

The Conflict Effect: Challenges and Opportunities for Girls' Education

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"I studied for one year in Sudan. I am taking literacy classes now. I feel very good when I study to read. Someone who has not studied compared to someone who has studied is like darkness compared to light. I know how to write my name, how to hold a pen, and I am hopeful for the future. I want my daughter to finish her education. She is 10 years old." -- Aza, 35, Mille Refugee Camp, Chad

Equitable access to quality education for girls in conflict and situations of displacement remains a serious challenge. However, ironically, conflict can provide a "window of opportunity" to increase girls' attendance and retention in school. In situations of displacement, girls may have the chance to go to school for the first time, which they would not have been able to do if they were still in their home villages.

Liberia and Darfur, Sudan, highlight some of the challenges – and opportunities – girls face in accessing education in conflict and post-conflict situations. Both countries also provide examples of effective strategies to ensure that all children – girls and boys – are able to realize one of their most basic human rights: the right to education.

Liberia, December 2005

One way to encourage girls to continue their education is to have female teachers as role models. The presence of female teachers can significantly reduce sexual abuse and trading in sex for fees or higher grades. Post-conflict Liberia presents a major opportunity to bring more women into teaching, a profession traditionally dominated by men. However, with only 27 percent of girls who enrol in grade one completing grade 5, creating gender balance in Liberia's education system will be a daunting challenge. The establishment of codes of conduct for educators – strictly monitored and enforced – is also important to address the all-too-common exploitation of girls and young women students by male educators. Save the Children UK, in conjunction with UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, has been working on developing a national code of conduct for education personnel.

In order to compensate for girls' time in school and allow them to contribute to the family, girls' clubs in Liberia have been formed during school hours to provide girls with a chance to earn some income while going to school. These activities have raised enrolment 20-30 percent and increased girls' self respect and independence. Membership is contingent on school enrolment and helps encourage girls to attend school. Seed money for clubs and enterprises may be provided by

the aid community and through local NGOs like the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

Darfur, June 2006

In Sudan, the number of girls in school is among the lowest in the world. In response to the gaps in girls' enrolment, the Sudanese Federal Ministry of Education established a Girls' Education Department in 2000, although officials admit that because of many challenges, the department has not yet reached its goal of gender equity. The Department stressed the problems of early marriage, parents' attitudes against education for girls, schools too far away for girls to travel safely and a huge lack of funding. In Darfur, girls' enrolment was among the lowest of the states of Sudan, but has risen somewhat because many of the girls have access to education for the first time in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

In IDP camps in Darfur, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) can serve as an important liaison between teachers and the community – supporting girls' education and providing a mechanism for reporting problems and abuses. PTA members have played a positive role in stressing the importance of girls' education with the community and encouraging more parents to enrol their girls. The PTAs, which comprise mostly men, would be even more effective, however, if more women were encouraged to be members.

Youth centres have also provided young women with opportunities to start or continue their education and learn income generating skills. A 17-year-old girl interviewed in Secali IDP camp in South Darfur had never been to school before because her village did not have one. In the camp she was attending a youth centre supported by the International Rescue

Committee and was learning Arabic, numeracy and basic English for the first time. She said "it makes me feel very good. I want to learn because it's important to my future to become a doctor or a teacher."

Raising awareness among mothers of the importance of education is another strategy that is yielding positive results. Adult literacy classes are very popular in the IDP camps in which they are offered, and often are the first chance many women have had to learn. Through numerous interviews, the Women's Commission learned that the classes not only helped the women learn to read and write, but also convinced them of the importance of education for their daughters.

Girls' education is the best investment a country can make to promote peace and reconciliation and improve the health and well-being of the community. Progress in girls' access to quality education in conflict-affected countries will require an ongoing assessment of the needs of vulnerable groups such as adolescent girls, teenage mothers, girls associated with combatants, and continued work with teachers, parents and the community. Education interventions should focus not only on providing consistent formal and non-formal educational services, but also on addressing obstacles, such as discrimination, school fees and language barriers. In countries such as Liberia and Sudan, interventions for girls' education must start at the outset of an emergency and continue through the transition to peace and rehabilitation.

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For more information about the Women's Commission, and to access their recent report on education in the conflict to post-conflict transition in Liberia go to www.womenscommission.org/



A woman with her daughter in an IDP camp in Darfur.

Credit: Megan McKenna/Women's Commission