons back at home.

Gaddafy recounts going into drugs after he found out that their father was cheating on their mother. It caused a family tension as he told his siblings and insulted the lady in question. This clearly indicates the risks that can spike because of a tension within the family:

I mistakenly peeped in my father's phone chatting with a lady...it was so stressing that I told my siblings. I insulted her... I decided to go into drugs.

COVID-19 pandemic showed the negative outcomes of the lockdown and its accompanied restrictions that manifested as social stressors on family members, which possibly affected the children's mental health (Wade et al., 2020). Rich wrote that he consistently fought with his brother and would always be reminded by the stepfather that he was his illegitimate child. Such family rejection was a risk issue to Rich as this could easily account for a mental stressor to him. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown may have worsened existing while triggering tension within the home. Rich accounts that:

I used to fight with my brother everyday...my father used to say that I am not his child.

Parental violence has a risky impact on the children, derived from negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and resentment on the ensuing violent behavior. When

parents conflict right before the children, there are possibilities of increased oppositional behavior from the children as they tend to disrespect their parents. Piquero et al., (2020) argues that increased risk of violence between the parents during COVID-19 lockdown made it difficult for them to meet the children's needs as Jane accounts:

Another case is that there was disagreements among* the members of the family. For example, the parents fighting when the children are around which will make the children disobey their parents.*

In view of the above, it is important that knowledge of the risk factors is vital for averting or reducing violence. It is crucial identifying the most appropriate forms of support and intervention to address these risks in future.

Alcoholism and Drug Abuse

Alcoholism refers to an addiction to the consumption of alcohol and irrational actions resulting from alcohol reliance whereas drug abuse is the habitual taking of addictive and illegal drugs. COVID-19 pandemic suggested increased levels of alcohol and drug use in Kenya (Jaguga & Kiburi, 2020). It exposed complete vulnerability to the ordinary functioning of society. As a result of the accumulating stress, many young people found it difficult to cope with rising pressure and reverted to alcohol, drug and substance abuse.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns people with depression and anxiety signs reported the highest increase in alcohol consumption (Weis et al., 2021; Sallie et al., 2020; Pollard et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2020). According to National Control of Alcohol and Drugs Authority (NACADA) (2020), when young people are not engaged and their movement is condensed, they are vulnerable to experiment on drugs or alcohol. The participants responses indicate the risky adventures of consumption of alcohol and drugs as given in their responses:

In his drawing Traf recounts how he was lured into alcoholism and drug abuse by his friends, and he was beaten up by his parents which gave him suicidal thoughts:

Draws a picture of a student who engaged in drug abuse (bhang provided by his friends at home) and alcoholism during the pandemic lockdown. The parents beat him up for the mistakes and he resorted to committing suicide.

Other participants shared similar experiences as Traf in that they were most indulging in alcoholism and drug abuse because of peer influence in the **neighborhood** and being idle at home. This is because boredom is one of the challenges most people face when in a lockdown and some may be overanxiously obliged to resort to such behavioral activities as alcohol and substance abuse (Kim et al., 2021). This is illustrated from the following responses:

Traf accounts that:

Being idle at home leads to use of drug abuse which was a crucial thing. Also, as some of the students engaged in drug abuse, no one was there to guide them follow the right path.*

Jane in her account wrote:

I personally fall in alcohol addiction during the pandemic because of my friend introducing it to me and I cannot work without it*

Zack wrote that:

My neighbor went to a party at night, and they were caught with bhang and taken to prison and paid a fine of twenty thousand shillings each and they were under 18 years of age.

Arel wrote:

During that pandemic lockdown, many of my colique neighbors were involved in drug abuse usage e.g., miraa, bhang and also Kuber*

Alexas wrote:

I almost got into alcoholism due to influence from my peers when I was forced to mercilessly take 'busaa'

Rean wrote:

Due to peer pressure my friends all got carried away into alcoholism. I as well ever tried the drink...

