Girls' education under attack

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Briefing Paper

Humanitarian emergencies[1], caused by natural hazards, conflict or both, are major barriers to the realisation of girls' right to education. In many countries they exacerbate the issues that are already hindering girls' access to education such as poverty and gender inequality. In some countries, non-state armed groups are fighting to ban girls' education and directly targeting schoolgirls. The issue of girls' right to education has received greater attention since the shooting of teenager Malala Yousafzai by the Taliban in Pakistan in 2012. Malala is not alone. Conflict and disasters are preventing girls across the world from accessing quality, relevant education in safe learning environments.

When adolescent girls' education is interrupted by conflict or disaster they are more likely than boys to remain out of school permanently.[2] Girls' learning can also be affected by the consequences of such crises, including: a lack of teachers, uniforms and school supplies; damaged school buildings and access routes; increased risk of violence on the journey to and from school; and post-disaster stress and trauma. Quality education and learning is a right, and in emergency situations, quality education can often provide practical knowledge and the physical and psychosocial protection needed to sustain and save lives.[3]

Through the Because I am a Girl campaign, Plan recognises the importance of protecting girls' rights to ensure they can complete at least nine years of quality education, including the most vulnerable girls, such as those living in disasters and conflict-affected or fragile states. Securing girls' education during emergencies means they have access to life-saving and life-enhancing skills and information needed to be resilient, and protect themselves, for example information on HIV, land mines, early warning systems, first aid and disaster risks can be shared through schools.[4] Moreover, safe education spaces can offer increased protection from exploitation and harm, especially for girls, and can provide a sense of normality during times of distress.[5] The international community must refocus efforts on ensuring girls' and boys' access to quality education in emergencies.

This briefing provides examples of the increasing risks to girls' education due to emergencies and conflict and makes recommendations on how to promote girls' education in emergencies.

Shahnaz Nazli

Shahnaz Nazli, a 41-year-old female teacher was shot in March 2013 by the Taliban on her way to the girls' primary school where she taught in the north Khyber tribal district of Pakistan. Such a targeted attack on a female teacher contributes to the environment of fear felt by teachers and students and seeks to undermine girls' rights to education. The UN Secretary-General condemned the attack, highlighting that attacks on female teachers disproportionately affect the female students for whom they serve as role models.

Education in emergencies[6]

The impact of emergencies on girls' access to, and the quality of, education is complex and diverse across different countries. The outcome is often determined by pre-existing, deeply-embedded social and cultural norms and power relations in a community. Where this includes gender inequality, girls are more likely than boys to have their education cut short because of adverse circumstances such as poverty, conflict or natural disasters.[7]

Fadimata

Fadimata is 15 years old. Her education was disrupted when her family fled from Timbuktu to Segou due to the conflict in Mali. When they arrived in Segou, although she was fortunate to join a local school, Fadimata wasn't able to do her homework at night, because the family couldn't afford a lamp. Fadimata describes the difficulty of finding space to do her homework, "We have one bedroom for ten of us to live in, me, my brothers and sisters and cousins. It is not easy. You cannot get any privacy here. Sometimes a girl needs her privacy."

For example, in Pakistan, when schools resumed after the 2010 floods, 22 per cent of girls did not go back, compared to only 7 per cent of boys.[8] This is significant given that the impact and frequency of emergencies are set to increase as a result of climate change, environmental degradation and urbanization. More than a billion students are enrolled in primary and secondary schools, with about 875 million school children living in high seismic zones. Hundreds of millions are exposed to regular flood, landslide, extreme winds and fire hazards.[9] Additionally humanitarian crises also damage school infrastructure. Schools that aren't destroyed may then be used as refugee shelters in the aftermath of a disaster, making it difficult for lessons to start up again.

Emergencies also destroy family assets and exacerbate poverty, resulting in adolescent girls and boys leaving school to earn an income to support their families. Some families prioritize their sons' schooling over their daughters' when faced with lack of money to pay for school fees and other associated costs (such as uniforms, school supplies and travelling). Girls can also be forced to marry at an early age in order to reduce the burden on their families when disasters damage or destroy households' main sources of income.[10]

During and after emergencies, girls are often at greater risk of gender-based violence, including rape, sexual exploitation or abuse, prostitution and transactional sex, and trafficking. The factors that increase girls' vulnerability in the aftermath of emergencies include extreme poverty, lack of income-generating activities and the breakdown of both households' and the wider communities' protection mechanisms and social safety nets.[11]

Ensuring girls have access to quality education can help safeguard them from risks of violence and abuse in emergency settings. It can also help reduce acceptance of violence,[12] transform negative gender norms and convince parents of the importance of girls' education.[13] Education forms the basis of post-conflict and disaster reconstruction, with the potential to build back better, safer and fairer by positively transforming gender relations.

