

Forum: United Nations Women (UN Women)

Issue: Increasing Girl's Access to Education in Conflict Zones

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Committee Information

UN Women was established in 2010 by the UN General Assembly. It is a United Nations Entity dedicated to lead organizations to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. It aims to address the needs of women and girls around the world by consolidating previous work and also making new reforms. UN Women operates under a triple mandate: it supports organizations to formulate global and regional norms; it provides support to member states to reinforce gender equality policies and standards; it coordinates between government and organizations to ensure that efforts are made effectively.

Definition of Key Terms

Conflict Zone	A geographic area experiencing armed conflict, which may be international or non-international in nature, characterized by widespread violence, displacement, and the collapse of governance and public services, including education.
Gender-Based Violence (GBV)	Harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is a severe violation of human rights and a major barrier to girls' education. In conflict zones, this includes, but is not limited to, sexual violence, forced marriage, and exploitation, which are often used as tactics of war.
Gender Equality	The concept that all human beings, regardless of their gender, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, or prejudices. In the context of education, it means that girls and boys enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities, and protections.
Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS)	Safe, semi-permanent structures established in emergency settings, such as refugee camps or displaced persons camps, to provide immediate educational activities and a sense of normalcy for children when formal school buildings are destroyed, inaccessible, or unsafe.
Safe Schools Declaration	An inter-governmental political commitment launched in 2015 that countries can endorse. It outlines a set of commitments to protect students, teachers, schools, and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict, including the prohibition of using educational buildings for military purposes.
Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs)	Flexible, age-appropriate education programs that are designed to cover a condensed curriculum for children and youth who have missed years of schooling due to conflict, displacement, or other crises. They are crucial for helping girls catch up and reintegrate into formal education systems.

More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs)	Countries with highly developed economies and advanced technological infrastructure. In this context, they often act as primary donors and provide diplomatic support for international humanitarian and educational initiatives.
Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs)	Countries with less developed industrial bases and a lower Human Development Index (HDI). This category includes both conflict-affected states and host countries that, while potentially facing their own development challenges, receive refugees from neighboring conflicts.
Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda	A framework established by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent resolutions. It recognizes the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls and the critical role of women in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding. Ensuring girls' education is a key component of this agenda.
Local Women-Led Organizations	Grassroots, community-based groups that are led by and serve women and girls within their own communities. They possess deep cultural understanding and trust, making them essential for effectively identifying needs and delivering aid, including education, in conflict-affected areas.

Introduction

The conflict zones impose tremendous challenges to education, with girls being affected the most. The consequences of conflicts such as destroyed infrastructure and the threat of GBV (Gender-based violence) creates significant obstacles for girls seeking an education. This not only deprives girls of their right to attend educational institutions but also has severe impacts on their future and the stability of society. Moreover, conflicts further compound pre-existing gender inequalities and induce discrimination under inherently oppressive gender norms, which in turn increases the rates of early marriage and forced labor. In addition, there is often a lack of safety measures and hygienic facilities or female teachers that are available in educational institutions located in conflict zones, further deterring girls from enrolling and staying on. This is why tackling these challenges and expanding girls' learning opportunities in war zones are not just ethical obligations but also a matter of strategic necessity to help establish inclusive peaceful societies, gender parity for sustainable development.

General Overview

Education is a crucial part in modern society, yet in conflicted regions around the world, education systems are fragile. They are the first ones to collapse and often lack attention when rebuilding fragile states. Conflict exemplifies pre-existing gender inequalities, denying girls' human rights for security, freedom and quality education. A well-established education system provides protection against violence, emotional support, and a channel to voice out opinions and concerns. The limited access to education reduces the opportunities for girls to have a safe and equitable environment for continuous learning amidst the aftermath of a conflict.

