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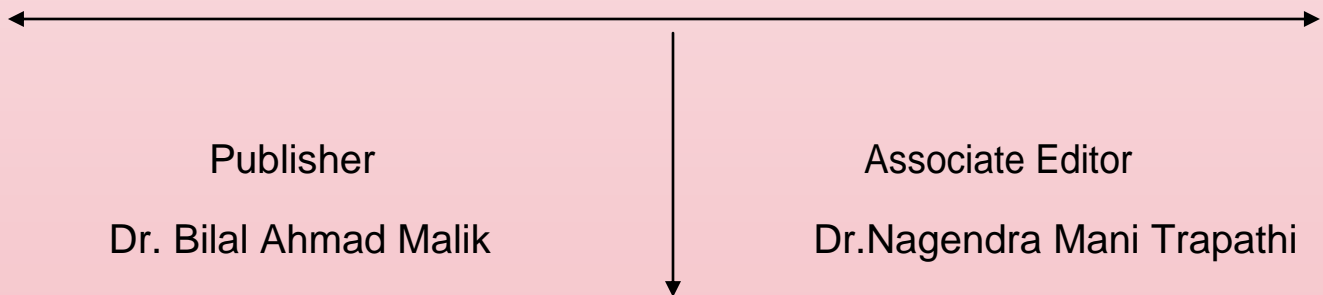
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CHALLENGES AFFECTING THE SCHOOL RETENTION OF THE GIRL CHILD IN HURUNGWE DISTRICT OF MASHONALAND WEST PROVINCE IN ZIMBABWE

NGONIDZASHE MUTANANA[1*] & DOUGLAS GASVA [2]

[1] Doctor of Philosophy Student, Centre for Development Studies, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe
[2] Quality Assurance Coordinator/Senior Lecturer, Quality Assurance Unit, Zimbabwe Open University

[*]corresponding author

ABSTRACT

With the high rate of school drop-outs being persistent, this study sought to investigate the challenges faced by the girl-child in the Hurungwe rural community of Mashonaland West Province in Zimbabwe. To answer the research question, a mixed research approach was adopted as several studies have shown that the strengths of the qualitative research method compensate the weaknesses of the quantitative research method whereas the reverse is also true. The target population was the girl-child in the rural community and a sample of 30 (n=30) participants who have dropped out of school in Hurungwe community was selected using convenience sampling. The researchers also identified 5 key informants using purposive sampling technique, which helped the researchers to explore further on the challenges raised by the targeted girl children. Questionnaires and interview guides were used to collect data from respondents. Findings revealed that the most dominant challenge is lack of money for school fees, followed by pregnancy and early marriages. Other challenges which were noted were family problems, personnel illness, need to earn money, caring for the sick and long distances to travel to school. To this end, the researchers recommended that the Zimbabwean government should enforce its education for all (EFA) policy in order to ensure that the girl child is not excluded from school, enact a robust law that prohibits the girl-child from getting married before she reaches the age of 18 years. In addition, there should be decentralisation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs)'s activities to rural communities to ensure that the communities keep informed of the necessity of education for all children, regardless of sex.

Key words: School dropout, school retention, girl-child, education, rural community.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cases of children who continue to drop out of school before they finish their education, particularly at secondary school level, continue to be on the increase. The most affected children in this regard are girls, especially those in the rural community (SADC Gender Monitor, 2006). The current study was, therefore, carried out in a rural community of Zimbabwe in order to explore the challenges that are faced by the girl child in light of the high increase of school drop outs currently being experienced. The research focused on the girl child who is mostly affected by this problem possibly due to the economic meltdown that has consequently affected children's school retention in Zimbabwe as well as the patriarchal nature of rural communities such as the area under study.

1.1   BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

School dropouts in the rural communities of Zimbabwe have become a cause for concern. The current debate is centred on the challenges faced by the girl-child as statistics such as by the SADC Gender Monitor (ibid) and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2006) have shown that girls are the most affected particularly in rural communities. Shahidul and Karim (2015) argue that the development of a society can be judged by measuring the issues that extend educational inequality prevalent in society. This argument sounds to be correct because various studies (such as by Kessler and Makeena, 1988; Lopi, 1999) have shown that a good number of vulnerable girl children are failing to complete their education in developing countries and the most affected are those from the rural community.