The relationship between stress and engaging in health-destructive behaviours exhibits a reinforcing tendency. Drawn from a different perspective, some young people became victims of a variation in physiological stress and poor decision-making abilities from their parents which increased the risk of stress-induced alcohol consumption (Clay & Parker, 2020). Some of their parents would project stress on them after consuming alcohol while some young people would resort to alcohol because of stress induced by their parents. This was heightened by the mounting sense of hopelessness and helplessness that prompted increased use of drugs, with the likelihood of pushing users to become abusers (Chen et al., 2022). This is shared by some participants in their responses as follows:

Wiseman wrote:

Some get into field of drunken this was due to what parents drink* past 6p.m. which make children follow what their parents were doing.*

Zack in his account:

My father could come home drunk and could yell at mother to give him food and he did not buy anything, and he could end up beating my mother and sometimes he could yell at me

Liz wrote:

During the COVID-19 pandemic I was so stressful because my mother was always drunk* throughout...she could just come at home and start to abuse me.*

Gaddafi wrote that he was pushed into using drugs when he found out that his

father had an extra marital affair:

From that day I insulted her I've never cared about their relationship until now. I decided to go into drugs

The unpreparedness associated with COVID-19 that saw a change in lifestyle paved way for the mentioned stressful experiences as given in literature and participants views. COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns throughout the world had the potential to lead to alcohol and drug abuse on vulnerable individuals (Clay & Parker, 2020).

Theme 3: Criminal Related Risks

Crime can be understood in relations to risk exposure. Crime possibly occurs when likely offenders converge in space and time with suitable crime aims in the absence of proficient protectors against crime. It emerged from the participants that the learners were affected by crime related risks during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in ways including: (i) FGM, forced early marriages and Sexual and gender-based violence and (ii) suicide (see table 4).

Table 4: Theme 3 and its categories

Theme	Categories
Criminal related risks	i. FGM, forced early marriages and sexual and gender-based violence
	ii. Suicide

FGM, Forced Early Marriages and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

In Kenya, any violation to human rights is considered a criminal offence and warrants arrest. Female genital mutilation (FGM), which involves partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons (WHO, 2016), forced early marriages and sexual and gender-based violence are offences according to law. The implementation of FGM law and its enforcement remain a challenge (Mutual et al., 2021; Mohamud et al., 2021). COVID-19 lockdown led to increases in harmful cultural practices (Esho et al., 2022). This sharply contrasted to the progress made in reducing the prevalence of these practices in Kenya (Musa et al., 2021).

COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the rise in FGM, child forced marriage (CFM) and gender-based violence in Kenya. The pandemic undesirably affected execution of interventions to mitigate the same (Riley et al., 2021). These violations have far-reaching negative effects on the health of girls and women (Esho et al., 2017). This is supported by Periz, a teacher participant that said:

I noticed that one of my learners was always withdrawn after schools reopened. I talked to her to find out her problem and she said she had been forcefully taken through FGM. The pandemic lockdown saw her spending her time in their remote home. FGM is still a common practice there. She confessed still having chronic pains, itching and vaginal discharge, that has made her withdrawn from her academics.

Ela shared a similar experience, having heard it from one of the parents she interacts with:

A parent confessed to us in one of our interactive sessions in my daughter's school that many girls from FGM practicing communities were undergoing severe health complication as the pandemic lockdown exposed them to the cut. Female teachers were asked to be very vigilant and rescue such victims from further psychological damages.

The aforementioned experiences demonstrate that schools provide comprehensive protection measures that include vigilance to coercions of FGM and forced marriage (UNFPA, 2020). Therefore, without the safety net provided by schools because of the lockdown, girls were exposed to an increase in risk factors. Moreover, main concern for girls is that being out of school for a lengthy period place them at risk of early marriage (Riley et al., 2021). This is evidenced in participants responses herein:

Justin in her drawing:

I even went to an extent of sneaking into an FGM practice that was illegally being conducted in our village

Gaddafy wrote:

Girls were mutilated and forced to marry at a young age.

Traf wrote:

*Sexual abuse was one of the most arising factors which lead to early marriages ...The girls underwent through FGM which it was a harmful to the **girl's** life*

Unlike, Traf, Gaddafy and Justin's accounts on FGM and forced marriages, Joyce's account and Judy's interview response illustrate the devastating risks associated with rape. Joyce wrote that the girl committed suicide after she was forced to sleep with men:

My cousin told my mother...she told my mom that my aunt has been coming with full grown men and tell her to sleep with them so my aunt can get money to pay the rent and to buy food...*

In Judy's interview response, girls who have faced sexual abuse hardly cope with the rest of the learners. They are always withdrawn and suffer esteem and mental health issues:

Researcher: *Within these experiences, what were the risks learners faced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown?*

Judy: *Some of our female learners were being sexually molested by people known to*

them. Some learners reported having been forced by their mothers to sleep with men for material gain...these acts lowered their self-esteem and affected their mental health.