Severity of the Issue

There are currently 129 million girls that do not have access to proper education, and a major proportion are living in conflict affected areas (UN Women, 2017). When conflict breaks out, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be stripped away from educational opportunities compared to boys (UNESCO, 2019). This gap in education limits individual opportunities creating a large population that hinders the recovery of the society.

Key Barriers

Targeted Violence and Attacks on Education

- Schools often act as a military target during armed conflicts to strike fear. Girls' schools, in particular, tend to get targeted to reinforce gender norms and seize control over girls. Between 2015 and 2019, there were 11,000 reported attacks on educational facilities targeted at girls (GCPEA, 2020). The threat of violence due to conflict acts as a significant concern and barrier for girls' access to education.

Forced Displacement

- Conflict forces millions to be displaced from their habitat. Displaced girls in conflict affected zones are half as likely to receive proper education compared to girls in non-conflict affected zones (Malala Fund, 2019). Displacement denies opportunities for continuous education as refugee camps couldn't provide basic security and sanitary, which are fundamental living conditions.

Economic Hardship and Poverty

- Conflict shatters the local economy. Families that face economic hardship are more likely to prioritise the education of boys over girls when they cannot afford both. In desperate situations, families also tend to use their daughters to provide economic support to the family by forcing them to undergo income-generating activities or forced and early marriage to gain a short term economic source. In conflict affected states, early marriage rates can exceed 50% (UNICEF, 2018).

Collapse of Infrastructure and Systems

- The physical destruction of educational infrastructure removes opportunities to provide quality, systematic education

Socio-Cultural and Legal Discrimination

- Customary laws in the local society enforces pre-existing gender inequalities by restricting women's rights to own land and assets. The absence of women's role in society encourages families to deprioritize girls' education.

Consequences of Inaction

The failure to provide formal education for girls induces long-term consequence

- Individual aspect: It increases rates of child marriage and early pregnancy, hindering girls' future potential for short term economic benefits.
- Societal aspect: It hampers the recovery of the society by creating cycles of poverty due to lack of education. Studies show that each additional year of schooling for girls can contribute to an increase of a country's GDP by an average of 0.3% (World Bank, 2018)

Key Resolutions

The Sustainable Development Goal 4:

Aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security:

Raises awareness of the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and the urgent need to protect women and girls from conflict-based violence.

The Safe Schools Declaration:

An inter-governmental political declaration to protect students, teachers, schools, and universities from the effects of armed conflicts.

Case Studies

Afghanistan

The Taliban first became prominent in 1994 due to their takeover of the Afghan capital, Kabul, in 1996. The takeover has extended into over 20 years of civil war. Political instability ensued as the Taliban imposed a strict and oppressive order based on its misinterpretation of Islamic law.

The Taliban then closed the women's universities and forced nearly all women to quit their jobs, subsequently restricted access to medical care for women, brutally enforced a restrictive dress code, and limited the ability of women to move about the city. "The Taliban has clamped down on knowledge and ignorance is ruling instead." — Sadriqa, a 22-year-old woman in Kabul reflected. This was a stark contrast from the 1960s, whereas Afghanistan was one of the most modernised, liberal and progressive nations in the Middle East: Women secured the rights to participate in political activities, the ability to vote, as well as attending universities.

Afghanistan is the only nation in the world where girls are barred from accessing secondary education beyond the level of primary six. The Taliban ended, for all practical purposes, education for girls. Since 1998, girls over the age of eight have been prohibited from attending school. Home schooling, while sometimes tolerated, was more often repressed. In 2000, the Taliban jailed and then deported a female foreign aid worker who had promoted home-based work for women and home schools for girls. The Taliban prohibited women from studying at Kabul University.

"The fate of women in Afghanistan is infamous and intolerable. The burqa that imprisons them is a cloth prison, but it is above all a moral prison. The torture imposed on little girls who dare to show their ankles or their polished nails is appalling. It is unacceptable and insupportable." — King Mohammed VI of Morocco.

