Policy Note

Addressing Threats to Girls' Education in Contexts affected by Armed Conflict[i]

October 2017

This policy note contends that greater investment in girls' education in conflict-affected contexts is urgently required as a critical component of achieving SDGs 4, 5 and 16. At-scale programmes, research and multi-sectoral collaboration must be strengthened to ensure all of the world's girls are achieving and learning, that gender equality goals are achieved and that these efforts contribute to building sustainable peace.

The information contained in this policy note is based on the findings of an evidence review conducted by ODI 'Addressing Threats to Girls Education in Conflict-affected Contexts' (2017) as well as other cited publications.

Women and girls are uniquely and disproportionately affected by conflict. Heightened insecurity, displacement and the associated breakdown of family and social support networks serve to reinforce existing gender disparities, rendering women and girls more vulnerable to threats resulting from conflict. For example, in addition to direct risks of forced recruitment into armed groups and trafficking, girls often face the double or triple burden of caring for children or elderly relatives and taking on household and income-earning responsibilities[ii].

Women and girls generally have less access to financial resources, social capital and legal means to protect themselves when conflict arises. The situation is further exacerbated for the poorest and most marginalized girls such as those with disabilities or from ethnic minorities[iii].

This results in greater dependency, socioeconomic disempowerment and limited social mobility.

Girls face multiple threats to accessing safe and quality education[iv]. Conflict has a devastating effect on the availability, access and quality of education for all children. Girls generally face multiple barriers to accessing safe and quality education as a result of a lack of enabling environment that promotes gender equality and various forms of discrimination. Such barriers are observed at the individual, community and institutional levels and can result directly from conflict or can be indirectly linked to but exacerbated by conflict. Direct factors include targeted attacks on girls' schools, School-related Gender-based Violence (SRGBV) and displacement. Indirect factors include early marriage, reduced availability of adolescent sexual and reproductive health services[v], exacerbated disadvantage of girls with disabilities and increased upfront and hidden costs involved in sending a child to school for poor families.

Adolescent girls are particularly disadvantaged. Unlike boys for adolescent girls, education is not generally seen as an investment[vi]. Girls also face multiple barriers within school that can affect enrolment, attendance and completion such as limited availability of female teachers and lack of adequate sanitation facilities. As in other contexts, the school environment itself can also pose barriers to promoting gender equality such as gender biased curriculum, textbooks and teacher practices.

Girls' education outcomes are weakest in conflict-affected contexts, particularly during adolescence. Four of the five countries with the largest gender gaps in education are conflict-affected[vii]. Indeed girls are nearly two and a half times as likely to be out of school in conflict-affected areas, and adolescent girls are nearly 90% more likely to be out of secondary school[viii]. Refugee girls are less likely to complete primary, and transition into and finish secondary[ix].

The intersecting effects of poverty and gender are particularly pronounced in conflict settings where evidence shows that poor girls fare the worst. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo's conflict-affected North Kivu province, adolescents and young adults are twice as likely to have less than two years of schooling than the national average – but three times as likely in the case of poor girls. In Northern Uganda, data indicates that violent conflict has had little effect on the education of boys from the wealthiest one-fifth of households. However poorest girls from the same area, are twice as likely to face risk of extreme education poverty[x].

Evidence demonstrates that investment in girls' education is pivotal to advancing myriad other development outcomes, particularly in conflict-affected settings[xi]. However gender disparities in education resulting from conflict factors deny girls the opportunity to gain skills and competencies in order to advance their own opportunities or support the broader development agenda. They thus are unlikely to contribute through productive economic participation and civic engagement to contribute to a country's recovery, economic growth and maintenance of peace and stability[xii]. Global analysis indicates that conflict is less likely in contexts where there is gender parity in terms of mean years of schooling[xiii].

Understanding the consequences and impact of conflict on girls and women - while reflecting the needs, experiences and enlisting the support of men and boys - is essential in order to inform the development of gender-sensitive policies and programmes that level the playing field in girls' education.

