The Impact of COVID-19 to the Female Students in Sierra Leone from the Economic Angle

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Abstract. As the epidemic spreads worldwide, its impact on all aspects of the world has slowly emerged. Its impact on the economy, education and gender equality is more pronounced. This paper uses Sierra Leone as an example to assess the impact of Covid -19 on the economy and education, especially on girls who already face existing education gaps. It suggests some possible strategies to address girls' education in phases during and after the pandemic problems and analyses potential challenges. As a sub-Saharan African country, Sierra Leone has always been a seriously underdeveloped area that has attracted much attention. Taking this as a research example will help to infer the possible epidemic situation in other less developed countries.

Keywords: Covid-19, Sierra Leone, female education, economic impact.

1. Introduction

Universal education has always been an important way to improve national development. Human Development Index (HDI) is based on a country's population life expectancy index, education index (literacy rate, enrolment rate) and national per capita income index [1]. It is a measure of the level of human well-being and the level of national development. These indices reflect the three most important dimensions for assessing human development: a long and healthy life, access to education, and a decent standard of living [2]. The complementarity of these three dimensions demonstrates the necessity of education for human well-being. Because universal education is the main means to promote the long-term development of society and the country, it is also necessary for a country to obtain better development opportunities. Education can make the future of the country better. Gender inequalities in universal access to general education for girls are essential issues for low- and middle-income countries. Improved education for women has gone a long way towards reducing child marriage and early pregnancy rates in this country. However, universal education needs a peaceful environment to ensure its progress. The global pandemic of COVID-19 will deal a severe blow to already fragile education systems in some low-income countries. This article will take Sierra Leone as a case to reveal the impact of COVID-19 on female students from an economic perspective and propose some feasible policies to overcome this situation.

The Context of Sierra Leone: Sierra Leone is one of the world's poorest countries [3]. According to the Human Development Report [4], Sierra Leone's HDI is 0.438, ranking 181st among the 189 countries reported. Sierra Leone is never a lucky country. On the contrary, it even always has a bit of trouble. It was a victim of slavery and colonialism from the 15th century, and its slave trade history lasted nearly 400 years [5]. After that, it accepted British colonial rule for about 160 years and did not formally separate from the British to be independent until 1861. However, this country's situation has not stabilized, and a massive civil war broke out between 1991 and 2002. Approximately 5,400 children became soldiers in the war, and 1,270 primary schools were destroyed [6]. The economy and infrastructure of the entire country suffered severe losses. After that, Sierra Leone began a complicated recovery process, but in 2014 it encountered the Ebola virus disease, which lasted for almost two years. Until March 2016, the WHO announced the epidemic's end [7]. There were 14,124 cases of infection in the country and 3,956 deaths [8].

It was again affected by COVID-19 in 2020, and the first case was recorded on March 30, 2020 [9]. As of November 10, 2020, Sierra Leone has 2385 confirmed cases, 74 deaths, and 1813 recoveries

[10]. It is ranked 158th among the world [11]. If compared the number with other countries globally and considering the infection rate per population and other factors, it does not seem particularly severe. However, considering the deficient level of development of Sierra Leone itself and its high degree of dependence on global support, the pandemic will still severely impact this country's overall development. Therefore, education will be seriously hit. Furthermore, female students will be severely affected by the terrible gender inequality in Sierra Leone. Its gender inequality index is 0.644, ranking 153rd among 162 reporting countries [4]. In this country, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, sexual violence, FGM, and other injuries are endless. For these women living in inequality, receiving more education is essential to change their destiny.

2. Impact of COVID-19

2.1. Impact on Economy

2.1.1. Context of economy

Sierra Leone, as one of the least developed countries in the world, has caused severe economic collapse due to the civil war between 1991 and 2002 and has lagged far behind the world in all aspects. After entering a peace period in 2002, it began economic recovery with the help of various international organizations, and the economic situation improved significantly from 2012 to 2014 caused of the Iron ore export. However, the Ebola epidemic that broke out in 2014 caused considerable losses to the country in one shot. Furthermore, in 2015, affected by the sharp drop in iron ore prices globally, its mineral market was severely hit. The two largest iron ore companies are under administrative management, significantly reducing government production and revenue [16]. After the Ebola epidemic ended at the end of 2015, the country started its renaissance again. This economic change can be seen at a glance in the GDP change in Figure 1. From the change in the proportion of total exports in GDP the iron ore market's influence is continuing. However, from the comparison of the ratio of imports and export to GDP, it can be found that Sierra Leone's trade deficit is decreasing, which also reflects its economic progress.