Conflict

Many fragile and conflict-affected countries are also at risk from natural hazards. However, conflict situations add further barriers and challenges to girls' and boys' access to education. Twenty-eight million of the world's 61 million out-of-school primary-school aged children live in conflict-affected poor countries.[14] In 2010 only 79 per cent of young people in conflict-affected poor countries were literate, compared with 93 per cent in other poor countries.[15] And enrolment rates in secondary schools are nearly one-third lower in conflict-affected countries compared with other developing countries.[16]

Sexual violence and the fear of sexual violence especially affect girls in conflict. Reports by the UN Secretary-General continue to show that rape and other sexual violence are widely used as war tactics in many countries, including the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sudan. For those directly affected, physical injury, psychological distress and stigmatization cause long term disadvantage in education - survivors often face social stigma and increased vulnerability to HIV and other STIs.[17]

Insecurity and fear from such violence can keep young girls out of school and the resulting breakdown of family and community life can also deprive children of a secure learning environment.[18]

Additionally, across the globe in clear violation of international humanitarian law, schools and school children are often targeted.[19] Schools and the routes students take to reach them can be preyed upon by those seeking children for their armies, for indoctrination, or for coerced sex. Since mid-2007 in at least 32 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, education has become the target of violent attacks or threats by both state security forces and non-state armed groups.[20]

"Stop teaching and running the girls' school, otherwise you will be slaughtered" was the message sent to the headmaster of a girls' school in Logar, just south of Kabul, when unknown masked gunmen took him out of his house late one evening and beat him up. Insurgent groups in Afghanistan have repeatedly threatened girls' education. Security fears resulted in the closure of over 70 per cent of schools in Helmand province of Afghanistan in 2010.[21] One report on Afghanistan found that while girls' schools constitute only 19 per cent of the total number of schools across the country, they account for 40 per cent of all attacks.[22]

Attacks can have a ripple effect on surrounding schools and affect the overall calculation that parents and students make in assessing the risks their children face in attending school. For instance, information from Syria shows that many children are too afraid to go to school in case their school is attacked. One consequence when school aged adolescent girls are unable to attend school, can be that they are forced into early marriage by parents seeking to protect them from security threats. Investing in education and protection in first phase response is critical to ensuring that girls are able to continue their education in a safe and protective environment.

Why does it matter?

Across the world, there are 66 million girls of primary and lower secondary school age out of school. Despite progress in achieving universal primary education, girls continue to be disadvantaged in many countries and regions. 68 countries have still not achieved gender parity in primary education, and girls are disadvantaged in 60 of them.[23] In most societies, unequal power relations between adults and children, as well as deeply-rooted gender stereotypes and roles, often result in girls missing out on education, at risk of gender-based violence and trapped in the cycle of poverty. These inequalities are compounded in crisis situations, when girls are at greater risk of missing out on school permanently.

The impact and power of girls' education has been widely acknowledged: educated girls are likely to be healthier, to earn more and to marry and have children later, who have an increased chance of survival. A girl who has completed her education is more likely to reinvest her knowledge and income into her family and community.[24]

Malala

Malala's strong support for girls' rights to education made her a target of a violent attack from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. In October 2012, masked armed men boarded the bus she was travelling on to school and shot her in the head, injuring her friends. The global outcry prompted the Pakistani government to make commitments to girls' education, but other girls and female teachers in Pakistan continue to face risks travelling to and from school on a daily basis.

Malala is a symbol of the importance of education for girls across the world. Ensuring all girls and boys access their right to education, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is also critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Disaster prone, fragile and conflict-affected states are more likely than any others to be behind on enrolment and learning outcomes, and resources should be committed to ensure no child, including vulnerable girls, is left behind.

Recommendations

All girls affected by disasters and conflict, including disabled girls and pregnant or young mothers, should be supported to access safe learning environments to safeguard and protect them during emergencies, and provide the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills to build their own resilience and that of their community to future risks.

Plan UK welcomes the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) strategic vision for girls and women[25] and its focus on ending violence against girls and women. We also welcome DFID's on-going support for girls' education, through the Girls' Education Challenge Fund. DFID has previously recognised the importance of investing in education in fragile and conflict-affected states,[26] and has committed to 'ensure that short-term emergency responses to education protect longer term prospects of rebuilding of education systems'.[27] In order to achieve this it will be necessary to increase funding to education in emergencies, ensure better collection of age and sex-disaggregated data in emergencies and work to ensure the integration of emergency provisions in national governments education plans.

1. Increase funding for education in emergencies

Education is important for its intrinsic value to girls' empowerment, allowing girls to be active citizens.[28] It forms a key part of the enabling environment which allows girls to transition to adult life with greater knowledge and skills as well as agency and choice.

Education accounts for just 2 per cent of humanitarian aid. DFID should ensure that education needs are adequately financed in every humanitarian response, and support the increase of overall humanitarian budget allocations for education to at least 4 per cent,[29] in line with the recommendation of the UN Secretary General.[30]

2. Collect gender- and age-disaggregated data

DFID should ensure greater collection of disaggregated data, particularly by sex and age and, where possible, disability, as an essential component of all needs assessments, monitoring or evaluation that is undertaken as part of emergency preparedness, response and recovery supported by DFID.