Education presents a critical entry point to promote gender equality and build sustainable peace during the social upheaval experienced during conflict. Shifts in gender roles and relations observed following conflict present the opportunity to harness such dynamics and set new precedents for gender equality. For example, conflict situations frequently result in women and girls adopting non-traditional activities that provide opportunities for economic participation[xiv]. Education has the potential to reinforce such positive shifts.

Education can also serve to develop identities and influence cultural norms; it should play a crucial role in shaping an understanding of gender roles and responsibilities. When education is available equitably, is of good quality, and sensitive to conflict and gender considerations, it has the potential to be transformative and to comprise a key element of building sustainable peace[xv].

Evidence has demonstrated the potential to promote teachers as agents of change for gender equality in Uganda's Karamoja Region.

Research has shown that changes in teachers' knowledge, attitudes and practices on gender in conflict-affected settings resulting from a UNICEF training initiative on gender socialization could have a considerable impact in promoting safer and more equitable schools over the long-term.

Promising Approaches

Evidence emerging from promising approaches to address the threats to girls' education in conflict-affected areas points to five key lessons:

Multi-pronged approaches must be adopted to address the multiple risks and disadvantages faced by girls. Evidence indicates that each of the individual strategies identified below are most effective when implemented in parallel, across different sectors and actors. Strategies showing particular promise seek to combine approaches that work with communities to influence and transform discriminatory norms, while improving the quality, flexibility and availability of formal and non-formal educational opportunities as well as taking targeted steps to reduce barriers such as safety, security and financial constraints.

In humanitarian contexts, crisis and conflict may undermined the capacity on the national government to provide safe, secure and quality education In these environments, additional roles for reinforcing system-wide approaches for protection and service delivery may fall to Education Cluster partners and the UN system as well as others engaged in peace-keeping and monitoring the rebuilding of appropriate services including education.

Community engagement is critical for the delivery of gender-sensitive and contextually relevant education. Working with communities to challenge discriminatory beliefs and practices against girls' education has led to increased enrolment and attendance. Such approaches also promote ownership and sustainability.

Evidence shows that:
- It is possible to influence behavior linked to social norms that hamper girls' education through advocacy and engagement of various community stakeholders including men and boys. Evidence from Afghanistan, South Sudan and Somalia has shown such interventions to serve as one of the bedrocks for promoting a more protective environment for girls' education.
- A critical factor of success has been where community members are directly engaged in a variety of ways, ranging from the provision of safe spaces to learn in community run-schools, to actively engaging in parent/teacher associations and school management committees. In Afghanistan, interventions have promoted smooth running of schools and better quality of teaching through strengthened accountability have shown to be especially effective.
- Local and religious leaders, once convinced about the value of girls' education, have been instrumental in challenging deeply entrenched cultural norms that are unsupportive of girls' education. Approaches have been successful in changing such community attitudes - often compounded by conflict factors – as shown by initiatives employing community participation strategies with local and religious leaders in Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan.

In Afghanistan, an evaluation of Save the Children's community-based schools found that community ownership was key to increasing student attendance. Community advocacy teams comprising children and youth councilors engaged in advocacy around girls' education and reduction of child labour, as well as child and parent groups following up on child absenteeism. Data shows that in 2005 less than 30% of students in formal schools supported by the initiative were female. By 2009, this had risen to 39% (above the national average of 35.5%). Between 2008 and 2009, the increase in girls' enrolment in supported schools was three times as large as the increase in boys' enrolment.

Financial and in-kind supports help families to send girls to school. Global evidence indicates that demand for schooling can be increased through economic support interventions, including scholarships, social protection safety nets and cash transfers. Such interventions can be particularly effective in conflict-affected situations where poverty, insecurity and lack of access to education generally becomes intensified.

