

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

Part I of II: Barriers to Equal Access

By Chloe Canetti

The Covid-19 pandemic has taken 1.6 billion students out of classrooms around the globe.¹ Although students everywhere are struggling to access education during the pandemic, the problem is especially exacerbated for girls. Girls in lower-income countries face unique challenges both in getting to school and in staying enrolled. These challenges include everything from lack of funding, to sexist norms about girls' education, to outright gender-based violence.²

And it is even worse for refugee girls. Refugee children in general are disadvantaged, with only 61% of refugee children having access to primary school education compared to the global average of 91%.³ However, in large refugee-hosting countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia, there are only seven refugee girls for every ten refugee boys in primary school.⁴ The problem of accessing education for this population is not new, but it is worsening during the pandemic, threatening to reverse the recent progress that has been made in educational gender parity.⁵

Refugee girls face a unique intersection of obstacles to obtaining an education, both as females and as displaced people. They face both the systemic discrimination, limiting gender norms, and outright violence that girls face globally,⁶ and also the lack of economic resources, lack of access to healthcare, and again, violence, that refugees face.⁷ These

obstacles only get worse as refugee girls grow. As girls get older, their school costs rise, they face greater risk of sexual assault or other gender-based violence, and they are often assigned disproportionate amounts of housework compared to their male peers.⁸

What is At Stake?

The good news was that, before Covid-19, the world had made significant progress towards gender parity in education. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of girls who were unable to access primary school education fell by 44%, and by the following year almost two thirds of all countries in the world had achieved gender parity in primary school access.⁹ Unfortunately, the pandemic is threatening to unravel much of that progress.

Although Covid-19 will likely cause only a temporary educational disruption for most students globally, it threatens to be catastrophic for refugee girls.¹⁰ The greatest concern post-pandemic is that refugee girls who left school due to the crisis will never return,¹¹ potentially putting 20 million more girls around the world out of school permanently.¹² If this happens, several decades of global progress towards gender equality in education could be lost in a matter of months.¹³

Barriers to Refugee Girls' Education

So, what are the unique challenges faced by refugee girls during the Covid-19 pandemic, and why will these challenges pose a long-term threat? There are three main categories of barriers that refugee girls face to accessing education during and after the Covid-19 crisis: 1) financial instability, 2) damaging gender norms, and 3) increased sex and sexual violence. Each barrier is amplified by a student's status as both a girl and a refugee, and each barrier threatens to undo long-term progress in refugee girls' education unless solutions are implemented sooner rather than later.

Financial Barriers

The first hurdle to refugee girls accessing education is financing. Although children in all lower-income countries struggle to pay for their educations, the issue is particularly acute among refugee children.¹⁴ Many refugee-hosting countries place limitations on refugees' ability to do paid work.¹⁵ This may include both forcing refugees to stay in the camps and not integrate into broader society, and also preventing them from obtaining work permits.¹⁶ These limitations make it difficult for refugee parents to earn stable incomes to pay for things such as school supplies, books, and uniforms.¹⁷

The Covid-19 pandemic has further limited refugees' ability to earn a living, depressing whole economies and limiting people's movement.¹⁸ These financial limitations require families to make difficult decisions about which of their children to send to school, or whether to send them at all.¹⁹ Often when a family is unable to afford educating all of its children, boys are favored over girls as they are seen as higher eventual income earners.²⁰

With so many young children out of school due to the pandemic, girls are being saddled with more childcare duties while their parents work.²¹ Worse still, when a parent or adult household member becomes sick or dies, this often leaves the older girls

in the home not only to do domestic chores, but also to discontinue studies and find paid work.²² When money is tight, girls are often the ones most negatively affected, forced to help out with the family finances while also forfeiting their educations to ensure there is enough money to educate their male siblings.

Gender Norms as a Barrier

Problematic gender norms are another hurdle refugee girls face in education. As discussed above, girls are more often deprioritized when it comes to educational expenses, and when they are out of school, they are disproportionately assigned domestic labor and financial responsibilities.²³

A driving force behind the deprioritization of girls' education is harmful gender stereotyping, for example that girls will not make as much money as boys, that they should not have as many rights as boys, or that having them marry early is much more cost-efficient than keeping them in school.²⁴ Although girls have always had to fight these stereotypes, the Covid-19 pandemic is fueling them and causing a regression in girls' rights that will detrimentally affect their access to education for years to come.²⁵

Women and girls have been more negatively affected by job shortages and loss of income than men during the pandemic.²⁶ Girls, who are already overburdened with more unpaid domestic work than boys, are now being required to take on greater workloads because they are spending more time at home.²⁷ Not only does this mean that girls are being forced to stay in the home and participate in more stereotypically "female" unpaid work during this time, but it also reinforces the notion that it is not worth educating girls because they will not make as much money as boys in the long-run. Additionally, greater workloads mean less time for girls to study, even if they want to continue learning.²⁸

