

Article

Whatsapp Platform A Strategy To Mitigate Early Pregnancies Among Zimbabwe Rural Secondary School Learners During covid -19 Era

Munyaradzi Chidarikire

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Kwazulu-Natal, 3605, Durban, South Africa

Corresponding author: mchidas78@gmail.com

Abstract: During COVID- 19, in Zimbabwe 4 959 teenagers fell pregnant and 1 774 adolescents were married between January and February 2021. I observed that, there are no contemporary studies in Zimbabwe that focuses on the effectiveness of WhatsApp dealing with grade 7 pregnant rural learners' issues during COVID-19 era. The aim of this paper is to explore the effectiveness of WhatsApp platform as a critical tool to mitigate early learners' pregnancies in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools during COVID-19 era. Ubuntu / Unhu theoretical framework couched this article. Interpretivism paradigm and a case study were used in this article. Purposive sampling technique was utilized to select fifteen participants and data from focus group were analysed through Thematic Analysis. The paper found that, WhatsApp message is effective in mitigating early pregnancies among adolescent learners in rural schools. It recommended that, internet service providers should charge lower WhatsApp data costs to help disadvantaged rural learners to access to internet. Consequently, there will be few or no early pregnancies among rural female learners in rural schools.

Keywords: WhatsApp; COVID-19; epidemic; learning; early pregnancies; Zimbabwe

Introduction

This paper is written when the third wave of COVID-19 has been dictated in South Africa and other countries. Zimbabwe is a neighbour to South Africa; as a result, there are high chances that Zimbabwe will be affected by COVID-19 again. Therefore, there is a high need to prepare ways to mitigate early child pregnancies among rural girls during the current and third wave COVID-19 era. According to World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020, p.2), "Approximately 12 million girls aged 12-19 years and at least 777, 000 girls under 15 years give birth each year in developing countries such as Malawi, Lesotho, Botswana, and Zimbabwe." Recently, UNESCO (2020) report found out that, 11 million primary and secondary school learners will be excluded from teaching and learning environments across all geographical spheres due to COVID-19 devastating effects and projected that learners' pregnancy rate in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Swaziland will increase by 65% during COVID-19 Period. In Botswana, Ord (2020, p. 3) observed that "Early reports in some remote areas (*rural areas*) show that as many as half of girls in examination classes are pregnant, married or not returning for other reasons such as work." In South Africa, rural KwaZulu- Natal Dube (2020) found that the WhatsApp platform is one of the online teaching methods that can be effectively used in rural schools. One study (far away from the location of the current study) in Zimbabwe has focused on a variety of issues relating to COVID-19 on rural school learners' early pregnancies and how society can assist learners with pregnancies to pursue their studies during and after the COVID-19 era (Ord,2020). In Kenya, United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) (2021) addressed the issue of sexual health and family planning among adolescents during the COVID-19 period.

Recent reports in Zimbabwe, during COVID-19, according to Zimbabwe Women Affairs (2021, p.1)'s found that "...4 959 teenagers fell pregnant while there were 1 774 child marriages recorded between January

and February 2021. We noted that there are no contemporary studies focusing on the effectiveness of the WhatsApp platform in mitigating early pregnancies among rural learners in Masvingo, Zimbabwe pre and during the COVID-19 era. Hence, this study is essential in contributing to the reduction of early child pregnancies among rural learners and assisting girl learners to achieve their academic success. Zimbabwe is located in a developing region where there are some learners between 15-19 years that are pregnant (Chinyoka & Ganga, 2014). Some research studies in the area where this study is located show that the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 was a catalyst in increasing the pregnancy rate among secondary school adolescents in Gutu rural learning ecologies (Herald, 2021; Upenyu, 2021). In Zimbabwe, schools were closed for almost one year between March 2020 and March 2021. The closure of the schools precipitated rural girl learners' vulnerability to early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. To promote girl child access to education, Zimbabwe has amended Education Act in August 2020 to allow pregnant girl learners to actively participate in the learning process (amended Zimbabwe Education Act, 2020). However, the researchers are yet to see pregnant learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies after the implementation of this Act. Hence, COVID-19, negatively impacts on the rural girl child's right to education as stated in Zimbabwe Constitution. Due to COVID-19 regulation of maintaining social distance as advocated WHO (2020), there is a need to use the WhatsApp platform to communicate with girl learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies in matters to do with early pregnancies. In Zimbabwe both rural and urban setup, many people have access to WhatsApp (Econet, 2018). However, there is no literature on the use of the WhatsApp platform as a way to mitigate early pregnancies among rural primary school learners in Zimbabwean rural schools. Therefore this paper seeks to address the two critical questions of this paper: *How effective is the WhatsApp platform in mitigating early pregnancies among rural girl learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies? And what are the challenges faced by rural female learners in accessing WhatsApp platforms and probably the solution to mitigate these challenges in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies?*