Thus, there are notable discrepancies in the completion of education by the girl child in the context of rural and urban setting. It would seem that rural settings continue to be the most affected compared to urban settings in spite of attempts by responsible government ministries and departments as well as some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide equal educational opportunities to children of both sexes in different social contexts.

UNICEF Zimbabwe (ibid) observes that girls are the first to drop out of school due to the social and economic crisis that many developing countries like Zimbabwe face. In such communities, impoverishment extinguishes the hope of going to school for many children. As noted by Magosvongwe et al (2010), girls are more likely than boys to lose educational opportunities due to poverty and social hardships. Poor and destitute families often cannot afford to send all their children to school and if it means choosing between sons and daughters, girls usually lose out. Even in cases where primary education is free, hidden costs such as books,

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supplies, uniforms or food may prohibit sending daughters to school. In poor societies where married women live with their husbands' kin, parents find little value in investing limited funds and resources in a daughter's education only to see another family reap rewards upon her marriage.

The World Bank Report (2013) and some researches such as by Lopi (2009) have also attributed girls' dropout trend to poverty, economic hardships, early marriages and the misplaced religious and traditional beliefs that educating a girl child is a waste of resources as she would one day get married and benefit the other family. Thus, the girl-child in developing countries is part of the disadvantaged social groups in the world today. School dropouts have also been attributed to other costs such as low income or household labour. If household money or chores are needed, girls often end up in the paid child labour force or are required to fetch water, find firewood and care for younger siblings or ill family members while their parents work to make a living. It would also appear that because of poverty, some girls are socialized to become home keepers and child-bearers, placing less value on their educational attainment.

Early marriages for girls are pervasive in many cultures in poor and developing countries including Zimbabwe and it would seem that bride prices are incentives for parents to forgo educating their daughters (Nicholas, 2003). It would also appear that children whose mothers have no education are more likely to be out of school compared to children whose mothers have some education. As such, Elisabeth and Ellen (2002) advise that it is important to get as many girls as possible into school and encourage them to stay on to complete their education as they are the future mothers.

Some researchers have suggested that there are few women teachers, especially in higher levels of education to provide the much needed role models for young girls. In cases of pregnancy, official or formal educational policies prohibit married or pregnant girls from attending school in Zimbabwe. Therefore, once the girl is married or pregnant, her education is compromised or virtually stops. The researchers observe that these days there are backyard colleges and girls who would have dropped out of school in the urban setup are able to continue with their education but those who reside in rural communities have no option but to keep out of school.

Most schools in rural communities are located far from communities and the distance travelled to school may usually force them to drop out of school. As girl children, they may be affected physically and psychologically. Long distances also mean getting up earlier and doing homework later, thus, reducing the free time needed for a balanced life. Some girls may need to be accompanied to and from rural schools especially in light of an increase

in cases of rape in rural communities. This means that if there is no one to accompany them to school, they often cannot go to school. Similarly, parents are likely to prevent some girl children from going to school because they are afraid for their safety.

In the same vein, Magosvongwe (Ibid: 58) note that:

> Requirements for accessible, gender-sensitive schooling go beyond the physical structure of a building or the classroom content. If schools are located far from communities, it means students must travel on unsafe roads or nonexistent roads. In this case, the girl child may be simply kept at home for safety reasons. Thus, there are many non-curriculum considerations that support girls' education, and failing to provide them makes education inaccessible for them. For example, schools need safe water and clean sanitation facilities especially for girls, and lack of safe water and sanitation facilities, shut girls out of school. Even in the case where girls must trudge many kilometers for safe water and other essential resources, they have neither the time nor energy for school.

Also, the devastating effect of HIV and AIDS may be another contributing factor to the girls dropping out of school in rural communities. More often than not, girls are taken out of school to take care of ill and bedridden family members or they are forced to work (child labour) to replace lost income. This is often the case in poor and developing countries where caregivers for those infected by HIV and AIDS and eventually become bedridden because of illness are absent (Lopi, ibid).

