

Education in crisis through to development: the gender implications

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Over half of the 75 million children who are out of school worldwide are in conflict-affected states, and millions more are living in situations affected by natural disasters. Education is a fundamental human right and a catalyst for development; in crisis contexts it can also be life-saving and life-sustaining. Ensuring girls and boys have equal access to quality educational opportunities in crisis contexts must therefore be prioritised by governments and their partners. This article explores these issues and makes the case for gender-responsive education programming in order to ensure both the protection of the most vulnerable children and sustainable and equitable social and economic development.

“I miss my school. I like to study. My favourite subjects are Kiswahili and science. When I’m older I want to be a doctor. I wouldn’t mind staying here if I could study. I don’t care where I am as long as I can go to school.” – Mercy, a 13-year-old girl who was displaced during the violence following the national elections in Kenya in 2008 (interviewed by Save the Children UK).

Unfortunately, Mercy’s situation is all too common; far too few children affected by conflict and disaster have access to education. As the world enters the final stretch towards the 2015 deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the time-bound commitments of the Education for All Dakar Framework for Action, access to quality education is still far from universal. Approximately 75 million children are out of school worldwide and more than half of these children – 40 million – are living in conflict-affected states, with millions more living in situations affected by natural disasters. While too often neglected, crisis-affected populations are perhaps those most in need of the knowledge, protection and social and emotional stability that education can provide.

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Meeting the educational rights and needs of children affected by crisis, and progress towards these global targets, is further hampered by persistent gender inequities. While some countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and the United Republic of Tanzania have made great strides, globally gender disparities are still deeply entrenched: only 59 of the 176 countries with data available have achieved gender parity in both primary and secondary education. Moreover, of the 776 million adults who lack basic literacy skills, about two-thirds are women (Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2009, UNESCO). For girls and boys living in crisis contexts, the gender inequalities experienced in and through education can have particularly dire consequences. Moreover, for countries in crisis or post-crisis recovery, the macro-level effects of gender inequalities within education are detrimental to stability, peace and development.

‘Education in crisis’ refers to a broad range of educational activities including formal and non-formal opportunities, which are life-saving and life-sustaining and therefore critical for children, youth and their families during times of crisis.



Photo courtesy of Save the Children

Shamin writes in her exercise book along with other pupils in what remains of a classroom at Aurukhater Government Primary School in Pakistan. The school lost its classrooms but no-one died in the earthquake of 2005 as they were outside praying.

Emergency situations include natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and floods, as well as complex crises involving violent conflict and political unrest. Education service delivery in these contexts includes short-term, temporary measures such as the establishment of ‘tent schools’ or ‘child friendly spaces’ when buildings are destroyed. However, education in crisis also refers to longer-term education policy and programme developments in chronic crisis situations. This might include refugee or displacement situations, where whole sections of a population are uprooted from their homes for long periods of time, during which young people’s educational needs must still be met. Education activities will evolve over time, and short-term temporary education interventions must be planned with a longer-term perspective, taking into account community

rights and the responsibilities of education authorities and the state, as described by Jackie Kirk in 'Education in Emergencies: The Gender Implications' (UNESCO, 2006). Furthermore, crisis situations can provide 'windows of opportunity', where innovations and reform can be achieved, providing potentially helpful models for countries which are not necessarily recovering from crisis.

Education, gender and crisis: different needs, equal opportunities

As for girls, getting an education is especially difficult. Families will pay for boys' education before that of girls' when they have few resources. A prostitute girl in Makeni said, "I wasn't able to go to school because my parents prefer paying for my brother instead of me. So, I ended up being a prostitute."

Mohamed
Sierra Leone (Interview by the Womens' Refugee Commission)

Crises such as violent conflict and natural disasters, and the physical damage, social disruption, and movement of people that they cause, are experienced profoundly differently by girls, women, boys and men. They face different risks, respond differently to stressful situations, and have different capacities

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for dealing with the often radical affects of crisis. Conflict and natural disasters can result in loss of livelihoods and changed social roles, when, for instance, women take sole charge of families. Power dynamics within families, communities and societies are often in flux, and can change women's and men's status. Moreover, in these contexts educational needs change while the ability for boys and girls to access school also often changes and is impacted by the crisis and the resulting shifts in gender roles and family circumstance. Being aware of these gender dynamics and understanding social constraints is critical to ensuring that children have equal access to quality education in crisis contexts.