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

This study is anchored on ubuntuism / unhuism theoretical framework. According to Chikuvadze et al, (2022 p.62) ubuntuism / Unhuism is "An Afro-centric framework, a broader postcolonial intellectual quest to rediscover and re-establish the idealised values of traditional African cultures and traditional African communities". In addition, Ubuntuism / Unhuism is defined by Chidarikire (2022 p. 1) as "a unique African moral philosophy, social philosophy, a collective African consciousness, a way of being, a code of ethics and behaviours deeply embedded in African culture". From above Ubuntuism/ Unhuism is a theoretical framework that shows Africanism, has an agenda to empower African scholars and participants in research studies utilizing indigenous knowledge systems. Ubuntuism / Unhuism, originates from different African languages in Zimbabwean Shona language Unhuism maxim refers to "*munhu munhu nekudakwevanhu*" and South African Zulu maxim refers to "*umuthu ngumuntu ngabantu*", which means "a person is a person because of other people" (Chingombe & Mangwa, 2018). Ubuntu / unhu concept has many principles however in this paper, the researchers utilises empathy, care, and collectiveness (Chikuvadze et, al, 2022). The above mention three principles namely: empathy, care, and collectiveness are essential in assisting girl learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies dealing with issues of early pregnancies using the WhatsApp platform. Zimbabwean Government, educationists, parents, learners, Non-Governmental organisations, and rural community members at large through empathy can adequately help learners with sexual and pregnancy-related information and support needed (Chinyoka & Ganga, 2014). Pregnant rural learners need care during and after pregnancy. Without care, pregnant learners will feel out-casted, lonely, hopelessness and some end-up committing suicide. Africans believe in collectiveness when dealing with community issues such as raising a child (Dakwa, 2014). We argue that it is a collective responsibility to deal with early pregnancies among learners in rural areas. From an African perspective, a child belongs to the entire community, and his / her success and challenges including pregnancy issues are collectively celebrated or collectively solved (Mwamwenda, 2014). Furthermore, the researchers are of the view that, Zimbabwean communities should be empathetic towards learners with pregnancy and not to exclude them in society and at school.

There has been wide reportage of the increase of girl child pregnancies in Zimbabwean schools due to the advent of COVID-19 and pre-COVID. Child pregnancies have caused girl learners to drop out of school in Zimbabwe (Ministry of Women Affairs Report, 2020; TellZim, 2020). Some studies (done in Zimbabwe far away from the location of the current study) focused on the causes of early pregnancies, effects of early pregnancies, and prevalence among learners (Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention, 2017; Mutanana & Mutara, 2015; WHO, 2020). However, there are no current studies in Zimbabwe that deal with the effectiveness of the WhatsApp platform as a strategy to reduce early pregnancies among rural secondary school learners. While on the other hand, other studies focused on preventing early pregnancies using strategies such as peer counselling, avoiding engaging in early sexual activities, and using birth control methods such as condoms and unprotected sexual intercourse (Chireshe, 2013; Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention, 2017). I have observed that there are no studies that focus on the relevance of the WhatsApp platform in helping female rural learners deal with issues around early pregnancies. WhatsApp is defined by Goodwin (2020:1) “as a multiplatform messaging app that allows people to use video and video calls, sent text messages and more using Wi-Fi-connection”. In addition, Dove and Beaton (2021, p.1) describe WhatsApp as “the most popular text and voice messaging apps. WhatsApp can send messages, make voice calls and host video chats on phones, laptops, and desktops”. From the above definitions, WhatsApp is an electronic communication application that is downloaded on the phone and other communication gadgets such as laptops and it is used to send messages and videos. In Argentina, the Development Bank of Latin America (2018) found that WhatsApp messages were successfully used to reduce the infant mortality rate and improved the lives of expecting mothers. This shows that WhatsApp messages were used effectively to mitigate the infant mortality rate that significantly risen in 2013 in Argentina. WhatsApp messages were used to remind pregnant women to take consistently tablets and the adherence to tablets in taking improves significantly in Indonesia (Dewi, Kusumawati & Ismarwati, 2019). The above two studies proved the effectiveness of WhatsApp messages in helping mature pregnant women in developed countries to give birth to healthy children and take pregnancy medication. Contrary, the current study aims at how WhatsApp messages can be used to mitigate early pregnancies among rural learners in Zimbabwean rural schools. Nabugoomu, Seruwagi, and Hanning (2020)’s study focused on using multi-stakeholders to reduce the increase of young children’s pregnancies in rural Eastern Uganda. The above study did not address the use of WhatsApp in reducing early pregnancies among young learners in rural primary schools.

