

Revealing Gendered Youth Lessons: Human Rights Revelations from Participatory Research in Lesotho during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted children and adolescents, prompting UNICEF Lesotho to embark on innovative participatory qualitative research. This meta-analysis aims to uncover the unique contributions of participatory methodologies in understanding gender disparities among Lesotho's youth during this global crisis. Employing a gender-sensitive and human rights-based approach, this meta-analysis underscores the paramount importance of participatory research methodologies. Participatory research not only contributes to deeper and more comprehensive knowledge but simultaneously empowers young individuals to express their perceptions and beliefs using innovative tools like photovoice and storytelling. Engaging 101 participants aged 10 to 17 across three districts, this research sheds light on the intricate and gendered nuances of the pandemic's effects on Lesotho's youth. The findings, resulting from an extensive process of data synthesis and thematic analysis, provide profound insights into the differential experiences of young men and women. Photovoice, in particular, offers a unique perspective on how genders perceive their psychological and emotional challenges, highlighting disparities in coping mechanisms and emotional resilience. Moreover, the analysis of enforced isolation and other pandemic-related issues transcends mere data retrieval. It underscores young women's heightened domestic responsibilities, exacerbated difficulties in accessing education and pursuing life aspirations, and the prevalent feelings of seclusion and anxiety, distinctly contrasting with young men's experiences. This research underscores the imperative of participatory research in addressing the unique challenges faced by young women and men during a crisis. It fosters a profound and equitable understanding of their experiences, offering valuable insights for the development of more responsive interventions and policies.

Keywords: Youth Gender Differences, Participatory Research, COVID-19 Impact, Human Rights

1 Introduction

Lesotho, a country with majestic highlands and profound valleys, is embattled by a gamut of socio-economic challenges that belie its scenic tranquillity [1], [2], [3], [4],

[5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10]. The nation's geographic positioning as a landlocked enclave within South Africa presents unique impediments to trade and development. Infrastructural limitations, particularly in rural areas, are a significant hurdle, stymieing the delivery of essential services and exacerbating the vulnerability of remote communities. These challenges are emblematic of wider structural issues that impede the nation's economic stability and potential for growth, leaving its people, particularly the youth, to navigate a labyrinth of intense and varied difficulties with significant consequences for their future [1], [4], [5], [11], [12], [13].

Public health in Lesotho presents a multifaceted tableau of challenges, characterized by one of the globe's most prevalent rates of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, in addition to a spectrum of other health issues, such as non-communicable diseases, and nutrition-related concerns, including stunting [14], [15], [16], [17]. Healthcare services are strained under the burden of these endemic diseases, which are compounded by a scarcity of medical professionals and facilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further strained this fragile system, disrupted the delivery of essential health services, and exposed the need for robust and adaptive healthcare infrastructures capable of withstanding multifaceted health crises [1], [18], [19], [20].

The economy of Lesotho is heavily reliant on a narrow range of industries, with textiles, agriculture, and remittances forming the backbone of its financial system. This dependence has rendered the nation susceptible to external economic shocks. The pandemic-induced global slowdown has severely impacted these sectors, precipitating a steep decline in national income, and leading to widespread job losses. Consequently, the economic downturn has engendered a palpable sense of urgency to revitalize and diversify Lesotho's economic base to ensure greater resilience to global market fluctuations [21], [5], [13], [21].

Educational attainment, a cornerstone for the nation's advancement, faces its own set of challenges, particularly for children and youth who are differently abled [22], [23]. A significant proportion of Lesotho's youth is ensnared in a cycle of educational disadvantage, amplified by insufficient infrastructure and teaching resources[24]. Furthermore, the disruption of education threatens long-term human capital development, which is essential for the country's socio-economic emancipation [24], [25], [26], [22], [23].