While rigorous evidence on the benefits of such support in fragile contexts is limited, what does exist shows promise:

- In Somalia and Burundi, the provision of financial assistance (cash or vouchers) to cover key school costs in return for attendance, or ensuring fee-free schools has been shown to have beneficial effect on girls' enrolment and drop-out rates. Indeed, such initiatives are often designed to target girls given the priority often assigned by families to boys.
- In-kind assistance such as food rations or school feeding can increase enrolment, provide nutritional benefits and assist in retention. While promising trends have been identified in Chad, DRC, Somalia and Sudan, there is a need to increase knowledge on the impact of feeding programmes, particularly with respect to how they can promote equality in education while at the same time ensuring minimum disruption to local markets.

In Burundi, the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) Teacher Emergency Package (TEP) demonstrated a significant impact on the enrolment of children, particularly girls, through ensuring free school entrance, books, materials and uniforms. Research concluded the initiative to be turning point in opening the door for girls to enter the education system in large numbers.

Alternative education mechanisms are crucial where existing school systems do not provide the flexibility needed to support learners. Alternative education initiatives, including accelerated learning, have shown promise in improving access to learning opportunities for excluded children in conflict-affected contexts, especially girls. Such models are able to adapt and respond through different modes of teaching in response to the needs of the students and the crisis environment.

Evidence indicates that:
- Community schools or distance learning are effective in responding to situations where school sites are damaged or occupied. Online and radio-based educational programmes have proven to be successful where students or teachers are threatened or absent due to conflict, the commute to school is dangerous or residents have been displaced, such as the Philippines, Somalia and South Sudan. Experiences with online learning for refugees and IDPs have shown particular promise in reaching adolescent girls across Afghanistan, Chad, Jordan, Somalia, Kenya, Malawi, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.
- Alternative education models that provide flexible schedules can facilitate improved attendance rates, particularly for girls. Children who have to work to support their families, as well as young mothers and adolescent girls with domestic and child or sibling care responsibilities can particularly benefit from such models. Indeed, the proportion of girls who return to school having been absent for a period of time remains low despite policies allowing girls to return to school following marriage or pregnancy. Accelerated Learning Programmes across Angola, Afghanistan and South Sudan have shown better indicators of gender equality than formal schools as a result of specific measures to address challenges girls face such as distance to school, low numbers of female teachers and inflexible schedules.
- Alternative education presents the opportunity to incorporate gender-sensitive strategies that may be lacking in local government schools. While short-term donor funding can limit the impact of such measures, promising solutions to address such sustainability concerns are emerging. These include

strengthening the link between community and school committees and promoting grassroots support and buy-in (through local governments taking up operational costs for example).

Targeted strategies to address SRGBV must be integrated into education programmes. Strengthening preventive and protective mechanisms within schools and temporary learning spaces during emergencies is key to creating a safe and supportive learning environments for all girls, young women, boys and young men. While some approaches will focus on the role of schools, teachers, communities, and girls themselves, others must acknowledge national accountability for safety and security of girls and boys in all learning environments. National-level prevention and response mechanisms would include systems for referral, complaint and support led by Ministries of Education and other ministries such a Women and Children's Affaires, Social Protection and Justice, and monitored as part on-going peace-keeping efforts, and systems of accountability to affected populations.

Evidence demonstrates that:

- It is critical to focus on reshaping harmful social norms relating to gender, sex and violence as the key drivers of SRGBV. Programmes fostering behavior change in collaboration with communities, built on reflecting on the realities of how SRGBV affects girls and the community more broadly, show particular promise. In South Sudan and Somalia, UNICEF's 'Communities Care' programme aims to address underlying drivers of GBV. As part of the initiative, teachers were engaged through its Community Engagement and Action component, which shows promising shifts in teacher attitudes and practices.

- Creating safe spaces for girls in or around schools, where they are provided with the tools and capacity to discuss critical issues such as violence, sex, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender norms have shown positive results in enhancing girls' empowerment and self-esteem in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Tanzania and Uganda.

- Creating gender-sensitive teaching and learning environments can contribute to the prevention of SRGBV by preparing teachers with awareness of gender stereotypes in teaching and learning materials; promotion of girls' active participation in class; a focus on self-confidence and self-esteem in both girls and boys; and use of gender-sensitive, non-violent and non-abusive language as shown by promising practices identified in Afghanistan and Uganda. It is important to ensure both male and female teachers receive robust training on gender equality in order to affect teaching and learning practices in the classroom.