A study done in peri urban Klambu in Kenya by Patel, Subbiah, Jones, Muigai, Rothschild, Omwodo, Ogolla, and Nour (2018) used WhatsApp groups to provide support to pregnant women. The support rendered to pregnant women through the WhatsApp group was effective as many women received adequate assistance (Dewi et al, 2018). This study in Kenya was done in peri-urban which is a different context to the current study that is located in the remote rural area in Zimbabwe. Swart, Colvin, and Harrison (2018)’s study in Khayelitsha township in Cape Town observes that there is a high rate of early pregnancies. A study in Khayelitsha was done before COVID-19 advent and before schools were closed. Furthermore, in South Africa, Dube (2020) focused on using online teaching methods such as WhatsApp to address the challenges faced by rural learners in acquiring education in South Africa in the context of COVID-19. The challenges faced by learners in South African rural learning ecologies are totally different from Zimbabwean rural context. Hence, there is a need to contact this current study in Zimbabwe among rural learners.

More so, World Vision (2020) noted that, after schools closed due to COVID-19 teenage pregnancy increased, which proves the devastating effects of COVID-19. In Zimbabwe, in Matebeleland South province (far away from the area of study) during the COVID-19 pandemic Woodward, Harrison, and Tope (2020) used WhatsApp texting as a teaching tool to educate girls in literacy and numeracy in urban and rural areas. Both rural and urban girl learners managed to study and learn in the comfort of their environment regardless of COVID-19 restrictions. However, the above study did not address the issues of mitigating pregnancy issues in COVID-19 in rural schools. Furthermore, in Zimbabwe Chiridza, Yorodani, Sigauke, and Katsaruware (2019) found that university students in town use WhatsApp as communication tool. The aforementioned study revealed that the WhatsApp platform helped the participants to interact, get new information and skills regardless of distance and other challenges. However, there is a scarcity of literature on the effectiveness of

WhatsApp platforms in reducing early pregnancies among rural learners in Gutu rural areas in Masvingo, Province, Zimbabwe. Consequently, there is a need for this article that specifically focuses on how the WhatsApp platform can be used to mitigate early pregnancies in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies through educating girl learners on sexual reproductive issues. To adequately unpack the topic under discussion, we responded to two questions: *How effective is the WhatsApp platform in mitigating early pregnancies among rural girl learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies? And what are the challenges faced by rural female learners in accessing WhatsApp platforms and probably solutions to mitigate these challenges in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies?*

Methodology

1. Design

This qualitative paper focuses on how effective is WhatsApp platform as a critical tool to mitigate early learners' pregnancies in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies during the COVID-19 era. The article is located in the interpretive paradigm. The qualitative approach was used because we wanted to study the effectiveness of the WhatsApp platform to mitigate early child pregnancies in rural learning ecologies in the natural setting (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). In addition, qualitative research permits the use of multiple perspectives on early girl learners' pregnancies, the role of WhatsApp in mitigating learners' pregnancies, and challenges faced in accessing the WhatsApp platform in rural schools. A case study research design was utilised in this paper. According to Creswell and Poth (2018, p.110) opined that, "using a case study the researcher provides an in-depth understanding of the case(s)." A case study involving three rural secondary schools was utilised in this article.

2. Participants

Fifteen knowledge-rich participants were purposively selected from those who were learning in rural areas in Gutu and purported to be valuable sources (Mohajan & Haradhan, 2018). Three female Form Three learners were sampled from each school that participated in this study. Form three learners were selected because they were not preparing for end-of-year examinations. The participants were selected based on their knowledge about the topic under discussion, gender, Form three classes, aged 14-17 and come from the same locality. Ground rules were agreed upon between participants and the research, with an objective to focus on the topic under discussion.