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Considering that education is a fundamental human right which is also a tool for accessing other human rights, its importance to all children cannot be overemphasised. Parents, schools, government and society in general all strive to ensure that children remain in school and ultimately realise their ambitions of educational success. However, the problem at stake is that there are several challenges that affect the school retention of the girl child; resulting in the girl child often dropping out of school and missing out on school completion.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the current study was to explore the challenges that affect the school retention of the girl child which result in her often dropping out of school. The study was guided by research questions including the following:

- What are the different circumstances of boys and girls which affect their school retention?
- What are the peculiar challenges that affect the school retention of the girl child?
- In what ways does family and society fuel the challenges of the girl child in school?
- How may the school retention of girls be ensured for the school completion of the girl child?

2.0 ABOUT THE STUDY

The current study explored the challenges faced by the girl child with regards school retention in Hurungwe District of Mashonaland West Province in Zimbabwe. Hurungwe District, is found in the northern part of Zimbabwe and is typical of the impoverished, underdeveloped and patriarchal communities of the country. Studies have shown that in areas such as this, there is generally a decrease in the number of girls that enrol for secondary school education after completion of primary school and few complete secondary education due to a host of gender-related challenges (World Bank Report, ibid).

The researchers noted that this is typical of underdeveloped and developing countries like Zimbabwe. Enrolments and completion rates, especially in secondary education, have remained skewed in favour of boys (Ministry of Education, Art, Sports and Culture, 2005). The situation has remained the same as shown by statistics in the study area. According to the enrolment statistics of Hurungwe district, enrolment statistics in 2013, the girls' primary enrolment was 43 556 whilst secondary enrolment for female students was 11 584, which generally paints a sad picture with regards girls' school drop-out rate. This study, therefore, sought to explore the challenges faced by the girl-child in light of the fact that their school drop-out rate is unpalatable and tantamount to undermining the development of communities.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, a mixed approach was used in this study. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) describe a mixed approach as one that involves mixing qualitative and quantitative research methods or concept

characteristics. The two approaches can compensate each other's weakness and complement each other's strength. Generally, the shortcomings of quantitative methods are the strengths of qualitative research methods and the reverse is true. Put simply, qualitative methods fill in the gaps in information that cannot be filled by quantitative methods which is also true about the reverse.

The target population were the girl-child in Hurungwe district who dropped out of school. As such, a sample of 30 (N=30) participants comprising girls who dropped out of school were identified to give the challenges that have caused them to drop out of school. In the study, 5 key informants were also identified from government departments and the civil society to have their perceptions on the problem under study. In identifying these participants, the researcher opted for purposive sampling and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to purposefully identify key informants by virtue of their characteristics, exposures and experiences (Mutanana and Mutara, 2015). On the other hand, convenience sampling, or as it is sometimes called; opportunity sampling, in consistence with Cohen et al (2007), involved choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size was obtained or those who happened to be available and accessible at the time.