The arrival of COVID-19 in Lesotho has acted as a force multiplier, magnifying the already existing challenges, and disproportionately affecting the youth [24], [22]. The pandemic's disruption has stalled educational and employment opportunities, pivotal for the personal and professional development of young Basotho. With the closing of schools and loss of income-generating activities, many youths faced the dilemma of prolonged dependency and the deferment of their aspirations.

The abrupt interruption to education and work not only stunts individual growth but also delays the overall progression of the nation's human capital, upon which Lesotho's future hinges. Moreover, gender dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis in Lesotho have brought to the fore the stark realities faced by young women and girls [24]. Lockdown measures and the economic downturn have led to a surge in domestic responsibilities and have heightened the risk of gender-based violence, compromising the safety and mental health of young women.

The pandemic has also illuminated the resilience and adaptability of Lesotho's youth [24]. Faced with unprecedented challenges, young Basotho have demonstrated an incredible capacity for survival and community mobilization. From the adoption of digital platforms for learning and entrepreneurship to the engagement in community-based responses to the pandemic, the youth have been pivotal in shaping adaptive strategies. Nonetheless, these positive strides must be matched by governmental and societal support to harness this potential fully. It is essential that interventions are youth-centric, leveraging the insights and experiences of young people to ensure that the post-pandemic recovery is both inclusive and equitable, particularly addressing the gender-specific challenges that have been exacerbated by the crisis.

2 Methodology

This research undertakes a meta-analytical re-examination of seminal UNICEF findings [27] focusing on the gendered experiences of youth in Lesotho during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is meticulously crafted, transcending the original study's scope to contextualize and intensify the results within a broader, interpretive framework. A re-evaluation of the primary data was conducted, complemented by a systematic literature review to enhance the thematic interpretation and connect the emergent themes with the broader discourse on global health and human rights. This approach offered a more comprehensive examination of the multifaceted realities of children and adolescents, aligning their lived experiences with the ongoing global narrative of health equity and human rights.

The original study's qualitative framework provided a rich tableau for exploring subjective youth experiences. Purposefully chosen for its depth, the design was particularly sensitive to the socio-cultural nuances of Lesotho, ensuring that the narratives captured were deeply resonant with the nation's unique social tapestry. This design was paramount in painting a vivid portrayal of the youth's experiences during a significant historical epoch, the aftermath of Lesotho's pandemic lockdown. Data was systematically collected between February and April 2022 across three ecologically varied districts in Lesotho, each meticulously selected to represent a distinct facet of the pandemic's impact. Maseru, with its elevated infection rates; Leribe, characterized by population density; and Thaba Tseka, known for its poverty and limited access to resources, formed the backdrop against which the spectrum of pandemic-induced experiences was illuminated.

The study's participants comprised 101 children and adolescents, specifically including those from the societal margins, ultra-poor households, and those with disabilities, demographics often rendered invisible in larger datasets. This intentional inclusivity reinforced the study's commitment to representing the full spectrum of youth experiences, providing a voice to those frequently muted in research. Capturing the transitional phase of adolescence, the participants, aged 10 to 17, embodied a cohort at a decisive developmental crossroads. The chosen methods were tailored to delve into the

intricate web of adolescence, now complicated by the far-reaching shadows of the pandemic. This approach aimed to highlight the pivotal changes in their life trajectories triggered by the extended crisis.

The methodology integrated a participatory framework, intentionally selected to deeply engage with and interpret the lived experiences of the study participants. Central to this approach was photovoice, a technique that challenges and transcends the bounds of conventional research methods [28]. Photovoice entrusts participants with the power of visual documentation, transforming photography into a medium of self-expression and narrative. This approach is particularly resonant for individuals from marginalized sectors, offering a platform where their voices, often side-lined, can command attention, and engender dialogue [28], [29], [30]. In the study, photovoice proved to be a crucial instrument, permitting children and young individuals to chronicle and articulate the distinctive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their existences. It expanded the reach of traditional qualitative research by prioritizing visual forms of communication over verbal ones, often uncovering deeper strata of context and significance. Through the lens of their cameras, the study's participants brought light to their realities, capturing both the difficulties brought about by the pandemic and their personal goals and fortitude [27].