3. Data collection instruments

I used focus group discussions as instrument to generate data from the participants. WhatsApp group was created as a platform to respond to two research questions: *How effective is WhatsApp platform in mitigating early pregnancies among rural girl learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies? And what are the challenges faced by rural female learners in accessing WhatsApp platforms in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies?* Focus group discussion through WhatsApp platform were utilised in order to get group views on the effectiveness of WhatsApp messaging in mitigating early child pregnancies in rural schools. WhatsApp discussions were held for three days, 1 hour each session (total of three hours). Early child pregnancies are found among rural learners; therefore, I argued that learners could be in a WhatsApp group setting where they are not seen (confidentiality) by the research and other participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, Johnson and Christensen (2007, p.185) aver that "a focus group is a type of a group interview in which a moderator leads a discussion with a small group of individuals to examine in detail, how the group members think and feel about a topic platform allowed participants to share their views on how WhatsApp can be utilised to mitigate pregnancies among rural learners. The data generated from participants were categorised into themes. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.10) argue that "theme captures something important about data in relation to the research question, and presents some level of patterned response or meaning with the data set." The two themes of data were the challenges of using WhatsApp and solutions to enhance the use of WhatsApp in dealing with early pregnancies among rural learners.

4. Trustworthiness of data

The trustworthiness of data was enhanced by a pilot study, which eliminated ambiguities in data generation instrument. Additionally, the researchers used member checking of the WhatsApp messages sent by participants on the group during discussions as a way to strengthen the trustworthiness of data. Furthermore, data was analysed through Thematic Content Analysis as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). In order to have access to the participants, we obtained the relevant clearance as part of advance protocol to conduct this study in the selected secondary schools from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. In Zimbabwe, the school authorities and universities do not give ethical clearance documents but they only give gatekeeper's letter to allow research studies. The participants informed consent forms and in addition, the researchers informed the participants' parents and guardians about the purpose of the study in a bid to obtain their consent concerning the participation of their children in the study in turn we requested them to assent to children's involvement in the study (Chidarikire, 2017). Data generation through WhatsApp interviews commenced with the giving assurance to participants that their responses were to be treated with the strictest confidentiality. In maintaining privacy, each participant's WhatsApp, the number was saved using anonymous name (Dube, 2020). The following section deals with results.

Findings and Discussion

The generated data from questionnaires via WhatsApp discussions were divided into two themes: namely the significance of WhatsApp messages in mitigating early pregnancies among rural learners and challenges faced by rural female learners in accessing WhatsApp platforms. Firstly, we dealt with the significance of WhatsApp messages in mitigating early pregnancies among rural learners and the challenges faced by the learners in using WhatsApp, and solutions to mitigate these challenges. The following segment deals with Theme 1: Significance of WhatsApp messages in mitigating early pregnancies among rural learners:

Theme 1: Significance of WhatsApp Messages in Mitigating Early Pregnancies among Rural Learners

This section deals with the significance of WhatsApp messages in reducing early pregnancies among rural learners in Zimbabwean rural schools. Following are the views of the rural girl learners: The participant argued that WhatsApp messages played (still playing) a critical role during COVID-19 in relation to mitigating early girl pregnancies in Zimbabwean rural schools. Some learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies learnt about sexual reproductive health matters through WhatsApp messages. Parents and other relatives used WhatsApp platforms as a method of sharing crucial reproductive health information with their children. The effective use of WhatsApp messages in effectively spreading the accurate message and information concerning sexual reproductive health in rural. Paida commented that:

“I learnt about sexual reproductive health through a message sent to me by my aunty. My aunty stays far away from me and we could not visit each other due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through WhatsApp message, we managed to break distance barriers and share information concerning sexual reproduction health reproduction during this period where rural schools are closed.”

On the sexual reproductive aspect, Viola highlighted that:

“I told my boyfriend to use condoms when engaging in sexual intercourse. I learnt about the importance of using condoms on the WhatsApp platform after my sister sends that information to me. I do not want to be pregnant.”