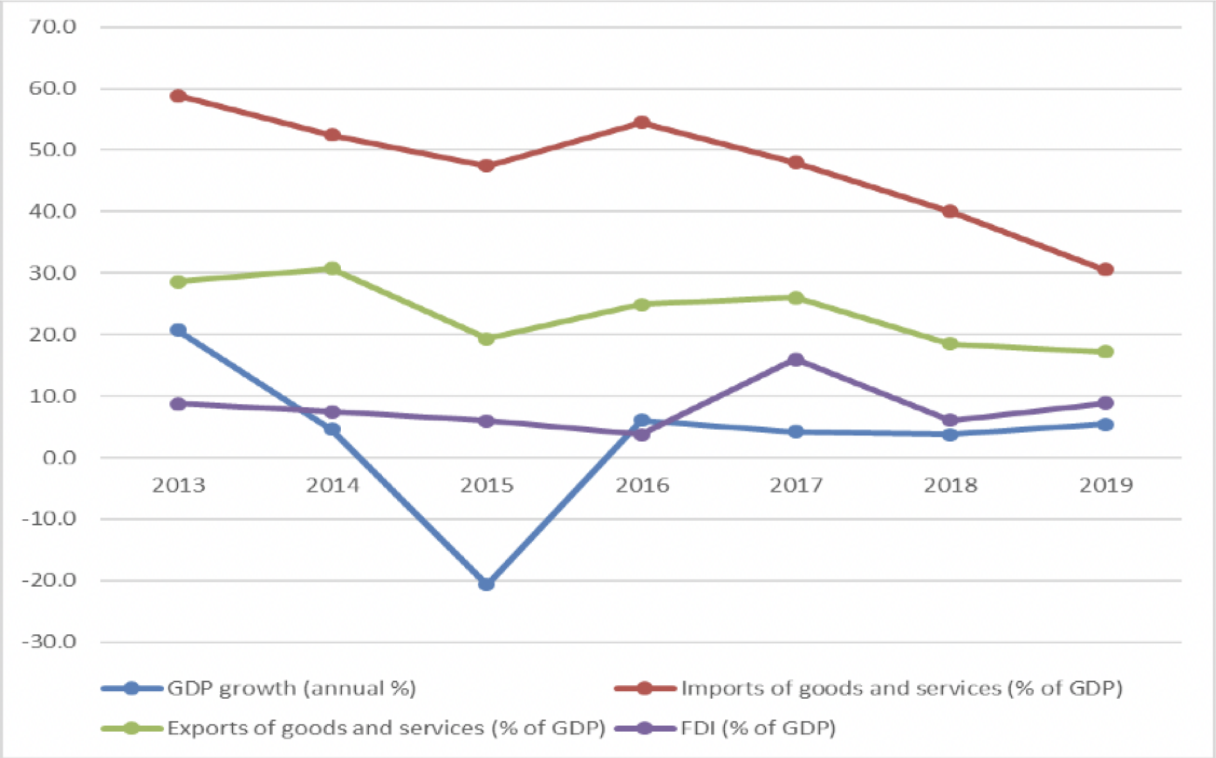


Figure 1. Selected Macroeconomic Indicators [12]

2.1.2. Genal impact of the economy by COVID

Like the Ebola epidemic situation, COVID-19 once again hit the country when the economic situation finally started to improve and entered rapid development. Sierra Leone performed exceptionally well in 2019. According to the Sierra Leone Economic Update [13], before COVID-19, its GDP growth is expected to reach 5.4%, which will be the highest since 2016. This growth rate will make Sierra Leone one of the fastest-growing economies globally, even higher than the developed countries' average. This GDP growth is an exciting good result and an excellent example of the government's efforts in post-Ebola recovery. Everything started to develop in the right direction. However, with the pandemic, Sierra Leone's economy will shrink by 3.5% in 2020, and even will seriously affect its development prospects [13]. It is because not only Sierra Leone's economy is affected, but the global economic recession will also make it more challenging to obtain the same international economic assistance as before the pandemic in the short term. Therefore, the recovery after COVID-19 will be more complicated than during the After-Ebola period.