Colombia

The development of women's education in Colombia is set against a context of a historically male-dominated society. For the majority of its history, women in Colombia were largely limited to their role in society, taking the role of housewives under desperate measures. Educational opportunities for girls are being severely limited and often restricted to those with wealth, usually within monasteries under Roman Catholic instruction (Wikipedia, 2014). A moment symbolizing change came in 1934, when the Colombian Congress passed a law to grant women the right to study, a controversial move at the time being (Wikipedia, 2014). This was followed by efforts that eventually granted women the right to access higher education. The state-owned National University of Colombia was the first institution to admit female students. This foundational history set the stage for the expansion of the Colombian educational system in the following century.

The decades following these legal changes saw a dramatic increase in school enrollment at all levels. The increases in education were significant. In 1935, enrollment at the elementary school level reached about 550,000, while by 1980, that number had risen to nearly 4.2 million (2009). A dramatic increase took place at the secondary level as well, although it was not as far reaching as the elementary increase. In 1935, enrollment in high schools totaled 45,670 students; by 1980, the number had grown to 1,824,000 (2009). By 1999, statistical data showed that females were somewhat more likely to attend high school than boys, with total high school enrollment at roughly 3.5 million students, the composition being 1.7 million boys and the relatively larger 1.8 million girls (2009). The teaching workforce also grew substantially, with the number of female secondary education teachers increasing from a record low of 17,690 in 1971 to 96,645 by 2022 (CEIC, 2022).

The progress in female education has had profound implications for Colombian society. A key area of research has been the long-run relationship between women's education and fertility decline in Colombia, a country that experienced both a rapid expansion of education and a fall in fertility rates in the mid-20th century (Banco de la República, 2024). At the individual level, research shows that education "increases the probability of remaining childless, reduces the total number of children and the likelihood of having a birth at a younger and older age, suggesting a strong trade-off between education and fertility" (Banco de la República, 2024). This highlights the empowering effect of education, giving women greater autonomy over their life choices.

China

In order to achieve a fully balanced education rate, the Compulsory Education Law, which went into effect in 1986, has been continually balancing educational inequality. China has attained or surpassed the averages of upper-middle-income nations in terms of enrollment rates at all educational levels. In 2024, the average number of years of education for working-age individuals was 11.21 years, the gross enrollment rate in higher education surpassed 60 percent, and the retention rate for compulsory education was 95.9 percent. These consistent investments have fueled the growth of high-quality educational development and helped China construct the largest educational system in the world. (ICSIN)

In reality however, in wealthy coastal cities such as Shenzhen and Shanghai, girls frequently perform better than boys and are high achievers. Yet traditional customs and financial difficulties produce a different reality in impoverished, rural inland provinces (such as Guizhou and Gansu).

- **Son Preference:** Even low-income families may choose to put their son's education ahead of their daughter's because they think the son will help them in old age and the daughter will marry into a different family.
 - Future employment opportunities and income potential are impacted by this "vertical segregation."
- **Economic Pull:** After junior high school, teenage girls are frequently urged or compelled to leave their home country in search of employment in order to support their brothers' education or the family's income.

Despite being a relatively better developed country than most, China has many non-economical issues (e.g. socio-cultural) factors that reinforce the obstacles in terms of girls' access to education— particularly in deep-rooted cultural beliefs, stereotypes and social pressures. (ICSIN)