Even when girls do find time to study, refugee girls in particular face barriers to remotely accessing education during the pandemic.²⁹ Refugee camps are not well equipped for the technology needed to access remote learning, and girls are even less likely to have access to this technology than boys due to notions that girls' education is not as important as boys' education.³⁰

Without access to schools, health facilities, and other supports they had before the pandemic, girls are also exposed to more violence at home.³¹ With fewer institutional mechanisms operating to hold perpetrators accountable, girls' rights are being violated at much higher rates than before the pandemic.³² This impunity sends a broader message to the community that violence against women and girls is acceptable, and that girls do not have as many rights as boys and men.³³

These norms and their consequences are self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating. As girls' education continues to be devalued and their rights violated, it becomes harder for them to access school, and therefore to access stable and high-paying jobs in the long-run. This means that girls will continue to make less money, perpetuating beliefs that they should simply stay home, get married, and have children instead of pursuing education.

High-Risk Sex and Sexual Violence Barriers

While girls in general are at a higher risk of experiencing sexual violence than boys, refugee girls face an extra set of hazards. Risk is exacerbated for refugees for multiple reasons: they often lack access to basic necessities and resources that leave them vulnerable to extortion; they are isolated and marginalized populations who often do not receive adequate protection; and refugees (especially girls and women) often have to travel long distances to isolated areas to collect supplies, leaving them exposed to attack.³⁴ The Covid-19 lockdowns have

increased incidents of high-risk sex and sexual violence. In a study of women and girls in refugee, displacement, and post-conflict settings in Sub Saharan Africa, 73% of the women interviewed reported an increase in intimate partner violence, and 51% reported an increase in sexual violence, as a result of lockdowns from the pandemic.³⁵ Almost one third of those interviewed had observed increased incidents of early and forced marriage.³⁶ With girls staying home from school for extended periods of time, they are spending more time around men and boys in unsupervised settings.³⁷ This increases the risk of not only sexual experimentation, but also sexual violence and rape.³⁸

Sex and sexual violence diminish a girl's access to education in numerous ways. First, sexual violence and coercion may be used as a weapon to intimidate girls from trying to attend school, either by controlling their movements or making their journeys to and from school more dangerous.³⁹

Second, the pandemic has made even consensual sex a greater risk factor for girls, as it has shut down access to vital sexual and reproductive health education and services.⁴⁰ Girls are not able to socialize with their peers to learn about sex, and they cannot learn about sexual health in school because schools are shut down.⁴¹ Health clinics have also become harder and more dangerous to access, as people stay away for fear of contracting coronavirus.⁴² As a result, girls are having more and higher-risk sex (whether consensual or not). This increases their risk of becoming pregnant, and consequently their risk of losing access to education.

When a girl becomes pregnant, she may be permanently barred from continuing school. Pregnant teens in some countries, including most of Sub Saharan Africa, are systematically excluded from further education.⁴³ Girls in these countries may face hurdles to reentry such as mandatory pregnancy testing, mandatory waiting periods, switching schools, and in some countries even

permanent expulsion.⁴⁴ Girls who become pregnant are denied education due to archaic gendered rules, while boys and men who engage in sex often do not face any educational consequences.⁴⁵

Perhaps the most harmful consequence of sexual activity during the pandemic is a rise in incidences of early and forced marriage.⁴⁶ An estimated 2.5 million girls are at risk of forced marriage in the next five years due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in large part due to increased sexual activity and sexual vulnerability for girls during this time.⁴⁷ Refugee girls are at a heightened risk of forced marriage due to their vulnerable status.⁴⁸ Once a girl is married, the likelihood that she will return to school is drastically reduced, as pregnant and married girls

are actively discouraged or even prohibited from continuing their schooling in many countries.⁴⁹

The barriers refugee girls face to education during the Covid-19 pandemic are numerous and intertwined. They also threaten to be long-lasting and even permanent for many girls whose families can no longer afford their schooling, who face gender stereotypes that keep them out of school, or who become pregnant or are forced to marry. Although we are facing a global crisis that threatens to turn back the clock on the strides made in girls' education in recent decades, there are solutions. Those solutions will be discussed in Part II of this brief.

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- ¹⁴ Grandi, “Her Turn” (noting that even small costs like books and uniforms are difficult to finance for displaced people who “are often denied the right to work” in their host countries).
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³⁸ Baker, "Covid-19 Aftershocks."

³⁹ Grandi, "Her Turn." (finding that girls may even be physically attacked as an intimidation tactic to keep them out of school).

⁴⁰ Baker, "Covid-19 Aftershocks" (linking many teenage pregnancies to a "lack of education on sexual and reproductive health" and insufficient access to reproductive healthcare services during the pandemic).

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⁴² Baker, "Covid-19 Aftershocks."

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⁴⁴ Baker, "Covid-19 Aftershocks" (at least two countries in Sub Saharan Africa have mandatory expulsion policies for pregnant girls).

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