The pandemic's economic recession has increased the demand for expansionary fiscal measures, undoubtedly increasing the government's financial burden. The budget deficit, reduced to 2.9% of GDP in 2019 from 5.7% in 2018, will surge to 8.9% [13]. Besides, Sierra Leone has considerable debt, and they mainly relieve debt pressure through external financing and import and export transactions before the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on these two methods is significant. The global economic recession and countries' need to control the epidemic and the economy at home make it difficult for them to have extra energy to help Sierra Leone. The grounding of aircraft, the disruption of the global supply chain caused by the shutdown of production worldwide, and the domestic demand for epidemic control will cause Sierra Leone's import and export transactions to decrease. Moreover, due to Sierra Leone's low medical level and chronic food shortage, the great import demand for essential medical resources and food has also worsened its economy.

2.1.3. Impact on domestic economy

Sierra Leone's domestic economy is small and needs to be diversified. It is highly dependent on natural resources and dominated by the primary industries of agriculture, forestry, and fishery. Due to the low degree of industrialization, industries in this country are labor-intensive, which has exacerbated their pandemic impact. According to the World Bank's report, the contribution of agriculture to the total output value is expected to fall from 2.3% in 2019 to 1.5% [13]. As for another major GDP-contributing industry, the service industry will be more severely affected due to COVID-related lockdowns and travel restrictions. The output value is expected to drop by 16%, resulting in its contribution to GDP falling to 4.7% [13]. The impact of the difficult conditions of agriculture and service industries on Sierra Leone's economic performance is clearly shown in Figure 2. The mining industry is basically suspended due to previous market influences and government regulations.

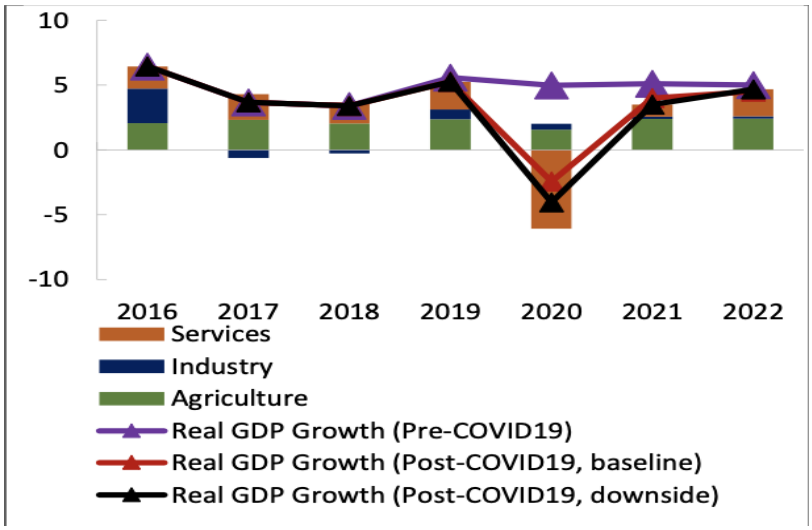


Figure 2. Contributions to Real GDP Growth, Supply Side, 2016–22 [13]

2.2. Impact on Education

2.2.1. Context of education

Before COVID-19, Sierra Leone's education was already an urgent problem. Due to the civil war between 1991 and 2002, many infrastructures, including schools, was destroyed. Therefore, in recent years, the Sierra Leone government has allocated about 20 per cent of its fiscal expenditure on education, the largest expenditure among all departments, to rebuild its education [15]. This effort has also paid off. By reducing tuition and fees and implementing compulsory education, Sierra Leone's enrollment rate has been significantly improved, as shown in Figure 3.