The researchers used two research instruments in data collection; namely, questionnaires and interview guides. Robinson (2005) asserts that the advantage of a questionnaire as a research instrument lies in the fact that it is very efficient in terms of researchers' time and effort, thus, they are capable of collecting large quantities of information within a short period of time. Questionnaires were distributed to the girl-children who have dropped out of school and these had open-ended and closed-ended questions. Interviews which were used as another set of instruments were considered appropriate as they assured the researchers of responses and researchers could further probe and get more information than anticipated (Masuku, 1999). Thus, interviews allowed researchers to probe further into the challenges faced by the drop-out girl-child in the rural community of Hurungwe.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Figure 1: Reasons for girls' dropping out of school (N=30)
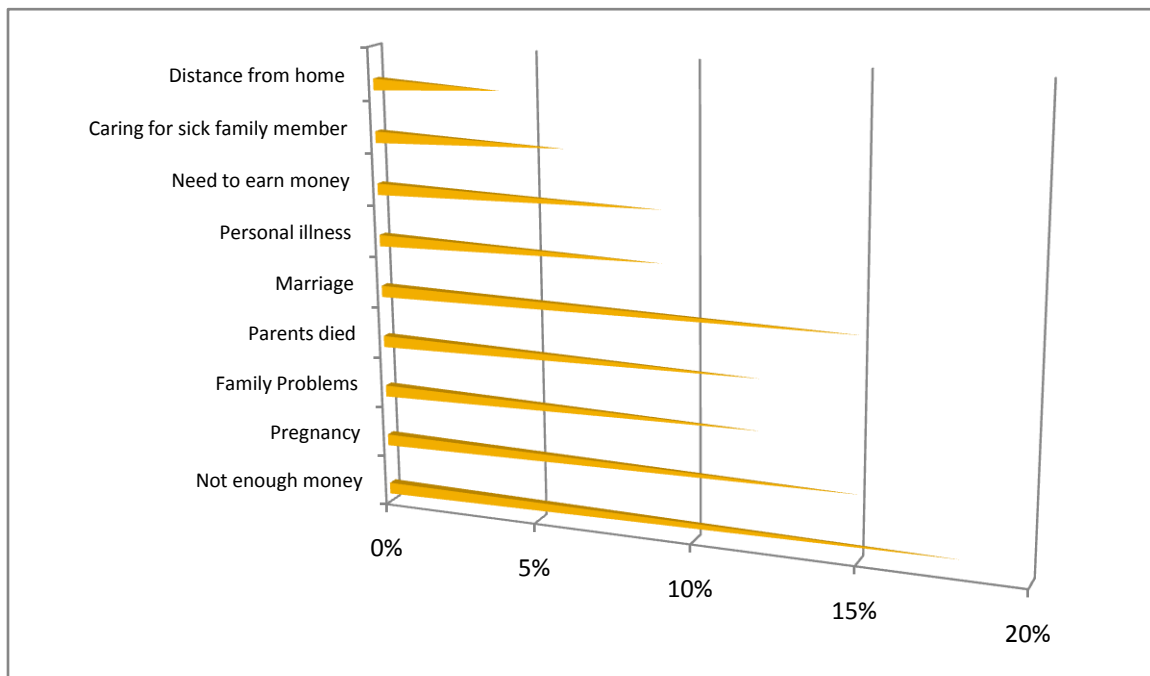
Source: Study Results 2015

The above results showed that most girls (18%) dropped out of school because they didn't have enough money to meet school needs. A key informant confirmed that, indeed, most children, be it boys or girls, are failing to continue with their education because they have no money. This challenge is more pronounced for the girl child as Magosvongwe et al (ibid) noted that girls are more likely than boys to lose educational opportunities due to poverty. Further probed on financial support mechanisms such as Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), another key informant stated that it normally covers individuals with special problems. There is also an organisation, CAMFED that offers financial assistance to the girl child in the community but it only helps orphans. What it shows is that poverty is contributing to the school dropout rate of the girl child in Hurungwe district.

The results also indicated that 15% of the girls dropped out of school because they were pregnant. A key informant explained that these pregnancies were linked to poverty identified as the main factor. Information gathered also revealed that the majority of the girls are marrying before they reach the age of 16 years. Even if having sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 16 years is considered as an offence in Zimbabwe, a key informant claimed that these cases go unreported, or if they are reported the cases are often withdrawn before the

offenders are punished because the parents would have been paid.

Even before they get pregnant, some girls drop out of school because of early marriages as shown by 15% of the participants who indicated that they had dropped out of school because they got married. A key informant argued that because of poverty, parents end up "selling" their children. '*Early marriages are becoming a challenge in this and other rural communities and the government of Zimbabwe should assist by enacting a law that prohibits the girl child to get married before she reaches the age of 18 years, that is if the situation is to get under control'*, explained an informant.

Findings also revealed that 12% have dropped out because of family problems. A key informant attributed these family problems mainly to marital conflicts. The study also revealed that 12% had also dropped out of school because their parents had died. Further probed on organisations that assist orphans in the district like CAMFED, a key informant explained that '*some do not take up the assistance because of lack of encouragement from their guardians or sheer ignorance'*.

Some girls dropped out of school because of personal illness (9%). '*The majority of the people in the community still believe in traditional health seeking behaviours; and as such, do not go for medication if the need arises'*, explained a key informant. Consequently, some have also dropped out to take care of the sick (6%). What it shows is that health related matters, be it personal or of a family member; are proving to be costly in light of school retention challenges faced by the girl child in rural communities.