- Female teachers or teaching assistants in the classroom and school environment prove to be positive role models and can support girls to be assertive and confront harassment and abuse. The presence of female staff in schools can also reassure parents who would otherwise be unwilling to send girls to school. Promising results to this end have been observed in Afghanistan, Guinea, Pakistan and Sierra Leone.

- Interventions across Afghanistan, Jordan, Pakistan and South Sudan have demonstrated that reducing the distance to school, providing safe means of transport, building protective walls around schools and having trusted guards in place improves safety and security for children in and around school.

An evaluation of NRC's Women's Rights through Information, Sensitisation and Education (WISE) GBV programme in Liberia has demonstrated effective strategies to change perceptions and norms that perpetuate GBV, including in schools and by teachers[xvi].

Underpinning all promising interventions is the application of the 'Do No Harm' principle where exacerbating disparities or discriminating between affected populations is prevented, measures are taken to avoid exacerbation of conflict and insecurity and the special needs of the most vulnerable groups are considered. Detailed country examples can be viewed in the full study.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers working at both the global and country-levels. While the following recommendations are suitable to a broad range of contexts, evidence indicates that they are particularly pertinent in conflict-affected settings in terms of addressing the specific threats identified to girls' education:

Due to limited data and evidence, invest in research, monitoring and evaluation of education programmes in conflict-affected contexts with a gender lens. Concrete evidence on what has worked on gender-responsive education in conflict-affected settings is critical to enable practitioners, donors and decision-makers to draw on rapidly in order to make informed programming decisions and choices. Measures include:

- Disaggregate data by sex and age and conduct gender analysis at the program design phase. This is a straight-forward and cost-effective way to increase the knowledge base for education interventions targeting and benefiting younger and adolescent girls in conflict-affected contexts. This is a minimum requirement to be supplemented by a comprehensive M&E plan that seeks to capture changes in gender-related outcomes;
- Invest in research to accompany targeted programming on gender-responsive education in conflict-affected countries. This will enable evidence-based scale-up of effective educational responses specific to conflict-affected settings;
- Broaden research to include all levels of education from early childhood to adult and higher education;
- Expand the scope of research to examine transitions between different levels of education, transitions to employment and empowerment (to understand the full impact of addressing girls' education on contribution to gender equality more broadly);
- Ensure research design prioritizes the safety and security of researchers and participants; this may require the provision of additional measures and female research teams in order to include the experience of women and girls;
- Adhere to standards of evaluation that that will strengthen the evidence base on what works to address threats to girls' education in conflict-affected contexts. This has been shown to be possible in challenging contexts at relatively low cost.

Focus investment on interventions that promote multi-sectoral collaboration to improve access and quality of education for girls alongside efforts to tackle discriminatory cultural and social attitudes and practices. . Approaches that span different sectors and actors, include systems' level interventions, and seek the participation of students, parents, teachers, leaders and the community to are the most effective in addressing the multi-layered threats to girls' education.

Such approaches include better and more gender-responsive teaching and learning and school environments, including reflecting gender analysis in education sector and humanitarian response plans, gender-sensitive budgets and appropriate curriculum and textbooks. These efforts should be complemented by approaches to reshape discriminatory social norms that keep girls out of school.

Build on proven interventions to scale-up combinations of promising strategies working explicitly and intentionally at the intersection between gender, education and conflict. . Evidence points to four key strategies effective in improving access and quality of education for girls in conflict-affected contexts: (i) community engagement including in particular with men and boys (ii) financial or in-kind assistance to families, (iii) alternative education modalities and (iv) targeted mechanisms and strategies to address SRGBV.

![UNGEI - United Nations Girls' Education Initiative logo]

Investing in at-scale efforts to implement a combination of these strategies as relevant to the specific context will be effective in overcoming or mitigating the multiple threats girls face in conflict-affected settings.