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Different barriers to education for boys and girls are often apparent, with girls usually experiencing greater disadvantage. For example, access to school is often a major constraint affecting children and especially girls in crisis situations. Schools can be far away and not accessible to girls, younger children and disabled learners. Safety concerns on routes to and from school will mean women and girls many not be able to securely travel even short distances without a male companion. In some contexts, being in school or travelling to and from



Apolonia, 40, teaches Level One of the Save the Children Accelerated Learning Program at Ntoroko Primary School, Uganda.

school places boys and girls at risk of abuse and exploitation. Girls may also be targeted for forced recruitment into fighting forces, in addition to being at considerable risk of sexual violence and other forms of exploitation. (IASC Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action: Education Action Sheet, 2006). In many instances, even when children are able to access a safe learning environment, the school itself can be a site of gender inequality. Often schools are staffed exclusively by male teachers, with a curriculum and textbooks that reinforce gender stereotypes and inequity. Even the basic components of the physical school environment, such as poor or absent sanitation facilities, can result in low attendance and high dropout rates among adolescent girls who are menstruating.

Families themselves, and the wider society, can also impose barriers to equitable educational access. As the quote from a girl in Sierra Leone illustrates, impoverished families sometimes prioritise boys' education over girls, particularly if there is a policy of school fees. Girls are also frequently relied upon to do household work and look after younger children. Both boys and girls may be expected to generate income rather than attend school. Even in contexts where girls do enrol in primary school, dropout rates in upper primary to secondary levels will often increase, especially where early marriage and pregnancy are common.

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In crisis contexts, the provision of gender-sensitive education is critical and should be supplied without discrimination of any kind. Despite the barriers and risks, quality education for girls and boys is a fundamental human right, a protection mechanism and a catalyst for development. Governments are duty bound to work with communities and other partners to ensure that all children are able to access safe and relevant educational opportunities.

An enabling right: education for protection and development

All people have a right to education, and those affected by emergencies are no exception, including during conflict and natural disasters. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights



“The key to rebuilding our lives and restoring our communities is education, especially for girls who have suffered disproportionately. A generation without education is doomed. We need assurance, we need to be heard and to participate, we need a future. We have a right to education and we want to go to school.”

Akello Betty

17-year-old girl from northern Uganda
(interviewed by the Women’s Refugee Commission).

(1948) articulates the right to education without discrimination and declares that primary education should be free and compulsory, secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational training, should be made available and accessible to all by every means appropriate, and that the higher levels of education should be accessible to all on the basis of merit. Since then, numerous international treaties have reaffirmed this right, as well as several major conferences resulting in international declarations committing the international community, and national governments to making ‘Education for All’ a reality.

Despite the rights-based arguments for the importance of education for all children, including those affected by crisis, until recently education was not considered an essential component of humanitarian response in conflict and disaster situations. There is now growing recognition of the life-saving role that education can play in crisis situations, providing cognitive, psychosocial and physical protection to both students and teachers.

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Education in emergencies provides physical protection through the creation of safe learning spaces free from crisis-related dangers such as falling masonry or landmines, as well as from risks associated with violent conflict such as forced abduction by fighting forces, or direct attacks on schools, learners or education personnel. Cognitive protection is assured through the provision of relevant educational content which meets the needs of the children and gives potentially life-saving health and safety messages. Psychosocial protection through

The right to education in international treaties

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- The Geneva Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949)
- Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1961)
- Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
- Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Education for All in international declarations

- Jomtien Declaration (1990)
- Dakar Framework for Action (2000)
- Millennium Development Goals (2000).

the creation of a safe and stable environment, where children can interact freely with each other, play and be supported by their peers and trustworthy adults, is also a crucial protective element that education can help to provide.

In crisis contexts, where boys and girls have different needs, vulnerabilities and capacities, a gender-responsive education system is crucial to ensure knowledge of these differences and to determine the resulting protection needs and actions. Physical protection will require particular considerations for girls and women, as they often face greater risks of sexual and gender-based violence. For example, the location of school buildings and sanitation facilities and the timing of classes should be carefully considered. School level policies such as codes of conduct for teachers and administrative staff should be in place to ensure that girls and boys are safe in and around school. Cognitive protection should also be approached with a consideration for the implicit and explicit gender dimensions. Information should be available regarding services for children and youth affected by sexual violence. Young men and women should have access to relevant life skills, including information on reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. While boys, girls and youth of both genders need this information, this will best be provided separately, with male and female teachers assigned to each group.

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Moreover, gender-sensitive psychosocial protection will need to respond to the changing gender dynamics which may be a result of the crisis. Providing space for girls and boys, women and men to discuss their experiences, share ideas and concerns is important. Women and girls’ work will often increase during times of crisis, so making time for these activities within the school can be crucial. For boys and men, the cultural barriers to sharing emotions and expression concerns may be a challenge, so finding appropriate and comfortable space for community self-support is also vital.