3. Ensure education in emergencies is integrated in national education plans

DFID should work closely with national governments to ensure that national education plans include education in emergencies and better integrate resilience into the education sector. All governments should integrate emergency prevention, preparedness, response and recovery in education sector plans and budgets,[31] ensuring that these responses are more resilient as well as gender sensitive. The impact of conflict and disaster risks on the education system should be considered as part of all sector assessments, and education-in-emergency-related indicators should be integrated into Education Monitoring and Information Systems (EMIS).

References

[1] An emergency can be defined as a situation that causes widespread human, material, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using only its own resources. It can be the result of a natural hazard (i.e. flooding, landslides, tsunamis, earthquakes), conflict or a combination of both. It is a unique situation where the severity of what has happened (i.e. conflict or earthquake) along with the vulnerability of the society or community is higher than its capacity to protect its people and environment. United Nations Disaster Management Training Programme. The term emergency and disaster are often used interchangeably.

[2] Lewis, M. & Lockheed, M. (2006) Inexcusable absence: Why 60 million girls still aren't in school and what to do about it. Center for Global Development quoted in Ann Warner, Anju Malhotra and Allison McGonagle Girls education, empowerment and transitions to adulthood: a shared agenda (2012) International Center for Research on Women

[3] http://www.ineesite.org/en/minimum-standards (Accessed 26th June 2013)

[4] INEE Good Practice Guide: Inclusive Education of Children At Risk – Gender Equality/Education of Girls and Women http://www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/doc_1_Gender_Equality_-_Education_of_Girls_and_Women.pdf

[5] Education Cannot Wait: Protecting Children and Youth's Right to a Quality Education in Humanitarian Emergencies and Conflict Situations http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Education_cannot_wait.pdf

[6] Education in emergencies can be defined as "the provision of quality education opportunities that meet the physical protection, psychosocial, developmental and cognitive needs of children affected by emergencies, which can be both life-sustaining and life-saving". (INEE and Global Education Cluster training materials).

[7] Lewis, M. & Lockheed, M. (2006) Inexcusable absence: Why 60 million girls still aren't in school and what to do about it. Center for Global Development quoted in Ann Warner, Anju Malhotra and Allison McGonagle Girls education, empowerment and transitions to adulthood: a shared agenda (2012) International Center for Research on Women

[8] Luqman Ahmed, Disasters and girls' education in Pakistan, (2013) Ideas for Life Trust

[9] One Million Safe Schools and Hospitals Assessment and Mitigation Planning for Risk Reduction Guide, p5. http://www.safe-schools-hospitals.net/en/InformationMaterials/Schools.aspx

[10] WHO, Violence and Disasters http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/violence_disasters.pdf

[11] INEE (2010) Gender Equality in and through Education: INEE Pocket Guide to Gender

[12] INEE, Minimum Standards for Education, 2010. http://www.ineesite.org/en/minimum-standards/handbook

[13] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Q7DzaDtRRw&feature=youtube_gdata_player

[14] UNESCO (2011) EFA Global Monitoring Report The Hidden Crisis: Armed conflict and education p.132

[15] Ibid p. 132

[16] Ibid

[17] NORRAG, Education in Conflict Emergencies in Light of the Post-2015 MDGs and EFA Agenda Network for policy research, review and advice on education and training, 2013

[18] UNESCO (2011) EFA Global Monitoring Report The Hidden Crisis: Armed conflict and education

[19] Ibid

[20] Global Coalition to Protect Education Under Attack

[21] UNESCO (2011) EFA Global Monitoring Report The Hidden Crisis: Armed conflict and education p.15

[22] Care International, Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation September 2009

[23] UNESCO(2012), Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2012, Youth and skills: Putting education to work

[24] Plan International (2012), The State of the World's Girls, Learning for Life

[25] DFID (2011), A new strategic vision for girls and women: stopping poverty before it starts

[26] Learning for All, DFID's Education Strategy 2010-2015

[27] Learning for All, DFID's Education Strategy 2010-2015

[28] Unterhalter, E. Gender, schooling and global social justice, London, 2007

[29] UNESCO (2011) EFA Global Monitoring Report The Hidden Crisis: Armed conflict and education

[30] Education First, Education Cannot Wait: Protecting Children and Youth's Right to a Quality Education in Humanitarian Emergencies and Conflict Situations http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Education_cannot_wait.pdf

[31] Ibid

About Plan

Plan is a global children's charity. We work with children and young people in the world's poorest countries to help them build a better future. A future you would want for all children, your family and friends.

For 75 years we've been taking action and standing up for every child's right to fulfil their potential by:

- giving children a healthy start in life, including access to safe drinking water
- securing the education of girls and boys
- working with communities to prepare for and survive disasters
- inspiring children to take a lead in decisions that affect their lives
- and enabling families to earn a living and plan for their children's future.

We do what's needed, where it's needed most. We do what you would do.

With your support children, families and entire communities have the power to move themselves from a life of poverty to a future with opportunity.

Plan UK
Working with the world's poorest children to move from a life of poverty to a future with opportunity.

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