- **Rural-Urban Disparity:** Particularly in western China, the largest divide is between affluent urban centers and impoverished rural areas due to geopolitical divides and conflicts. Because of poverty, traditional beliefs, and the need to move for work or to assist with family responsibilities, girls in rural areas are more likely to drop out after junior high school.
- **Gender Stereotyping in Academic Fields:** Although women make up the majority of undergraduate students, they are underrepresented in STEM fields, especially at the highest levels, and are disproportionately concentrated in humanities, education, and medical fields.
- **Implicit Bias and the "Boy Preference":** Culturally ingrained son preferences can still have an impact on family choices about educational spending. Sons' education may be given precedence over daughters' in low-income families.
- The phenomenon known as **"Leftover Women"** — the social pressure that highly educated women experience when they are stigmatized for being "overqualified" for marriage, which unintentionally penalizes them for their academic achievement.
- **Ethnic Minorities:** In isolated areas, girls from ethnic minority groups frequently encounter the biggest obstacles to enrolling in and finishing school.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations entities	These entities provide leadership, coordination, funding and assist on implementation of policies ● UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund): UNICEF is often involved in the front lines during conflicts, providing essential supplies and immediate assistance in humanitarian resources ● UNHCR (United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees): UNHCR provides support to refugee girls to access education in refugee camps. They address language barriers, certification of learning, and mental support for refugee girls
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	• UNESCO ((United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization): It provides leadership and monitoring by collecting data to set global standards, such as statistics on access to education and education gaps. They promote education in conflict zones by actively engaging in the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA).
National Governments	National governments have direct responsibility to ensure education in conflict zones. There are 3 types of governments involved. • Local Governments: The State Ministry of Education has direct responsibility over this issue. Efforts must be placed on strengthening policies, maintaining the quality of education, and eventually rebuilding the education system. However, they face challenges in limited authority, discriminatory policies and lack of human resources. • Host Governments: Countries near the conflict zone are essential partners to receive refugees. Their role is pivotal as their policies determine how much access to education can refugee girls have. They often receive international support to expand educational infrastructures and facilities. • Donor Governments: More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) such as France, Canada and Australia are major funders. They provide financial support through contributing to funds like the Education Cannot Wait (ECW) fund
Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)	These groups have an essential role to implement policies and engage in community-level access. • International NGOs: Organizations like Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Plan International provide fundamental services. They run informal schools, provide learning materials, train teachers, and implement programs that ensure girls' safety and hygiene • Local NGOs: Local NGOs are often undervalued. They have the most trust from local communities, therefore their role is to challenge gender norms and identify girls at risk. According to NGO VOICE, local women groups are the first ones to provide emergency education and immediate protection, yet they receive minimal international funding (VOICE, 2021) • Global advocacy network: These groups are responsible for conducting policy changes, advocating policy changes, and ensure accountability of the issue by keeping girls' education in conflict zones on the international agenda.

Previous Attempts at Resolving The Issue

Global Attempts

UNICEF's "Education in Emergencies" (EiE) Program had attempted to create a holistic, on-the-ground approach that includes:

- Establishing Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS) in refugee camps and displaced persons camps.
- Providing "School-in-a-Box" kits containing essential supplies for teachers and students

Cited in MLA

- Recruiting and training teachers from within refugee communities
- Implementing Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP) for girls who have missed years of schooling

This approach was extremely effective in terms of providing immediate, life-saving education and a sense of normalcy. However, it is often hampered by chronic underfunding (education receives a tiny fraction of humanitarian aid) and can struggle with sustainability once initial emergency funding ends.

UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) — these agencies operationalize gender-sensitive approaches on the ground:

- By creating safe learning environments: It includes constructing separate latrines for girls, installing lighting to prevent assault, and employing female teachers to make the environment more culturally acceptable and safer for girls
- Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Risk Mitigation by integrating them into education programs, such as establishing safe referral pathways for survivors and training teachers on PSEA (Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse)
- Implementing Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs) specifically for adolescent girls who have been forced out of school, often incorporating life skills and psychosocial support

This approach is critical for making education accessible and safe for girls. Its main limitation is chronic underfunding and the difficulty of implementing these standards in rapidly escalating crises or in areas controlled by non-state armed groups.

