

Long-Term Effects of COVID-19 on Refugee Girls' Education

Part II of II: Solutions for Equal Access

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Part I of this brief discussed the barriers refugee girls face to continuing their education in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The barriers fall into three main categories: financial issues, gendered norms about the value of educating girls, and outright gender-based and sexual violence. Part II focuses on solutions, not only to overcome these barriers in the short-term, but to create greater gender equity in refugee education in the long-term.

Based on USCRI's research, recommendations from NGOs and agencies on the ground, and innovations currently being implemented during the pandemic, here are USCRI's top recommendations for ensuring educational gender parity among refugees during and in the aftermath of the pandemic:

- Fully fund education while ensuring that funds benefit boys and girls equally
- Provide a variety of remote learning options, some of which do not require a computer or internet access, while encouraging families to share their technology access with their girls
- Increase family support for girls' education by providing financial incentives and sensitization on the importance of educating girls
- Combat gender discrimination through both short-term solutions and longer-term dismantling of gender-discriminatory policies
- Hold perpetrators of discrimination and gender-based violence accountable, from harassment on the way to school, to sexual assault, to child marriage

One notable gap in the existing literature on solutions is the role that men and boys can and *should* play in promoting girls' education. Short-term solutions proposed by various NGOs too often focus on girls as the only solution to problems that are largely caused by men, leaving males unaccountable for creating change and falling short of actually dismantling gender hierarchies. Hence, USCRI's last two recommendations reflect the need for more systemic change, which cannot be achieved without demanding that males participate in creating solutions and holding them accountable when they perpetuate gender inequality.

Fully Fund Education

Perhaps the most obvious, yet challenging, solution to ensure refugee girls' access to education is funding. USCRI recommends that countries commit to fully funding refugee education, while monitoring implementation to ensure that funds benefit girls and boys equally. When girls' education is fully funded, including school fees and supplies, families do not have to choose whether their limited finances should go towards educating their sons or their daughters.

World Vision International urges countries to contribute 15- 20% of their national budget to education, and donor countries to focus their funding priorities on education as well.¹ The Malala Fund emphasizes, however, that funds must go to gender-responsive initiatives to ensure specific targeting of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on girls.²

School funding must include building infrastructure, particularly private washrooms, access to clean water, and menstrual hygiene products.³ Girls who do not have access to menstrual hygiene miss an average of 4 days of school per month, and access to proper sanitation in overcrowded refugee camps can be particularly challenging.⁴ Funding must also include all necessary school supplies and adequate meals for students to prevent girls from being exploited for basic supplies. During the pandemic, there has been an uptick in the number of girls who have been exposed to sexual exploitation in exchange for access to essentials like school supplies and food.⁵ When schools are able to address and meet girls' basic needs, girls are more likely to stay enrolled to keep accessing these essentials.

Invest in Remote Learning Technologies

Another essential way to help refugee girls continue to learn, especially during the pandemic, is to fund innovative education technology to facilitate learning while schools are closed. USCRI recommends that governments and schools invest in technology that allows children in remote areas to access their education; they should also invest in other remote

learning methods, such as the use of radios, which do not require internet or computers. Different methods should be assessed for their effectiveness and accessibility, as well as their potential to provide long-term solutions to education barriers in the refugee community post-pandemic.

While few refugee children have internet or computers in the home, when they do, that technology is usually reserved for boys.⁶ Not only do girls need devices like phones and computers, but they also need learning tools that do not rely on internet access, which can be sparse among refugee families.⁷ This means funding new programs that can be downloaded to a flash drive, or directly onto a device.⁸ While sharing of technology between girls and boys should be encouraged, there must also be funding to create easier access to it in the first place.