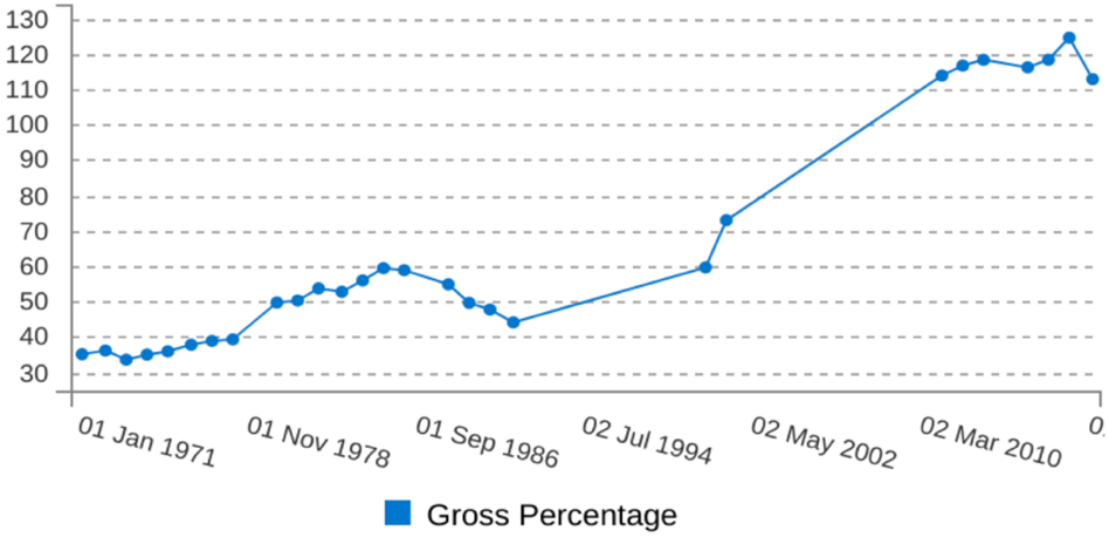


Figure 3. Primary School Enrolment [17]

Despite this, students' dropout rate increases as the school year has grown. The data shows that the dropout rate for children of primary school age (6-11 years old) in Sierra Leone in 2013 was only 0.225% [18]. 40.406% of lower secondary school children (12-14 years old) in the same year [19]. More than that, in 2018 data, the dropout rate of lower secondary school-age children (12-14 years old) increased to 49.029%.

In addition, the Sierra Leone 2015 GER and NER data in Table 1 and Table 2 show the obvious gap between rural and urban enrollment rates and that the enrollment age of many students is not the prescribed school age. Furthermore, GER's data clearly reflects that female students' enrollment rate has decreased significantly as the school year grows. GPI decreased from 1.05 in elementary school to 0.75 in high school, reflecting male and female education obvious inequality.

Table 1. Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in differ school level [20]

	Male	*Female*	*GPI*	*Urban*	*Rural*	*Total*
Primary School	102.9%	108.2%	1.05	122.6%	96.0%	105.5%
Junior Secondary School	100.6%	93.1%	0.93	115.2%	82.7%	96.9%
Senior Secondary School	78.0%	58.3%	0.75	108.9%	37.6%	68.3%

Table 2. Net Enrollment Ratio (NER) of differ school year [20]

	Male	*Female*	*GPI*	*Urban*	*Rural*	*Total*
Primary School (6-11)	63.6%	67.2%	1.06	76.7%	59.0%	65.4%
Junior Secondary School (12-14)	21.2%	20.8%	0.98	28.4%	15.2%	21.0%
Senior Secondary School (15-17)	11.1%	10.6%	0.96	18.5%	5.1%	10.9%

Poverty is the main reason children are out of school [14]. When many families' income cannot meet their own basic needs, children must drop out of school or go to work to supplement the family income. It can also be reflected in the massive gap between rural and urban enrolment rates. Rural children are usually more likely to drop out and stop entering school. Of course, the ideological gap

between rural and urban areas is also one of the reasons. Rural parents prefer to let their children learn about agriculture and help them by working on the farm.

Moreover, although Sierra Leone has implemented nine-year compulsory education, the family still bears a large part of the education-related expenditure cost. The indirect expenditures, such as teaching materials, school uniforms, and school supplies, make children's education an enormous family burden. Coinco [14] conservatively estimates that for a family with an annual income of 472,000 Leones (160 US dollars), sending a child to elementary school will cost a quarter of the annual income. If it is a sixth-grade student, it will increase to 29%. This is a heavy burden for them, and a family usually has more than one child.