Strengthen knowledge management systems to facilitate wide dissemination of proven interventions on girls' education in conflict-affected contexts. Ensure easy access to existing (but largely untapped) tools and successful interventions that have shown potential to work in conflict-affected contexts.

Invest in documentation of good practice and establishment of a comprehensive, widely accessible repository of information, and provide opportunities for the sharing of experience and lessons learned. This will foster a more systematic uptake of evidence-based solutions in the sector and increase the likelihood that future programmes will respond to community needs and have positive outcomes for girls.

Strengthen collaboration across gender, education and conflict actors globally to promote coordinated, collective advocacy and action to address girls' education in conflict-affected contexts. Evidence has highlighted the relevance of advocacy actions from the ground up and from a policy level down that draw on key lessons to inform broader policy actions in conflict-affected contexts. At the country level national, collaboration across agencies and with the national government is also key, including between UN and other peacekeeping and service delivery agencies to avoid duplication and ensure complementarity of interventions.

National and global level advocacy campaigns have been instrumental in raising the profile of education in conflict-affected settings and rallying support and resources accordingly. While global efforts to date have brought visibility to the needs of girls in conflict-affected settings, this momentum must be further leveraged. Greater efforts are required to promote systematic collaboration between actors across different sectors and institutions working on gender, education and conflict to achieve learning for all girls through a unified voice and strategy in conflict-affected contexts.

[i] *The term 'conflict' shall be used from this point forth to refer specifically to all forms of armed conflict.*

[ii] *UNCEDAW (UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) (2015) Attacks against girls seeking to access education.Background Paper. Geneva: OHCHR.*

[iii] *UNESCO (2011) Education for All Global Monitoring Report The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education : Gender Overview.*

[iv] *While men and boys are also exposed to numerous threats which can hamper education opportunities and can undermine peace and stability, the focus of this note is women and girls. Critical issues pertaining to men and boys in this context are related yet different in nature and merit separate discussion. See for example: UNICEF (2016) Violent Conflict and Educational Inequality: Literature Review. Education Policy and Data Center FHI 360.*

[v] *UNFPA (UN Population Fund) (2016) Adolescent girls in disaster & conflict: Interventions for improving access to sexual and reproductive health services. New York: UNFPA.*

[vi] *Alam, M., Warren, R. and Applebaum, A. (2016) Closing the gap: Adolescent girls' access to education in conflict-affected settings. Washington, DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.*

[vii] *Nicolai, S., Hine, S. and Wales, J. (2015) Education in emergencies and protracted crises: Toward a strengthened response. London: ODI.*

[viii] *UNESCO (2015a) Education for all 2000-2015: Achievements and challenges. EFA Global Monitoring Report Paris: UNESCO.*

[ix] *UNESCO (2016) Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender Review.*

[x] *UNESCO (2011) Education for All Global Monitoring Report The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education : Gender Overview.*

[xi] *GPE (2016) Girls' Education and Gender Equality: Factsheet; GPE (2016) Advancing Gender Equality in Education across GPE Countries: Policy Brief*

[xii] *UNICEF (2016) Gender, Education and Peacebuilding Brief: Issues Emerging from Learning for Peace. Peacebuilding, Advocacy and Education Programme.*

[xiii] *Omoeva, C., Hatch, R., Moussa, W. (2016) The Effects of Armed Conflict on Educational Attainment and Inequality. Education Policy and Data Center, FHI 360.*

[xiv] *See, for example: Justino, Patricia, et al., 'Quantifying the Impact of Women's Participation in Post-Conflict Economic Recovery,' HiCN Working Paper, no. 131, Households*

[xv] *UNICEF (2016) Gender, Education and Peacebuilding Brief: Issues Emerging from Learning for Peace. Peacebuilding, Advocacy and Education Programme.*

[xvi] *The social norms change approach included interventions that engaged with community groups in critical discussions around GBV - working with both teachers from formal and community-based schools.*