In addition, Dorren argued:

“My mother and other female relatives are working in South Africa about 1 700kms from rural. Due to the lockdown my mother is not allowed to travel to Zimbabwe from South Africa where she is working. However, they are sending messages about the dangers of early sexual relationships and ways to avoid pregnancies such

as avoiding unprotected sex. WhatsApp have made it possible to receive helpful information during this COVID-19 period”

From the above participants’ view, WhatsApp platform is critical in mitigating early pregnancies among rural learners during this COVID-19 period in Zimbabwe. Some learners learnt about sexual reproductive issues such as using condoms on WhatsApp. WhatsApp platforms can be utilised as information-sharing zone. Accessibility of information empowers the disadvantaged and vulnerable female rural learners against sexual abuse (WHO, 2020). There is current literature in support of WhatsApp as online learning tool in Zimbabwe and beyond during this COVID-19 season area supported by the following literature (Orbit, 2020; World Vision, 2020). We argue that parents, sisters, and other relatives are using the WhatsApp platform to educate their young learners, this resonates with Ubuntu / Unhu theoretical framework’s principle of collectiveness utilised in this study. The well-being of Zimbabwean rural learners is a collective responsibility of all citizens. A child according to Ubuntu / Unhu theoretic framework belongs to all of us (Dube, 2016).

The next paragraphs deal with the significant role of the WhatsApp platform in reporting sexual abuse cases.

On the other hand, raped and sexually abused learners managed to use the WhatsApp platform to report rape cases to police during lockdown period. Many learners in rural areas are subjected to sexual abuse.

Rebecca said:

“I was raped by my uncle during COVID-19 induced lockdown. He threatened to kill me if I report rape case to anyone including police. After three weeks I realised that I was pregnant. I was afraid and nearly committed suicide. However, I told my best friend about my pregnancy and threat. I immediately my friend sent a WhatsApp message on my phone with Police Friendly Victim WhatsApp number, informing me that one can report domestic violence, sexual assault and any other criminal activities. The report (s) will be treated with confidentiality. I then report the case of rape using police WhatsApp number and they were cooperative and empathic to my situation. My uncle was subsequently arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison.”

Tariro explained:

“My female classmate was sexually abused by her, and she reported the matter to one social worker via WhatsApp message. The social worker gave her helpful counselling and the matter was reported to the police.”

Dambudzo said that:

“I contracted sexual transmitted diseases after being sexually abused by my neighbour’s husband. My sister through a WhatsApp message informed me to seek medical help at a nearby clinic. I took an HIV test and was negative. But I had syphilis disease and currently, I am being treated.”

The sentiments anchored by participants prove that rape cases and other sexual abuses during the COVID-19 period against female learners in Zimbabwean rural schools. There are articles that support the increase of sexual abuse cases during lockdown (Herald, 2021, Masvingo Mirror, 2021). We noted that some learners managed to report sexual abuse to relevant authorities such as police and social workers. Social workers, friends, and other health professionals helped sexually abused learners with counselling, advice and medication. The help offered to sexually abused learners by community professionals and friends collaborates with Ubuntu / Unhu theoretical framework’s principle of empathy. Being emphatic means to feel for another person, the rural community members are (were) emphatic to learners with pregnancies and assisted them (Mwamwenda, 2014). The participants’ views show that all reported cases to police were successfully dealt with and perpetrators were arrested and sentenced to prison. According to participants rape and sexual abuse

victims received medical, psychological, physical, and emotional assistance from well-trained social workers and counsellors in the Police and Social Welfare department (TellZim, 2020; UNP Fund, 2021).

The next section deals with the importance of the WhatsApp platform as a tool used by teachers to help girl learners.

The participants acknowledged that some rural teachers are creative and have skills of using WhatsApp for the benefit of girl child: Betty argued that:

“During lockdown, our Guidance and Counselling teacher created girls WhatsApp group and all schoolgirls were added. Every day our Guidance and counselling teacher shared information on different topics which include rape, menstruation, gender-based violence and how to resist peer pressure. This information helped me to stay safe from sexual relationships and early pregnancies.”

In support, Dorothy noted that:

“Our teachers used WhatsApp platforms as a teaching tool during COVID-19. Classrooms are closed; however, learning is progressing on the WhatsApp platform. I am not going out of the house premises. I am always on WhatsApp learning from other learners and teachers.”

In addition, Mary said:

“Last year 2020, in April during the lockdown, I became pregnant. However, I continued with my studies on WhatsApp. I was not expelled from school. Now I gave birth. I will go back to school when they open.”