2.2.2. Genal impact of education during COVID

Due to severe national health problems and social problems caused by the pandemic, such as food insecurity, the government of Sierra Leone is focusing on handling this emergency. Furthermore, the aforementioned negative impact of COVID-19 on its economy will undoubtedly affect Sierra Leone's fiscal policy. Government revenue has also been affected by the pandemic. Besides, Sierra Leone's government budget relies heavily on external aid. All of those will severely affect government spending on education. During this period, maintaining the compulsory education program itself also increased the financial burden on Sierra Leone.

In order to control the pandemic, Sierra Leone closed schools nationwide starting March 30, 2020 [21]. UNDP points out that an estimated 2.6 million children are currently out of school [12]. Among them, a large number of students may leave school forever. Due to the pandemic, the high unemployment rate and increasing family poverty will make it difficult for many families to pay for their children back to school.

Although Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education has taken measures allowing schools to continue teaching through television and radio, many students, especially those in remote rural areas, cannot learn through this method due to the high poverty rate. Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) [22] shows that only 54.7% of households have radios. The urban area is 22.1% higher than the rural area. When 66.9% of urban households own radios, the proportion of rural households is only 44.8% [22]. Furthermore, gender inequality between men and women will also affect their chances of listening to the radio. When 57.7% of men between the ages of 15 and 49 can listen to the radio at least once a week, only 32.4% of women of the same age can listen to it [22]. This part of the students with no access to alternative teaching methods also belongs to more impoverished families, which means they are more likely to drop out of school due to the suspension of classes.

2.2.3. Female student out of school due to the increase of child marriages and early pregnancy

However, female students will suffer a more remarkable and worse impact than male students, who may just stay at home. For most female students, suspending classes means losing a vital protecting umbrella. Based on the Ebola epidemic data, more than 14,000 young girls became pregnant, including 11,000 in school, before the outbreak [12]. It can be speculated that during the COVID-19 period, the rate of forced child marriages and early pregnancy among female students who were in school will also rise rapidly, which will cause them to drop out of school.

During the pandemic, many families will fall into more severe poverty. Arranging marriages for girls in the family will reduce the family population's burden and receive a betrothal gift from the groom's family. It will significantly improve the family situation. Moreover, forced child marriage usually means the girl will drop out permanently. Word Bank estimates that "only 1.6 per cent of the sample consists of girls who are married and in school", proving that the possibility of women continuing to go to school after child marriage is extremely low [13]. It is related to a series of factors, such as society's cultural norms and the economic pressure after marriage. Usually, girls have to take care of the family and have children after child marriage. They will not have time to continue studying and will lose their qualifications. In traditional concepts, it is not advisable to spend the husband's money to study after marriage.

Pregnancy is also an important reason why girls are out of school. Sierra Leone once banned pregnant girls from going to school for ten years, and in social opinion, few parents support their pregnant daughters to go to school. Despite the government announcing the prohibition's cancellation in March 2020, social concepts and publicity still need to work hard [23]. Child marriage and early pregnancy are related in normal circumstances. However, the Sierra Leone Economic Update [13] points out that the first pregnancy rate increased significantly during the Ebola epidemic due to "unwanted sex and transactional sex for food and other essentials". This point must be noted while making the policy against COVID-19.

2.2.4. Female unemployment causing children to drop out of school

Due to low education levels and lack of necessary skills, women in Sierra Leone usually work in informal jobs. 70% of the urban labour force in this country has an informal job, and 65% are women [24]. They usually work in vulnerable jobs such as babysitting, street vendor, and manual work. The pandemic has the most significant impact on this type of work, so COVID-19 will cause a large number of women to lose their jobs. It has a significant impact on children's schooling. In Sierra Leone, polygamy is widespread, leading to large families with many children from different mothers. However, it is obvious that the father alone cannot support so many people while allowing all the children to go to school. Their mothers usually pay the cost of schooling for these children. Therefore, some mothers' children in the same family go to school, but some do not [14].

2.3. The Subsequent Impact of Female Students Dropping Out of School Caused by COVID-19

Due to the dropout of female students from school caused by the pandemic, the rise in child marriage and early pregnancy rate has not only caused harm. It also has a further impact on the future development of those girls and the country, and this type of impact will be difficult to improve in the short term.