Significantly, photovoice promoted the study's participants as co-researchers, recognizing their unique insights as vital information. This method did more than democratize the research, it instilled in the participants a sense of belonging and contribution to the findings. The study acknowledged the power of visual storytelling which, combined with group dialogues, deepened the understanding of the intricate ways the pandemic has redefined the lives of young people. The photovoice approach gave participants a robust voice, often muted in traditional research contexts, and sparked a dynamic exchange between their personal experiences and the broader socio-cultural narrative. Moreover, the study meticulously designed a photovoice process that enabled children and adolescents to convey their narratives with sincerity and transparency. They were equipped with the necessary instruments and direction to investigate and record their surroundings, resulting in a collection of photographs that stood as a poignant chronicle of their experiences throughout the pandemic. These images, paired with the participants' personal accounts, became an essential component of the study, offering immediate understanding into the intensified gendered inequities and socio-economic trials during this international crisis.

Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted to create a collective dialogue among participants, fostering an environment where shared experiences could be explored, common themes identified, and diverse viewpoints discussed. These discussions helped weave together a tapestry of narratives that reflected the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by children, adolescents, and their families during the pandemic. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted to delve into individual stories, allowing for a deeper exploration of personal journeys, coping mechanisms, and aspirations. These interviews provided nuanced insights into the intersectional dynamics of gender, age, socio-economic status, and disability, shedding light on the complex realities of the participants.

Overall, the participatory nature of the study empowered participants to actively contribute to the research process, ensuring that their voices were heard, valued, and incorporated into the findings. It facilitated a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the gendered disparities and challenges faced by children and adolescents in Lesotho, particularly in the context of education, domestic responsibilities, mental health, and access to information during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Results and Discussion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the distinct experiences of stress and anxiety among different genders became acutely pronounced. Both boys and girls experienced heightened levels of worry and apprehension, attributable to the intense upheaval caused by the pandemic.

"All participants in the study (across age groups, gender, disability status) describe their lives during the early pandemic period similarly and used expressions like "life had stopped" or "it was just a strange life" (Sheep, 10 years old, male, IDI16, CwD). The pandemic was explained as "a year seated at home doing nothing" (Beetroot, 12 years old, female, FGD4), or a year in which they felt "bored for way too long" (Habashoe, 13 years old, male, IDI10)" [27].

This tumultuous period was marked by a pervasive sense of instability and uncertainty, contributing to increased concern over future prospects, the health and financial stability of families, and the prospects for continuing education. The following personal accounts of the participants encapsulate the emotional toll of the pandemic.

"The pandemic often made them feel 'not happy' (Chicken, 10 years old female IDI15 CwD) and 'not free because he's [fictional character] not able to talk to his friends like he used to in the past' (Lendu, 16 years old male FGD6)" (...) Some of the interviewees feared contracting the virus and chose not to leave their homes to stay safe and keep their relatives safe. As one interviewee put it: 'I did not want to contract corona so I would sit indoors' (TPN, 16 years old male FGD3)" [27].

Furthermore, the pandemic has highlighted and intensified the gender-specific challenges faced by girls. They bore the brunt of increased domestic responsibilities, a burden compounded by the economic struggles their families faced during the pandemic. For many girls, this meant not only managing an increased workload at home but also contending with the pressure to contribute financially, all while their educational opportunities dwindled.

"For some of the children and adolescents interviewed the economic problems faced during the pandemic had consequences for their education. For example, parents could not afford to buy books and stationery, let alone digital media tools: 'Some of us were not able to attend online classes because of finance' (Juju, 15 years old, female, IDI11)" [27].

"It [COVID-19] affected [my family] because there were times when we did not have anything to eat we were somehow starving [...] challenge was that there

were many people that we had to share food with that is my sisters and on the other hand we had to share with our shepherds who stay in the cattle post (Queen-star, 14 years old female)" [27].