As illustrated from Judy and Joyce's responses, adolescent girls' absence from school, tied with the lack of alternate safe spaces, was associated with increased vulnerability to sexual violence from family members and others, including guardians, neighbours, and other community members (Barchielli et al., 2021). While the actions taken to curb COVID-19 unquestionably curbed the spread of the disease, they seemed to be compromising the safety and well-being of citizens during lockdown (Chagemu, 2023; Rockowitz et al., 2021; Flowe et al., 2020; Mutiso et al., 2020; Memiah et al., 2020).

Suicide

Suicide is the termination of emotionally vulnerable people's life. A few prior stages ought to pass before a suicide completion, which includes suicidal ideation or thought, suicide plan, suicide attempt, (Mamun et al, 2020; Klonsky, 2016). Youth suicide is a significant global public health problem (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Suicidal cases were on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Depression, anxiety, isolation, and decreased social support associated with COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns likely contributed to increased suicide risk in youth (Hill et al., 2021; Hawes et al., 2020).

The participants' responses highlight the suicidal risks that the young people faced in their socio-ecological setup. Some participants wrote that some of their peers committed suicide in relation to what they were going through in their homesteads. Some girls opted to take their lives because they could not live with the shame of pregnancy, abortion, rape, and domestic violence. Since schools which serve as safe havens for learners were closed, and in as much as some learners interacted with their teachers online, teachers becoming aware of any behavioral fluctuations was challenging. Thus, learners were left without much social support (Campion et al., 2020). Here are participants experiences as written in their accounts:

Joyce wrote:

She told my mom that my aunt has been coming with grown up men and tell her to sleep with them...after a few days later we had that my cousin killed herself by starbing* herself in the chest...*

Jane wrote:

Some of the girls committed suicide because they fell shame in the community

Liz recalled that:

She could throw me out of the house until their was a moment I was going to commit*

suicide...

The pandemic forced people out of their comfort zones and impacted their emotional and mental health (Tandon, 2020). While adults may have been better equipped to handle the disruptions, young people were greatly impacted (Marsden et al., 2020). In an interview with John, a PA participant, he commented that most of the learners in his community came from very humble backgrounds and found it difficult adjusting to life without free food in school and teacher shelter. The deprivation of the school comfort zone led some of them to taking their own lives:

Researcher: In your own opinion, how did the risks affect learners during the COVID-19 pandemic?

John: The risks of staying home for a long time, facing challenges of even getting the basic needs like food and sanitary wear for the girls pushed some young people into having mental health issues. Some went to an extent of committing suicide! Many of our young people felt lost in the community and this was basically heightened by the uncertainties of the pandemic.

The isolation from friends, teachers and peers caused by the lockdown resulted in young people being extremely sensitive thus leading to mental stress (Li et al., 2020). To avert such eventualities in future, the young people should learn to take the bull by the horns. They should be encouraged to face difficulties head on and be more resilient to them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

During COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, young people were abused and became increasingly vulnerable to abuse and its consequences. This study has shown that while the government, through the Ministry of Health, was looking for ways of controlling further spread of the corona virus, young people's lives were clearly put at risk. Life Skills programme within the HIV and AIDS education programme in Kenyan schools remains a major concern as it only focusses on changing individual behavior while ignoring the communities in which young people are located in. It is recommended that The Kenyan Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education need to strike a balance on safety measures to be taken during pandemic crises. By doing so, young people's lives are not compromised by rules that govern further spread of disease outbreak. Moreover, stakeholders should prioritize equitable access to technology and resources, enhance support for mental health and well-being, strengthen social support networks, build resilience and adaptation strategies, and foster interdisciplinary research collaborations. This will address the multifaceted challenges faced by learners in times of crises thereby creating more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable educational ecosystems. As well, the

Ministry of Education and curriculum developers should strengthen Life Skills education programme within the HIV and AIDS education programme in Kenyan schools to offer an inclusive curriculum that incorporates supportive coping strategies in the communities and schools that young people are located in.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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