



A call for joint action is urgently required in Middle East countries due to prolonged school closures/banning of girl students

“Seek knowledge, from the cradle to the grave” - Prophet Muhammad (SAWA) on education

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School closure during the COVID-19 has impacted the children's mental health globally (1). According to UNICEF “around 214 million children globally – or 1 in 7 – have missed more than three-quarters of their in-person learning”. In some countries the schools are closed for a longer period (1).

Closure of schools' for prolonged time harms students' physical and mental health. It is likely to contribute to a wide range of the already existing public health challenges including worsening mental health, increase in domestic violence, worsening of menstrual hygiene, increased burden of early pregnancies and decline in health literacy in most of the middle –east countries (MECs) (2).

In some middle-east countries, the schools are closed/restricted to certain students per say female students/girls due to political unrest or socio-cultural controversy (type of school uniform, timings). In those countries, it is said that -whenever school uniforms are designed based on the components of regional law,

customs, and culture, then, the girl schools will reopen (3). However, this technical issue has already taken over 200 days and yet the schools are either closed or banned for secondary and high school girls across the countries (4). It is also a fact that traditional cultural issues in a male-dominant country like India, Afghanistan, Pakistan have already been present, acting as a barrier by families toward girls' education (5-7).

This decision on continuity of closing the girls' schools is backed by a minority of people in those countries. According to UNICEF, the school ban decision by those countries will mean a majority of girls not being allowed to attend schools as of April 2022 (8). The Banning of girls from attending schools will increase the feeling of hopelessness and fear of losing their ambition on what they want to become in the future. It is likely to increase the mental health problems among girls similar to how it affected them



during the country wide lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic (9).

The already low rate of health literacy among girls and women will be affected by the closure of schools. In LMICs, where only on an average one in five women has an adequate health literacy level, banning girls' schools for prolonged time is likely to accelerate this issue and lead to a lower level of health-related literacy among girls and women in the country (10).

Education, as one of the six primary institutions in our lives, aims to prepare children as responsible members of society capable of leading productive lives. Childhood is when we establish and concertize our knowledge, beliefs/attitudes, social, and cultural norms (BASNEF Model) regarding numerous parts of our lives (including health). As a result, schools can play an important role in establishing knowledge and attitudes about health-related behaviors through formal education. The development of a social environment that fosters health-promoting behavior at a young age, rather than just book learning, is becoming an increasingly important part of school health education. (i.e. informal education) (11).

Closing schools and banning particular students from learning will only worsen and complicate the existing social public health issues. A proper strategy by the ministry of public health and ministry of education in the middle-east countries need to be devised so that the fight against this unscientific culture/tradition/ignorance will become possible. Awareness programs are needed to be launched by the aforementioned ministries on an urgent basis. As we know, one of the key ways to prevent future social public health issues related to females is to educate girls. The prolonged closure of girls' schools/banning them on unscientific basis is likely to have both short-term and long-term effects on social public health in the countries.

On scientific basis, we need to reopen schools for students/withdraw bans (for particular students, especially girls) and let them educate to prevent impending future public health risks.

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