As the pandemic forced schools to shutter, the domestic sphere inadvertently became the focal point of daily existence, thrusting girls into the forefront of additional household chores and caregiving responsibilities. This shift not only diverted their time from educational and self-development activities but also exposed the deep-rooted gender biases in the division of labour at home. Girls, often groomed for caretaking roles, encountered a magnification of these duties, reinforcing gender disparities and potentially perpetuating a cycle of inequality. In the absence of adequate support or acknowledgment of these intensified roles, such expectations directly encroach upon their fundamental human rights, including the right to education, as well as their rights to rest, leisure, and holistic well-being. The closure of schools did not just mean a loss of educational opportunities for girls but also an increased risk of gender-based violence.

Boys, including herd boys in rural settings, also felt the pandemic's economic sting, articulating a palpable concern for their families' financial security. Herd boys, in particular, faced the dual challenge of sustaining their families' livelihoods while trying to uphold their academic endeavours. This balance was precarious as the need to support their families often collided with the pursuit of their education, highlighting a pressing need for support systems that reconcile economic contributions with educational continuity. These boys, accustomed to prolonged periods away from their families while tending livestock in remote locations, found their isolation intensified by the pandemic, which cut them off further from family ties, peer connections, and access to educational resources. The deepening of this isolation had considerable implications for their mental health. The sustained periods of solitude contributed to increased reports of loneliness, depression, and anxiety among these boys. The risks extended to their social development, vital life skills, and experiences that are often gained through regular community interaction and attendance at school were missed. Consequently, the socialization process for these herd boys was interrupted, potentially delaying, or even permanently altering the development of crucial interpersonal skills.

"Some of the herd boys found their work difficult, especially when they were isolated for longer periods of time. They described it as a time characterized by loneliness. They mentioned seeing no one during the time spent with their cattle apart from one or two other boys herding with or close to them (...) Herding animals makes you a poor person [...] You will not have a future at all. With animals, you will always be chasing after them and you will not have time to study at all" (Potatoes, 13 years old male ID16)" [27].

Children and adolescents with disabilities encountered a myriad of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for girls with disabilities, these obstacles were exacerbated by a system that frequently fell short in providing accurate diagnosis and tailored support, particularly concerning the intersection of gender and disability. Girls and young women struggle also extended to accessing critical information and resources, particularly during the lockdown. The gendered dimensions of this access issue

made it especially challenging for them to utilize pandemic-related information, education, and health resources, highlighting an urgent need for inclusive approaches that prioritized both gender and disability in service provision.

"During the lockdown, a few children with disabilities who usually board at school, missed the school facilities where they have their own bedroom and hot running water, which they did not have at home. Only one child mentioned missing their home and parental support while living at school. With the closure of schools, learning how to cook was also a matter of survival for one child with disabilities: "I told my mother that I go for long periods without food when she is not there ... she taught me how to fry eggs" (Sheep, 10 years old, male, IDI16, CwD)" [27].

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed distinct gendered patterns in how children and adolescents coped with the challenges it brought. Girls, drawing upon the support of their communities and families, exhibited a resilience deeply rooted in social connections. This reliance on social networks allowed them to navigate uncertainties and adversities with a sense of collective strength. In contrast, boys, especially those in traditional roles like herd boys, tended to rely more on solitary coping mechanisms. This divergence in coping strategies reflected broader societal gender norms and disparities in resilience strategies, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of gendered responses to crises. Additionally, while not highly common, it is worth mentioning that negative coping mechanisms were also present among children and adolescents interviewed.

"Children and adolescents interviewed only mentioned negative coping mechanisms a few times, including the use of alcohol, drugs, the increase in violence among peers or within the household, and engagement in petty crime (in 2 focus groups out of 13)" [27].

These negative coping mechanisms underscore the importance of addressing mental health and psychosocial support needs among children and adolescents during crises, highlighting the vulnerabilities and stressors that can lead to maladaptive coping strategies.