Regional-Specific Attempts

Palestine

UNRWA's Palestinian Refugee Education Program, with United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as the main actor – they've attempted to utilise one of the longest-running and most established educational initiatives in a protracted conflict area. With a focus on gender parity, it operates almost 700 schools for more than 500,000 Palestinian refugee boys and girls throughout the Middle East. Although it operates under limitations – despite the remarkable accomplishment in ensuring that generations of people living in exile have almost complete access to education, serious political and financial crises are currently posing an existential threat to it, highlighting how susceptible these systems are to the whims of donor governments. (Unrwa)

African Union

The African Union (AU)'s "Ending Child Marriage" Campaign — although broader, this campaign directly addresses a key driver of girls' school dropout. Member states are encouraged to adopt and enforce laws against child marriage and implement programs to keep girls in school. In addition to addressing marital policies, the "Safe Schools Declaration", was endorsed by many AU members for this international political commitment, which includes guidelines for protecting schools and universities from military use during conflict. This is crucial for making education safer for all, but especially girls who are more vulnerable when military presence is near. (Africa, 2020)

Nigeria

A prominent case in Nigeria is “The Lake Chad Basin (Boko Haram Conflict)”, exemplifying both the severe challenges and the regional response. Boko Haram's ideology is explicitly opposed to "Western education," leading to the systematic destruction of schools and the abduction of female students, most infamously the Chibok girls in Nigeria. The response was the formation of a military coalition of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) While not an educational body, its goal to create security is a prerequisite for reopening schools. (Ohchr, 20250

- **Regional Education in Emergencies Working Group:** Facilitated by UNICEF, this group brings together governments, NGOs, and donors from across the region to coordinate the response, share data, and standardize approaches for out-of-school children, especially girls.
- **"Back to School" Campaigns:** Governments in Cameroon and Niger, with international partners, have run targeted campaigns to reassure communities, provide temporary learning spaces, and recruit female teachers to encourage girls' return.

Possible Solutions

A successful resolution will require actions from both MEDCs and LEDCs. Below is some general advice for delegates to understand the context of their country's potential role and contribution.

More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs)

MEDCs should mobilize their abundance in resources and diplomatic power, providing funding for international organizations to ensure that sufficient resources are brought up to the front lines. Delegates should utilize their influence to ensure the accountability of this matter in international stages.

Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs)

LEDCs should focus on developing and enforcing national policies to address barriers such as gender-based violence (GBV). They should aim to address this issue in a more societal aspect.

Collaborative approach

MEDCs and LEDCs can partner to ensure that international support is directly addressing local needs. Cross-border educational approaches can be considered as a solution to providing formal education in conflict zones.

Appendices

Suggested sources for preliminary research:

UN Women – Humanitarian Action Section: the official website that describes UN Women's ongoing work on this issue. It provides specific case reports and fact sheets

Cited in MLA

- UN Women. "Humanitarian Action." UN Women, www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-action.

Education Cannot Wait (ECW): This website contains annual results reports that provides a clear view of the issue

- Education Cannot Wait. Homepage. Education Cannot Wait, www.educationcannotwait.org.

UNICEF – Education in Emergencies: This website offers specific information such as safe schools and teacher training situations.

- UNICEF. "Education in Emergencies." UNICEF, www.unicef.org/education/emergencies.

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA): This source provides in depth research about attacks on education, a barrier to girls' education in conflict zones.

- Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA). Homepage. GCPEA, www.protectingeducation.org.

Guiding Questions

1. What are the most significant barriers that uniquely prevent girls from accessing education in conflict zones?
2. Beyond building schools, what does a truly "safe learning environment" for girls in a conflict zone consist of, and which organizations or entities are responsible for creating and maintaining it?
3. How can the international community effectively support and partner with local organizations, especially local NGOs, who are often on the front lines in crises?
4. In contexts where state authority has collapsed or is contested, what are the viable pathways to provide structured, certified, and quality education to girls?
5. How can educating girls in conflict zones be explained not just as a fundamental human right, but as a crucial catalyst in long-term economic recovery and peacebuilding?

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