2.3.1. Early pregnancy increase causing more poverty

The rising rate of early pregnancy will increase this country's population and poverty. It is because poverty calculation is based on household consumption per capita or per equivalent [13]. Therefore, reducing the population growth rate will reduce the population burden and vice versa. Due to COVID-19, women enter marriage earlier, and their childbearing age will be earlier. The Sierra Leone Economic Update [13] states that "depending on the girl's age at marriage, child marriage increases total fertility by 9% to 28%." Moreover, these growing populations will have a lasting impact on the poverty reduction plan, suspended and even worse because of the pandemic. Women's loss of education opportunities can also lead to an increase in the fertility rate per person. In the same report, the author points out that completing secondary school education will reduce women's total fertility rate by 13% [13]. However, the pandemic has caused a large number of female students to lose the opportunity to complete their secondary school education.

2.3.2. Women out of school impact the national income level

Women's education level is linked to their income, so losing the opportunity to receive an education will significantly reduce women's income and formal job opportunities. Worldwide, the labour market tends to hire educated people, and it is relatively tricky for illiterate persons to find formal jobs. Furthermore, many women in child marriage will give up entering the labour market and choose to stay at home doing housework, making them lose income-generating opportunities. Moreover, the education level of women will also affect the average income of the entire country. Figure 4 shows that countries with higher female education levels have higher average incomes [13]. It is partly because women enter the labour market and get more income, but at the same time, because of the increase in women's income, men's income will also increase accordingly. Therefore, women losing the opportunity to complete their studies will affect the average income of Sierra Leone and its poverty alleviation.

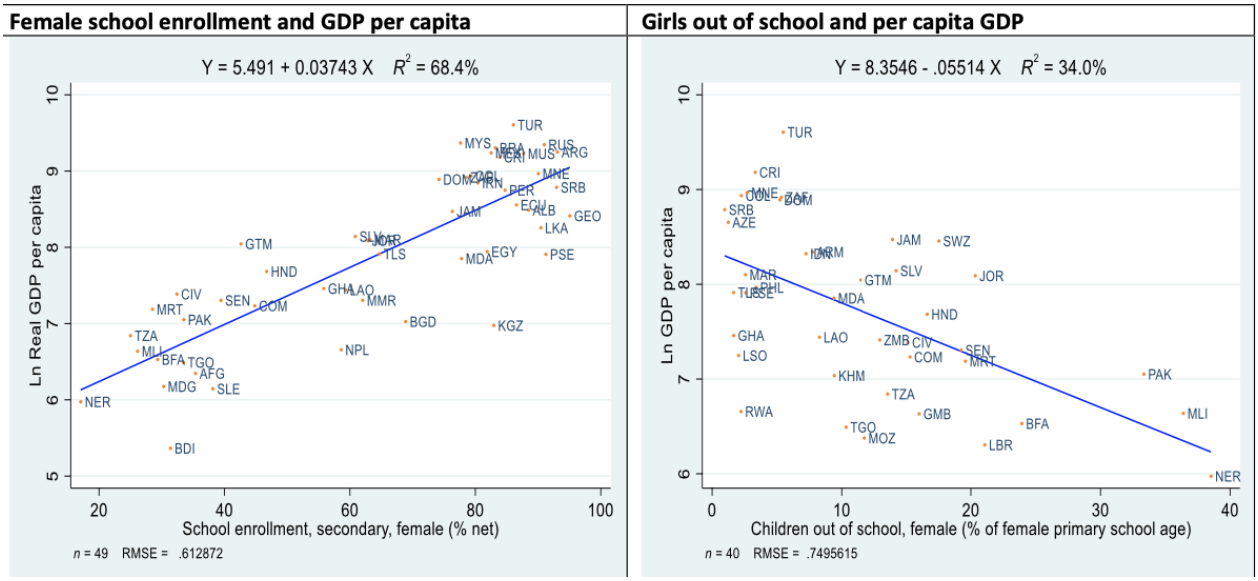


Figure 4. Female Education and Economic Development [13]