The study showed that about 9% dropped out of school because of the need to earn money. A key informant claimed that '*the majority of the girls who drop out end up being domestic workers'*. What it shows is that poverty is the dominating factor as these girls would want to experience a new life all together. However, another key informant noted that these girls are often abused and eventually they find their way back home, though it would not be easy for them to be reinstated back into school.

Study results also identified distance to be another barrier for the girl child. As shown by 4% of the participants, travelling long distances has motivated a few girls to drop out of school. A key informant indicated that '*there have been an increase in cases of sexual abuse in the community and consequently some are dropping out on the pretext that they fear to be abused, especially those who travel long distances'*.

Findings also revealed that some religious and cultural practices are a barrier to girls' education at the household and community level. A key informant noted that the culture in the community favoured the education of boys more than that of girls, which is consistent with patriarchal societies. As such, the low participation of girls in education is also a result of cultural forces outside the school as well as traditional gender roles. Then there are issues affecting girls' education like traditional and religious practices associated with adolescence and rites of passage, which are related to the construction of sexuality of young boys and girls. From the researchers' background knowledge about the community, some apostolic sects also tend to marry off young girls to older members of the sect, which does not only compromise girls' educational opportunities but totally excludes them from school.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

From these findings, it was observed that the girls from the rural community are faced with many challenges which include poverty, pregnancy, early marriages, family problems, parents who have died, personal illness, need to earn money, caring for the sick and long distances to school among some other things. These findings are in agreement with observations that were made elsewhere by other researchers, for instance, Mawere (2012) discovered that most of the girl child school drop-out cases were a result of early marriages, abject poverty and economic hardships. However, Mawere (ibid) also observed that religious and traditional practices also work against the education of the girl child.

Alika and Egbochuka (2009) found out that death of parents, pregnancy, ill health and inadequate teaching are some of the reasons behind girls' dropping out of school. Similarly, in this study, it was observed that death of parents, pregnancy, and personal health are some of the contributers to girl child school drops outs. Early marriage is another challenge that is faced by the girl child in the rural community. Similarly, Mohammed (2000) is of the opinion that girls may be withdrawn from school if a good marriage prospect arises. Holcamp (2009) argues that girls' dropout rate becomes higher because some parents consider girls' schooling as of little or no benefit when they leave their own family after getting married.

One interesting finding in this study was that some girls in the area under study are dropping out inspite of the great support from programmes and organisations that are trying to assist the underprivileged. BEAM and CAMFED are good examples that support the girl child, especially orphaned girls and those who cannot afford to get financial assistance from their parents. On the other hand, there is noticeable reluctance by some parents in the

community under study to send the girl child to school. Kotawal, Neslima and Rani (2001) cited in Kingdon (2005) are of the same opinion when they state that some of the causes of school drop outs among girls in rural areas are reluctance by parents to send them to school and participation in domestic activities, which are results also drawn in the study.

The issue of the girl child being used to participate in domestic activities has been quite topical for some time. Glick and Sahn (2000) state that there is gender bias or pro-male bias in the case of parental investment in children as well as allocation of gender roles. Similarly, Leung and Zhang (2008) state that the parents' preference for sons encourage more of them to invest in their sons' well-being to take care of parents who have limited/lower income and resources, causing girls to leave school earlier than boys due to school fees and other related problems. What it shows is that patriarchy is still predominant in most rural communities. Decision making about rural girls' participation in education is also influenced by the household head within the family, which often puts the girl child at risk as patriarchal societies tend to favour the education of sons at the expense of girls' education (Chege & Sifuna, 2006). Thus, the tendency for parents to support boys' education over girls is still predominant in developing countries.

Findings in this study revealed that revealed schooling costs (not having enough money for school) are the main reason for school dropouts amongst the girl children in the rural community under study. Some people in the rural community are of the perception that educating a girl is economically and socially costly and unnecessary. The costs may be in the form of tuition fees, school levies, uniforms, stationery just to mention but a few. Shahidul and Karim (2005) agree with this finding when they state that direct and indirect schooling costs are important factors for the education of children and these become more problematic to ensure for girls in patriarchal societies. In Zimbabwe, the researchers note that secondary education is usually more costly than primary education and as such, fees tend to be higher as one progresses from primary to secondary, which, therefore, further compromises girls' educational opportunities as they move on to the next level. Alika and Egbochuku (2009) are also of the opinion that the socio-economic status of the girls imposes considerable constraints upon continuing their stay in school.