The rights-based and protection arguments for the importance of equitable education for all affected by crisis contexts are clear. But national governments and their humanitarian and development partners should also be aware of, and responsive to, the role that a gender equitable education system can provide as a catalyst for development. Recent research that supports earlier studies has determined quantifiable and reciprocal links between progress towards equitable education and impacts on other areas of development, such as poverty reduction, public health, democratisation, and gender equality at the society-wide level. In all countries, ensuring equality of opportunity in education is one of the most important factors for reducing social disparities and overcoming social injustice (Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2009, UNESCO). Equitable education also shores up economic growth and efficiency and ensures that societies are competitive in the knowledge-based world economy. No country can afford the economic inefficiencies and developmental stagnation that arise when people are denied educational opportunities because of their gender or social group, least of all states impacted by crisis.

Apart from the more tangible impacts that education can have on the economic and public health domains of development, a quality education can also impart what are often considered ‘softer’ skills and behaviours, but which are essential to sustainable growth and development. Girls and boys learn social

skills, self confidence, critical thinking and other essential tools for life, enabling them to fully participate in their society and make informed decisions that impact positively upon their families and wider communities. Inclusive quality education is therefore not only one of the foundations of democracy, but it also contributes to stability and helps to ensure an informed population that has the skills necessary to rebuild after crisis. Gender balanced educational opportunities are a key strategy to create more equitable societies and communities; empowering women and girls, with men and boys, to be actors in and to benefit from sustainable transitions to peace and stability.

“Knowing that educating a girl is educating a nation; what type of nation are we building if the young girl is not educated?”

Nan (15)

Cameroon (interviewed by Plan International)

Opportunities for change: guidance and good practice

In crisis situations, the challenges to ensuring an equitable and gender-sensitive education system can seem insurmountable, with some actors arguing that greater stability is needed before efforts to reach excluded groups can be attempted. However, with the average conflict lasting 10 years and families remaining in internally displaced person camps for an average of 17 years, the failure to provide education in these contexts will render entire generations uneducated and unprepared to contribute to their society's recovery. Furthermore, the social upheaval that emergencies will often cause can also be an opportunity for change. Using this 'window of opportunity' to examine the education system with a gendered lens, considering how a gender-responsive approach might be attempted, and implementing incremental reforms in response to crisis can result in long-term changes in education systems that positively impact more equitable relations, and power and opportunity sharing between women, girls, boys and men (Kirk, 2006).

In crisis contexts, where boys and girls have different needs, vulnerabilities and capacities, a gender-responsive education system is crucial to ensure knowledge of these differences and to determine the resulting protection needs and actions.

The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies has a number of tools and resources to help governments and their partners undertake this analysis and consider holistically how their education systems, either in times of crisis, in early recovery, or during the development of preparedness policies and plans, can promote gender equality and the right to education for all children. The INEE Minimum Standards are the most well-recognised and utilised resource in the field, used in over 80 countries worldwide. Developed in a highly consultative process in 2003 and 2004, the Standards provide a common framework for governments, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations and donor agencies working to plan, implement and evaluate quality education programmes in crisis, post-crisis, and pre-crisis preparedness. ('Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction', published by INEE in 2004. www.ineesite.org/standards)

Grounded in the Education for All commitments, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the INEE Minimum Standards collate best practice and guidance, ensuring that girls' and boys' rights to safe, quality and relevant education are met and that the education provided is gender-responsive and empowering for all. Gender equity is a theme that is integrated across all categories of the INEE Minimum Standards, which cover the broad range of educational components and dimensions from access and learning environment, to teacher training, curriculum development, community participation and policy formulation. Further guidance is available from the IASC Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action, as well as a number of other inter-agency Gender Strategy Sheets developed by INEE's Gender Task Team.

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With these tools, and the technical guidance that INEE and its member organisations can provide, governments should work to ensure that gender-responsive educational opportunities are available for all children, particularly for those affected by crisis. Governments should:

- **Work across ministries:** to ensure that education is included within humanitarian response, policy and financing
- **Build capacity and resilience:** by including preparedness, mitigation and emergency response plans in education sector planning and policy
- **Finance quality education for all:** donor governments must improve coordination and support flexible financing modalities to ensure that all children in crisis-affected states receive quality education.

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The **Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)** is an open global network of representatives from UN agencies, donor organisations, government ministries, non-governmental organisations, teachers, researchers and individuals from affected populations working together to ensure all people the right to quality and safe education in emergencies and post-crisis recovery.

Website: www.ineesite.org