One budget-friendly method of education that has seen success during the pandemic is radio learning.⁹ Several African countries have started using mass radio or television broadcasting to reach more rural student populations.¹⁰ For instance in Dadaab Refugee Complex, the biggest refugee camp in Kenya, one teacher has taken to the radio waves to continue reaching her classes in a safe and affordable way.¹¹ Although radio classes have not proven to be as effective as in-person learning, it has kept open doors to education that would otherwise be completely shut during the pandemic.¹²

Provide Incentives for Families to Keep Girls in School

Even when education is fully funded and technically accessible, families may still decide to keep their girls at home to help around the house or earn extra income. Especially given the economic hardships imposed on families by the pandemic, many will still be financially behind once schools reopen. USCRI recommends that governments implement financial incentives to encourage refugee families to get their girls back in school, and that schools work in their communities to stress the importance and benefits of

girls' education. Family support and encouragement is essential to the success of a child's education. Therefore, it is vital to provide struggling families with both financial assistance and education on the importance and benefits of returning their girls to school.¹³

To really ensure girls return to school quickly after the pandemic subsides, families must have financial stability.¹⁴ One way governments are already working to tackle the financial crisis—and consequently the girls' education crisis—is by implementing cash transfers to families and providing meals to children.¹⁵ These programs give families incentive to put their girls back in school, both by helping out family finances and relieving families of the need to provide some of its own meals. This is especially important in refugee communities, where isolation and restrictive laws can make it difficult for parents to hold steady jobs and receive a reliable income.¹⁶

Families also need emotional incentives to keep their girls in school. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recommends that teachers have frequent meetings with parents to help them understand why schooling is important and how they can play an active role.¹⁷ Parents need to be shown the long-term benefits to their families if they keep their girls in school. There must be community education efforts to share the realities that educated girls are at a lower risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, they are better able to take care of their children, and they have greater earning potential.¹⁸ Parents need to know that their investment in their girls' education will actually pay off in the future.

Combat Gender Discrimination

The bigger long-term barrier to girls returning to school after the pandemic is systemic gender discrimination. Gender norms that girls' education is less valuable or that girls are meant to stay home and do chores are often as difficult to overcome as the financial barriers. USCRI recommends that

governments engage in both structural gender reform and short-term fixes to tackle gendered barriers to education now and in the post-pandemic era. USCRI stresses that certain short-term "band-aid" solutions may pose a greater burden on girls themselves, so these solutions must always be recommended in conjunction with longer-term solutions to promote broader educational gender equity.

To combat structural gender inequalities in education, it is important to start with teachers and families.¹⁹ Teachers must be trained in gender-transformative education and must be taught about the barriers girls face in getting to school.²⁰ They should be seen as community advocates for challenging harmful gendered practices and ideology that discriminate against girls.²¹ Community accountability mechanisms should be put in place to follow up with families once kids start returning to school. If a girl does not return to the classroom, schools must address any issues the family faces to keeping all of their children in school.²²

While NGOs have focused their recommendations primarily on creating structural shifts in education, some of their recommendations are shorter-term, "band-aid" solutions that may impose pressures on girls themselves to overcome the systemic issues in front of them. One band-aid solution recommended by UNHCR is to provide girls with light so that they can study at night.²³ This recommendation stems from the fact that, especially with the current school closures, girls are given more domestic chores than boys and so have less free time during the day. Instead of combatting gender inequity directly by encouraging redistribution of work, the suggestion to provide girls with study lights puts the onus on girls themselves to stay up later and work longer than boys.²⁴ Although some girls may be willing to make this sacrifice, other girls may feel pressured to perform even if they do not have the time.

Another common recommendation has been to expand access to sexual and reproductive health

education to help avoid teen pregnancies during the lockdowns, and consequently to avoid the barriers teen pregnancy poses to girls' ability to go back to school.²⁵ Most NGO recommendations follow along the lines of providing "comprehensive [sex] education to mitigate against increased rates of teen pregnancy."²⁶ In order to promote gender equality, these recommendations must be made more specific. It must be made very clear that comprehensive sex education is necessary for *both* girls and boys. Additionally, sexual health education should not solely revolve around preventing teen pregnancy, but should also focus on safe sexual practices, consent, and shared responsibility. Only focusing on girls and pregnancy perpetuates the idea that only girls need to be concerned about the consequences of unsafe sex. Boys and girls both need to be educated about reproduction, not only to help prevent teen pregnancy but also to ensure that everyone shares equally in the responsibility for safe practices.