The study also revealed that some vulnerable girls drop out of school in search of employment to earn a living, and in most cases, they get employed as domestic workers. UNICEF (2004) has attributed this challenge to the absence of parental care and guidance. In addition, this leads to an increased risk of the girl child who would have dropped out of school, with some girls ending up facing the risk of being abused in the process. The study has

also shown that female students tend to drop out of school to take care of the sick, especially with the advent of HIV and AIDS. In some cases, if mothers work and get wage outside of the home, female children take some responsibilities of the household which causes them to drop out (Fuller and Liang, 1999).

It was also discovered that the distance travelled to schools by girls also hinder their willingness to attend school. Some schools are too far from home and young girls tend to drop out more due to the vulnerability to sexual harassment. Ainsworth et al. (2005) also made a similar observation when they noted that the likelihood of attending secondary school for girls decreases with greater the distance compared to the nearer secondary schools. What it shows is that school distance gives the motivation to girls to stay in school. Ainsworth et al. (ibid) emphasised that close proximity to schools had a positive motivating impact on girls' school retention. Elsewhere in countries such as Burkina Faso, it has been established that satellite schools have helped girls to receive education close to their villages and homes and this model has helped Burkina Faso achieve a very high girls' secondary enrolment (UNICEF, ibid).

The death of a parent has also been identified as another reason for girls' dropping out of school. Women in most developing countries depend on man economically, hence, when the man dies, this leaves them without financial resources to send their children to school, which also compromises the girl child's chances of remaining in school. This finding is consistent with Grant and Hallman (2006)'s finding when they showed that children in poor communities whose parents were dead were more likely to have dropped out of school than those whose parents were alive, with this trend often affecting the girl child more than the boy child.

Related studies also found out that cultural norms and beliefs constrain the girls' education in rural communities. Save the Children (2005) agree with this perception when it states that cultural norms and beliefs constrain girls' education especially in many developing parts of the world. Chege and Sifuna (ibid) also examined this claim and concluded that many cultures favour the education of boys more than that of girls. Chimombo (2005) believes that the pattern of transmitting and gaining of religious knowledge and power has been influential in determining the access and exclusion of girls to formal education In addition, Magosvongwe et al (ibid) also observed that some African socio-cultural factors including patriarchy and differential gender-roles highly impacted negatively on the school retention of girls.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings, the researchers concluded that the dominant challenge in the predominantly patriarchal rural set-up is poverty and lack of money to support the girl-child's education. Because of poverty, some girls end up looking for jobs as domestic workers which also exposes them to further risks of abuse. Early pregnancies and marriages are also resulting in the girl-child's dropping out of school before they finish their secondary education. Some girls fail to continue with their education because their parents would have died and family problems, personal illness and the need to care for sick family members have also been identified as barriers to the girl-child's retention in school. Furthermore, long distances to school are also an impediment to girls' education considering their vulnerability to sexual abuse and security fears by their parents.

Basing on these study findings and conclusions, the researchers recommended that:

- The Zimbabwean government should enforce its education for all (EFA) policy in order to ensure that the girl child, particularly the vulnerable and rural girl, is not excluded from school
- The government should enact a robust law that prohibits girls to get married before they reach the age of 18 years and to ensure that parents who accept lobola for children below this age have been punished
- Non-governmental organisations must take a leading role in carrying out awareness campaigns on the importance of educating the girl-child in the rural communities while also focussing on educational interventions meant to benefit and retain the girl child in school
- Non-governmental organisations should be urged to decentralise their operations in order to ensure the target population, in this case the girl-child in the rural communities is adequately assisted in order to remain in school.
- The establishment of Satellite schools have proved to be quite effective in other countries, and the government of Zimbabwe is also encouraged to ensure they are spread throughout the country to motivate the girl-child to attend school considering that schools would be nearby where the girl child is safe from possible sexual abuse on the way.

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