3. Possible Policies

3.1. Policy one: support broadcasting classes in the village to increase access to education

According to the data above, only 54.7% of Sierra Leone's households own the radio, and 44% of the rural population own one, not to mention the shallow television penetration rate [22]. Considering that the rural population of Sierra Leone accounts for 59.29% of the total population, in this case, it can be predicted that the penetration rate of teaching through radio broadcasting alone will not be very high [25]. Therefore, replacing personal radios with the village broadcasting system will become imperative. More students and adults can listen to and learn from the teaching content through the prominent speaker in the village for the teaching broadcast. In this way, as long as each village has one radio and one speaker for the whole village, it can significantly improve insufficient radio teaching penetration. Although teaching through the village broadcast will cause difficulty in teaching by grade, it is a useful means of education for primary school students and the illiterate in the village. Allocating most of the broadcasting time to elementary education will help village-wide literacy, reduce the pandemic's impact on young students, and ensure that they have access to elementary education. Considering that the secondary school enrollment rate in Sierra Leone is relatively low, having a chance to access and complete elementary education opportunities is very important.

3.2. Policy two: establish a special fund to support impoverished female students to ensure their lives during the pandemic and increase the possibility of returning to school

Although Sierra Leone's agriculture is one of its primary industries, its food insecurity rate is still very high because its small farmer's production model cannot meet its population's needs. According to 2018 data, 43.7% of the population is experiencing food insecurity [26]. Moreover, its food relies heavily on imports. Data shows that 80% of its consumed food relies on imports [27]. The global transportation difficulties and food shortages caused by COVID-19 will exacerbate this problem, leading to food shortages and price increases. The unemployment rate has also risen, so the increased poverty and insufficient food may lead to more serious girls prostituting money and food than during the Ebola epidemic. Therefore, it is essential to establish a special fund to locate and help these girls. Reducing this kind of prostitution will effectively reduce the chance of early pregnancy caused by non-child marriage and the possibility of contracting AIDS, HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

3.3. Policy three: further strengthen the assistance to poor women in the pandemic, reduce their unemployment rate, and ensure the possibility of their children going to school

Since Sierra Leone's polygamous marriages are common, a husband may have several wives and many children. Therefore, it is quite difficult for every child to go to school. According to UNICEF's report in 2008, only 39% of children's tuition is paid by the father [14]. Generally speaking, even if the father agrees for the child to go to school, the mother will pay for her own children's tuition. Thus, protecting the mother's job will more likely ensure that the child can receive an education. Furthermore, because Sierra Leone women find it harder to have high-paying jobs because of their low level of education, they also understand better the importance of women's education and are more likely to support their daughters to go to school.

3.4. Policy four: strengthen communication and cooperation with the chiefdoms and call on female students to return to school

Sierra Leone has 149 chiefdoms, and the chief has a high position in the local chiefdom. Therefore, people usually trust and obey the chief orders of the region more than government propaganda. Chiefs have played a key role in bringing female students back to school in the recovery from the Ebola epidemic. Therefore, it can be speculated that chiefs' appeal will also help students return to school after the pandemic. The government should strengthen communication and cooperation with the chief and let them fully understand the importance of children, especially girls, going back to school to the whole society. The government can encourage chiefs to take this action more actively by giving financial and policy support. For example, promises to increase educational experimentation and prioritization of the most active chiefdoms can also help increase enthusiasm.

3.5. Policy five: increase publicity and implementation measures to ensure the effective implementation of the policy allowing pregnant girls to go to school

Although the policy of allowing pregnant women to continue school officially took effect in March 2020, the ensuing pandemic has made it more challenging to implement this policy. Considering that school-age girls' pregnancy rates will rise rapidly after the pandemic, it is essential to ensure that this policy is effectively implemented. Since the policy announcement time is close to the outbreak time of COVID-19, this policy has yet to be well-known to everyone. Therefore, it is critical to strengthen the promotion of these policies during and after the pandemic. Government departments need to strengthen communication with the community to implement more effective measures, including financial support, door-to-door persuasion, Etc. Of course, the power of the chiefs should also be considered and used. Although it will be challenging to implement this policy due to the economy and other cultural factors, it is still essential for fighting for gender equality.