The above discussion shows that creative and innovative teachers have created WhatsApp groups consisting female and male rural learners. The WhatsApp groups are utilised by teachers and learners as a platform to share valuable information concerning gender-based violence and the impact of peer pressure on sexual decision (Van der Bank & van de Bank, 2014). In addition, educational lessons are progressing well on WhatsApp and learners are covering syllabi. Most learners engage in sexual activity due to lockdown because classrooms have been closed (Dube, 2020). From the above discussion, the participants articulated the significance of the WhatsApp platform as a critical tool to mitigate early pregnancies among rural learners in Zimbabwe. The active innovative and creative teachers using WhatsApp platforms to help learners do schoolwork and not to engage in an early sexual relationship during the COVID-19 period, shows that teachers care for their learners. Caring is a vital component on Ubuntu / unhu theoretical framework and hence rural community members should care for pregnant and non-pregnant learners.

The next section deals with Theme 2: challenges faced by learners in utilizing WhatsApp platform as a tool to mitigate early pregnancies.

Theme 2: Challenges Faced By Rural Female Learners In Accessing Whatsapp Platforms And Solutions To Mitigate These Challenges.

Most of the female learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies experience different challenges that incapacitate them from effectively using the WhatsApp platform during the COVID-19 era. The paper also looked at the solutions to mitigate these challenges. The following are the challenges and solutions that were articulated by the participants.

Firstly, some rural female learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies do not own smartphones that have WhatsApp platforms. There are a variety of reasons why rural female learners do not own personal phones, these reasons include poverty and the high cost of smartphones and data. Failure to get smartphones

and data incapacitates learners' access to important information concerning sexual health during the COVID-19 period. Lack of information perpetuates the pregnancy rate in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies Ropa stated that:

"I do not have a smartphone because my parents cannot afford it. The smartphones and WhatsApp data are expensive because they use WhatsApp facilities and another internet platform. My family is very poor. We are struggling to buy food, and clothes and paying fees. I have three school terms outstanding fees. I travel 9 kilometers to my friend's place to see WhatsApp messages sent by our teacher. During tight levels of COVID-19 imposed by our Government I could not travel to my friend's place to see WhatsApp messages. I suggest that the Government, internet providers, and other stakeholders partner to provide a free and cheap smartphone to rural learners."

More so, Mercy explained that:

"My single mother failed to buy a phone for me to use WhatsApp. She cannot raise money to buy smartphone because she is not working and she is taking care of six children. I suggest that, Non-Governmental organisation and compassionate community members give learners in rural learners' smartphones."

The participants highlighted that they are facing challenges in buying smartphones because they are expensive. Poverty is negatively affecting parents' capacities to buy smartphones (POTRAZ, 2015). Failure to buy or own smartphones negatively affects learners' access to sexual reproduction knowledge and learning material thereby exposing them to early marriages (Dube, 2020). To mitigate, the lack of smartphones the Government and other stakeholders may use Ubuntu / Unhu principle of "*collectiveness*" to collectively assist rural learners with laptops that have access to WhatsApp. For example, South African Government is giving all learners laptop as learning gargets (Sowetan, 2020).

Secondly, learners can not afford to buy data.

Secondly, there are some learners who have smartphones but they experience data problems and internet connectivity in Zimbabwe's rural areas.

Talent explained that:

"My parents bought a smartphone for me to use it as an educational tool during the COVID-19 era. I am using it during online lessons. However, data has been very expensive. Sometimes I fail to join others on WhatsApp because of lack of data. The Government and internet providers provide cheap and free internet data at rural schools."

In addition, Betty noted that:

"We have internet connection problems in our remote rural areas. I have to climb a big mountain to get access to internet connectivity in order to access my WhatsApp. Climbing the mountain to access the internet exposes rural girl learners in rural learning ecologies to dangerous snakes, animals, rapists, and other forms of dangers. Recently, a girl was raped in a nearby mountain and this story has negatively affected us as rural learners in remote areas where access to the internet is a great challenge. I recommend that the Government and internet providers provide internet infrastructure in rural areas to mitigate connectivity challenges."