World Vision International (WVI) is one NGO that is working to implement both short-term and long-term solutions to gender barriers. WVI encourages not only education about reproduction, but also changing policies about teen pregnancy to allow teens who are pregnant or already mothers to return to school.²⁷ Both avenues— pregnancy prevention and access to opportunity when girls become pregnant— are essential if long-term gender parity in refugee education is to be achieved and maintained after COVID-19. In countries where girls are categorically denied the right to education once they become pregnant, new policies must be pushed to allow unconditional re-entry, build in support for new mothers, and combat the discrimination and stigma they face.²⁸ Policy reform, in conjunction with comprehensive sex education for all students, will help prevent teen pregnancies while also creating a gender-inclusive space for pregnant students and catalyzing a responsibility shift solely from teen girls to other responsible actors, such as boys, men, and the community at large.

Hold Perpetrators of Gender-Based Violence Accountable

There has been an enormous surge in gender-based violence since the COVID-19 pandemic began.²⁹ Most NGO recommendations for combatting gender-based violence as an obstacle to education largely focus on girls as the solution to the problem. While these solutions can keep girls safer, they also put the onus on girls to solve a problem that is caused mostly by boys and men. USCRI recommends that all reforms and policies implemented to keep refugee girls safe from gender-based violence include at least some action requirement for men and boys. Every policy implemented or recommended must hold men and boys accountable in some way for violence prevention. While USCRI acknowledges that women and girls can perpetrate violence, and that men and boys can be victims of violence, many NGO recommendations place the burden on women and girls to combat gender-based violence, while remaining silent about the role men and boys play both in perpetration and prevention.

Girls often face harassment or outright physical and sexual violence on their way to school.³⁰ Some advocates have proposed that girls should travel in large groups, or that all-girl bussing should be implemented to prevent girls from being attacked on their way to school.³¹ While safer ways to get to school are a good thing, especially with increases in violence against girls during the pandemic, the focus should be on changing perpetrators' behaviors as opposed to forcing girls to prevent their own abuse.

Similarly, the isolated solution of giving girls sex education to stop teen pregnancy ignores the root cause of many pregnancies: rape, coercive sex, and survival sex.³² While girls clearly have a right to sexual education, suggesting this as a solution to teen pregnancy without any other recommendations places the entire burden of prevention on girls.³³ This is neither practical nor productive, as it reinforces the

idea that only girls are responsible for having sex, and worse, for sexual assaults against them.

To combat the lopsided accountability created by some of these policy suggestions, USCRI recommends teaching both boys and girls not only about reproductive health, but also about consent, safe sex, and healthy relationships. These broader conversations will help foster mutual respect between boys and girls from a young age, dismantling narratives about male superiority and female sexual shame. They also make it harder for perpetrators to feign ignorance about the wrongness of their behaviors when they commit sexual violence.

USCRI also recommends that communities take a zero-tolerance stance against perpetrators of gender-based violence and harassment. This will require governments to implement stronger laws against rape, harassment, and child marriage by prohibiting these acts in all circumstances and creating serious and measurable consequences for perpetrators. It will also require enforcement of these laws, either through community accountability or through court systems. Girls cannot feel safe to go back to school if perpetrators of gender-based violence are allowed to continuously commit attacks with impunity.

Girls should not be solely responsible for their physical and sexual safety. Although solutions that give girls ways to learn about reproduction or to

protect themselves against violence on the way to school are a good start, it would be unfair and inhumane to suggest that these are the only solutions. Boys and men must be part of the solution. Boys and men must be held to account for gender inequality and for helping mitigate the increased vulnerability of women girls during this unprecedented health crisis. Boys and men must acknowledge that girls are not the problem, but that ensuring girls have safe and equal access to education is best for the entire community.

Conclusion: Why Does It All Matter?

Communities stand to benefit immensely from tackling both short-term and long-term barriers to refugee girls' education during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Educating girls is better for their individual health, their families, their communities, and the economy. Educated girls are more likely to see the importance of sending their own children to school, and educated women tend to have lower birth rates, lower rates of maternal and infant death, and more healthy and stable families.³⁴ They have more stable jobs and higher rates of pay.³⁵ When girls are educated on a large scale, they can even increase a country's GDP.³⁶ The benefits of educating girls cannot be understated. When girls are educated, everyone wins.

References

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