The participants in the study also demonstrated a commendable level of agency in seeking information about COVID-19 and adhering to preventive measures. However, their proactive engagement was often hindered by incomplete understanding and access to accurate information. This underscored the urgent need for tailored and gender-responsive health communication strategies that address the specific information needs of different genders during health crises. Such strategies should take into account the social and cultural contexts that shape gendered experiences and perceptions of health-related information.

Finally, amidst the pandemic's upheaval, the aspirations of children and adolescents reflected both resilience and vulnerability, intricately shaped by the multifaceted impact of the crisis. Girls, advocating for uninterrupted education and skills development, faced heightened domestic responsibilities exacerbated by deeply ingrained societal norms. This balancing act underscored the critical intersection of gender equity and the fundamental right to education, emphasizing the challenges faced by girls in maintaining educational

continuity amidst crisis conditions. The study highlighted the need for targeted interventions that address gender-specific barriers to education, such as increased caregiving responsibilities and limited access to educational resources.

4 Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the profound gendered disparities that children and adolescents in Lesotho grapple with, particularly concerning education, domestic responsibilities, and mental health. Girls have borne the brunt of increased domestic burdens, facing elevated risks of gender-based violence and encountering significant obstacles in accessing education and pursuing their life goals. On the other hand, boys, especially those in traditional roles like herd boys, have also confronted unique challenges such as economic instability, heightened isolation, and disruptions to their educational journeys. These challenges underscore the urgent need for targeted support strategies that address the distinct and intersecting needs of different genders during crises. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender norms and disparities, magnifying the urgency of interventions that promote gender equality and empower marginalized groups. For instance, the intersectionality of gender and disability has further compounded challenges for girls with disabilities, highlighting the imperative of inclusive approaches that prioritize both gender and disability in service provision and policy formulation.

Coping mechanisms exhibited a gendered pattern, with girls often drawing strength from social support systems, while boys, particularly herd boys, tended to rely on solitary strategies. Although less common, negative coping mechanisms were also observed, emphasizing the crucial role of mental health and psychosocial support in crisis response and recovery efforts. Moreover, the study revealed the commendable agency demonstrated by participants in seeking information about COVID-19 and adhering to preventive measures. However, gaps in understanding and limited access to accurate information underscore the need for tailored and gender-responsive health communication strategies that bridge knowledge gaps and address diverse information needs.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the indispensable significance of adopting a gender-sensitive and human rights-based approach in navigating the complex challenges faced by children and adolescents, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative to prioritize inclusive policies, targeted interventions, and robust support systems that uphold gender equity, safeguard human rights, and foster resilience among Lesotho's youth as they navigate the aftermath of the pandemic and chart their paths toward a brighter future:

- **Foster Youth Participation and Empowerment:** Empower children and adolescents, especially girls, through meaningful participation in decision-making processes and community initiatives. This involves creating platforms for youth voices to be heard, supporting youth-led projects that address gender inequalities, and providing opportunities for skills development and leadership training to build resilience and agency among young people.
- **Implement Gender-Responsive Education Policies:** Develop and implement education policies that are gender-responsive and address the specific barriers faced

by girls in accessing education during crises. This includes providing targeted support for girls with disabilities, addressing gender-based violence risks in educational settings, and ensuring access to digital learning resources for all students, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas.

- **Implement Inclusive Policies and Programs:** Develop and implement inclusive policies and programs that actively promote the inclusion and protection of minority groups, including persons with disabilities, and marginalized communities. This includes ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and social services for all individuals, regardless of their background or identity. Additionally, create awareness campaigns and training initiatives to foster cultural sensitivity, respect diversity, and prevent discrimination and prejudice within society.
- **Strengthen Mental Health Support Services:** Enhance mental health support services for children and adolescents, focusing on addressing the unique stressors and challenges experienced by different genders. This includes providing psychosocial support programs in schools, community-based mental health initiatives, and capacity building for educators and healthcare professionals on gender-sensitive mental health care.

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