In order to access internet connectivity learners, need data and where there is internet infrastructure. The participants in this study argued that data is very expensive in Zimbabwe. Some scholars argued that Zimbabwe is among high data-expensive countries in the world (Chronicle, 2019). The high cost of data makes it difficult for learners in rural areas to access WhatsApp messages. Other learners have data but fail to access the internet because the network is bad due to a lack of internet infrastructure. As a result, some female learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies risk their lives by climbing dangerous mountains to access

the internet. However, there are reports that some female learners were killed and raped whilst in mountains accessing internet connectivity in remote areas in Zimbabwe (Herald, 2020). We argue that the Government and internet providers should urgently put adequate internet infrastructure in these rural marginalised communities. Ubuntu / Unhu concept of care includes equal sharing of resources between rural and urban areas ((Fourine, 2008), however in Zimbabwe urban setup has more resources than rural communities thereby disadvantaging rural learners in accessing information (Hlalele, 2019).

Thirdly, the next section deals with WhatsApp as a source of false and pornography materials

The last challenge against the WhatsApp platform is the spread of false information and naughty learners sending pornography materials in order to seduce female/male learners into engaging in sexual affairs through WhatsApp was noted as one of the challenges encountered by Zimbabwean rural schools Tendai noted that:

“On my WhatsApp I have received incorrect information concerning COVID-19, sexual reproductive health, and other incorrect information. I have noted that there are people who create fake articles and forward them to the WhatsApp platform. Incorrect information is harmful and dangerous to us, the rural female learners in this COVID-19 period where we cannot ask teachers about the authenticity of such information. False information is detrimental to the fight against COVID-19 and early pregnancies in Zimbabwean rural schools. More awareness programs on the dangers of circulating false information should be done in rural schools and beyond.”

Furthermore, Rudo commented that:

“My friend was pregnant after watching a pornographic video on her WhatsApp with her 23-year-old boyfriend. Some learners download and share Pornography materials, and this has caused some rural learners to engage in sexual activities exposing them to early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. The wrong use of the WhatsApp platform increases the chances of promoting promiscuity among rural learners. To mitigate the issue of pornography material on the phones learners should report to the police and stiff penalties should be imposed on who sends the videos.”

The dissemination of inaccurate, false, and pornography information that promote sexual engagements among rural female learners is regarded as another challenge faced by Zimbabwean rural female learners. The Zimbabwean Government enacted laws that prohibit people from disseminating inaccurate and pornographic information on WhatsApp and other social media platforms (Zimbabwe Ministry of Information, 2020). In addition, participants are of the view that stiff prison sentences should be given to people who sent pornography materials on the phone this act as a deterrent measure to would-be offenders. The concept of Ubuntu / Unhu does not allow people to mislead and abuse others with sexual explicitly videos and information. As a result, Ubuntu / Unhu theoretical framework encourages community members to respect each other and maintain dignity (Nussbaum, 2003).

Conclusion

Caged in COVID-19, Zimbabwean female rural learners in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies are exposed to a high risk of sexual activities such as promiscuity that lead to early pregnancies. Consequently, pregnant female rural learners will be denied access to education. Denying rural female learners' access to education makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, early pregnancies, and early marriages. COVID-19-induced lockdown has led to the closure of schools and hinders learners from accessing education. It is against this background, that this paper sought to find that, the WhatsApp platform is a critical tool to fight early female learners' pregnancies in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies during and post-COVID-19 period. Failure to deal with early pregnancy, issues during the COVID-19 lockdown will lead to many learners getting

pregnant and increase the high level of female learners dropping out of rural schools. The majority of participants in this study are of the view that the WhatsApp platform is an effective way of helping rural female learners deal with early pregnancy problems. WhatsApp platforms can be used as awareness and education platforms. However, the participants pointed out some challenges such as the high cost of data and smartphones that negatively affect the effective use of the WhatsApp platform in containing and eradicating early pregnancies and sexual activities among Zimbabwean rural learners. However, participants provided solutions to mitigate these challenges such as Government and other stakeholders providing cheap and free data and smartphones to rural areas as their social responsibility. This article suggests that teachers, learners and other stakeholders effectively use the WhatsApp platform to disseminate information concerning early pregnancies' dangers and how to avoid engaging in early sexual relationship. In addition the article suggests that, data should be free, easily and/or cheaply be available to rural learning ecologies for easy access of internet facilities. On the other hand, the participants suggest that, teachers and learners utilise the WhatsApp platform as a teaching 'classroom' and cover the school syllabus. The network providers should adequately provide internet infrastructure in Zimbabwe's remote areas for easier access to WhatsApp and other internet platforms. Future researchers should do a quantitative study on the role of WhatsApp in mitigating early pregnancies among rural female learners in Zimbabwean rural schools.

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