3.6. Policy six: cooperation with NGO for establishing an unofficial education system

The government can cooperate with NGOs to establish an unofficial education system. This system aims to reduce illiteracy and provide more students with educational opportunities through a wide range of low-difficulty education. In this system, the education context should increase cooperation with the local area and spread the knowledge of agriculture to increase parents' interest in it and integrate education and social practice to be more relevant to daily lives. It can also provide classes for adults and teach them the knowledge used in life and feasible methods of making money so that parents can understand what education can bring and value it more. Although this kind of education system will mainly provide primary education at the lower grade level, the government can allow uniform examinations for children, who are too far away from school and have a young age, to transfer after completing the previous years of education. It will allow this education system to assume the function of a satellite school and increase the NER. Furthermore, in this unofficial system, non-essential expenses such as school uniforms need to be eliminated to reduce families' burden purpose.

4. The Challenge

4.1. Challenge One: Problems caused by the second wave of the pandemic

Although Sierra Leone's domestic epidemic's daily growth data has gradually slowed, the second wave of the pandemic in some major developed countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, is quite severe. France and Germany announced the closure policy again at the end of October [28]. Due to the presidential election and other factors, the United States increased 187,957 new cases in just one day, November 13 [29]. The economic instability of these developed countries due to the pandemic will also seriously affect Sierra Leone and cause global funding and other assistance to be postponed. The global market crisis will also continue to affect Sierra Leone's economy. It is still challenging to obtain necessities such as food and condoms, which will seriously affect the recovery of Sierra Leone after COVID-19. It is impossible to estimate when the pandemic will end accurately. This has caused Sierra Leone to struggle with the pandemic's problems even if the domestic epidemic is completely over for a long time. Therefore, the government's financial pressure will continue to increase, and the difficulty of advancing the recovery policy will further increase as the poverty and undernourishment problems deepen.

4.2. Challenge Two: Cannot follow up the situation in various places in time

Due to the high proportion of Sierra Leone's rural population, each region's situation is complicated. It is tough and time-consuming to follow up on the status of each area and family in detail. Some remote areas are difficult to observe, which leads to the degree of completion of the policy may not be as good as estimated. Of course, this situation can be improved by cooperating with communities and chiefs. However, some issues, such as corruption within the community, are also challenging to deal with and affect the data's authenticity. Ensuring the work is properly executed while borrowing local power is an interesting and important topic.

4.3. Challenge Three: Orphans and children in restructured families need special attention because they are usually more vulnerable to injury and out of school

Unfortunately, it is difficult for them to be valued by their families. Due to Sierra Leone's poverty problem, supporting one's children in school is a considerable burden for the family. It also means that orphans living with relatives and stepchildren in restructured families often struggle to receive an education. Parents usually pay more attention to their own children and are more willing to pay for their school expenses. These orphans and stepchildren usually need to go out to work to increase their family income. This kind of problem is difficult to get the right solution because it still may be opposed by the family, even with funding.

5. Summary

In general, the COVID pandemic has severely harmed Sierra Leone's economic prospects and caused serious student dropout problems, especially among female students. Its heavy dependence on the outside world also makes the recovery process complicated. The government's efforts to recover from Ebola have been mainly in vain. The increase in unemployment among women has also caused students to drop out of school. The rising child marriage and early pregnancy rate have made female students lose access to education, further leading to their vulnerability in this crisis, affecting their income and living standards. The population increase brought about by early pregnancy. The lower-income level caused by dropout will affect the country's development level, making it more challenging to eliminate poverty. Therefore, an effective plan to reduce the number of students, especially female students, out of school due to the pandemic is crucial for its development. This article proposes three mitigation policies during the pandemic and two measures to prompt students to return to school after COVID-19. Finally, this article proposes a policy proposal for an unofficial education system that collaborates between the government and NGOs. Although this policy is not

directly related to COVID-19, it provides a method that NGOs can refer to improve fragile countries' education, and it is interoperable in countries with similar conditions.

Finally, although this article only uses Sierra Leone to discuss the damage to gender equality caused by the pandemic's educational and economic impact. Nevertheless, many similar countries in the world have become more vulnerable due to the pandemic. While COVID-19 is fighting for gender equality, it also allows us to re-examine our shortcomings in advocating women's rights and gender equality. We should make more men realize that fighting for gender equality benefits everyone's well-being. Involving more men can improve the situation, especially in reducing domestic violence and promoting girls' schooling. Recognition of the role of the husband and father is crucial. The goal of fighting for women's rights was never to build a world where women are supreme but to create an equal society conducive to all humankind's well-being. Therefore, this should not be working by women alone but also need the join of men.

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