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Gender equality in education in emergencies

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Evidence shows how a gender-responsive approach can alleviate the particular risks that girls and boys face during crisis and displacement.

Major achievements have been made worldwide to ensure education rights for both girls and boys. When crisis or disaster erupt or people have to flee, however, these achievements are jeopardised. Statistical data on displaced people's access to education is difficult to obtain, and statistical information that is disaggregated by sex even more scarce. In a country like South Sudan, for example, which has suffered many years of war, violent conflict and displacements, it is estimated that 75% of girls are not enrolled in primary education.¹ Emergency situations may change existing gender dynamics and affect boys and girls differently but – most often – conflict reinforces existing barriers to education which in turn tend to reinforce gender disparities. Evidence from Oxfam IBIS' education in emergencies programming, which is based on a framework for analysing and addressing barriers to gender equality in education, identifies several such barriers:

Gender stereotypes and the devaluing of girls' education: Men are traditionally supposed to be breadwinners, while women are expected to become mothers and wives and their education is therefore considered less important. Although progress has been made in terms of promoting gender equality in education, in a time of crisis or displacement the gains that have been made in a stable context can sometimes be lost: response efforts focus on other areas, meaning it is difficult to ensure education is prioritised. And when education is delivered in an emergency it is often hard to find the resources to continue specific efforts and initiatives to promote gender equality that have been implemented by States and non-governmental organisations.

Gender stereotypes and economic factors: Poor families generally tend to prioritise the

education of boys, and in crisis situations they are even less likely to support girls' education. When families are displaced, both boys and girls may be forced to drop out or stay out of school to support themselves or their family by taking on jobs or engaging in prostitution, or parents may arrange marriages for girls at an early age. A recent study carried out in Nyal, South Sudan – located close to some of the most brutal fighting during the five-year conflict – shows that it now has some of the highest early marriage rates in the world, with an estimated 71% of girls married before the age of 18, significantly higher than the national pre-conflict average of 45%.³

Violence and safety: Both girls and boys, but in particular girls, are exposed to the risk of sexual harassment and violence in schools and on the way to school, especially in crisis situations. This risk is greatly increased in a situation of conflict, both for those in school and for the considerable number of children who are left without access to education. For example, in Nyal most community members interviewed felt that women and girls faced serious risks of sexual violence. They also felt that these risks had increased as a result of the crisis, to the extent that women and girls could not go out alone or go to school without risk.

Promoting gender equality

Although approaches to ensuring gender equality in emergency education are essentially the same as in a stable context, advocacy efforts are needed to ensure that all actors involved in emergency settings incorporate gender responsiveness into their education programming, and that authorities and donors provide the necessary funding. Interventions must be based on an initial gender analysis of how conditions for male and female children and youth are affected by the crisis and on identification

of the specific risks they are exposed to and any barriers to their education and safety.⁴ It is important that all actors, including local and national authorities, international and non-governmental organisations, consider the following interventions:

Changing gender stereotypes: Education interventions in communities affected by crisis or displacement should include sensitising parents on the importance of education for both boys and girls in a time of crisis, showing them how education can protect their children and promote gender equality, and also be an investment in a better and more gender-equal future. To ensure equal access, teachers should be trained on how to promote gender equality and safety in the classroom, and female teachers should be engaged to act as role models and advocates for girls' education. For example, in an accelerated learning programme (ALP) for 12–18-year-old South Sudanese who had previously been unable to access education because of crisis, the female teachers were strong advocates for female enrolment and for activities to help girls stay in education, providing menstrual hygiene kits and gender-segregated latrines.⁵

Addressing economic barriers: Even in a situation where families' livelihoods or incomes are diminished because of an emergency, different types of support can help crisis-affected and displaced families send all their children to school. This may include offering free school meals (and being aware that food insecurity particularly affects women and girls), providing free school learning materials, and giving access to micro-credit programmes. This support is particularly important for youth and adolescents, who may be left to support themselves in a situation of crisis and may need economic support alongside skills training and assistance to establish a decent livelihood. Adolescent girls interviewed in the Nyal study noted that poverty was a particular barrier to girls' education, and suggested that incentives could help girls stay in school. Evaluations of the Girls'

Education South Sudan programme show that the cash transfers that were given directly to girls to support their access to education and mitigate poverty at household and community levels helped them remain in school longer and improved their attendance.

Eliminating violence and ensuring safety:

Special measures should be put in place to counter gender-based violence and harassment both within and outside the school, including ensuring that the route to school is safe, providing separate toilet facilities for girls and boys, and offering psychosocial support for children affected by gender-based violence or crisis-related stress. Conflict-sensitive programming can also help reduce gender-based violence. This is not possible without involving school management, parents' associations and teachers, and without sensitising parents and communities, setting up protection systems and reporting mechanisms for violations, and establishing codes of conduct for teachers and school personnel. In the ALP in South Sudan, for example, the parent-teacher association acted as guards during classes to prevent youth from taking part in or being subject to revenge attacks.

In a situation of crisis, gender equality comes under pressure. However, providing gender-responsive education in emergencies is an effective way of protecting both boys and girls from severe risk, and of providing them with opportunities to rebuild their future.

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