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UN Women

ADVANCING QUALITY
EDUCATION IN
CONFLICT ZONES

TSINGHUA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

UN WOMEN BACKGROUND GUIDE

Topic: Advancing Quality Education in Conflict Countries

Committee Introduction

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to addressing gender inequality and empowering women. Established to advocate for the advancement of gender equality movements and address the needs of women globally, UN Women works toward realizing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Its priorities include, but are not limited to, promoting women's leadership in governance, ensuring equal income for women, safeguarding women's health and social well-being, and enhancing women's participation in global affairs. The creation of UN Women in July 2010 resulted from the merger of four pre-existing entities: the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Offices of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Statement of Problem

Throughout history, young women have often been marginalized in the development of educational systems, particularly in countries affected by poverty and conflict. This growing inequality is addressed by various United Nations committees from multiple perspectives. According to UNICEF, 122 million girls worldwide are currently out of school. Furthermore, only 42% of countries have achieved gender parity in lower secondary education, and just 24% in upper secondary education. In terms of literacy, more than two-thirds of illiterate adults are women. While the gender gap in primary and secondary school completion is relatively small in most countries, in **Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) countries**, girls are 2.5 times more likely to drop out of school than boys. Moreover, compared to countries not affected by conflict, girls in FCV nations are 90% more likely to leave school.

Wars in regions such as Africa have significantly hindered educational access, with ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Ukraine, the Maghreb, Mali, and Burkina Faso further exacerbating the issue. In Mali, for example, up to 200 schools have been closed, and in Burkina Faso, 500 schools have been affected. The number of school closures increased threefold between 2017 and 2019, culminating in the shutdown of 9,272 schools, which impacted more than 1.91 million children and 44,000 teachers. In countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger,

Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria, militant groups have targeted schools, particularly those providing education to girls, in protest of their western-style education. As a result, 38.8 million children are currently out of school—more than the number recorded a decade ago in the same regions. The lack of educational access in these countries also correlates with a rise in **gender-based violence** and **femicide**, child marriage, teen pregnancy, child labor, and even child soldier recruitment. The absence of safe schools and environments places children, especially girls, in Central and Western Africa, in grave danger. Denied education and safety, they are instead exposed to violence and death.

Primary Causes

The scarcity of education for women in conflict-affected countries can be attributed to several intertwined causes, including instability, cultural norms, lack of resources, and targeted violence. First and foremost, the direct impact of violence and instability in conflict zones severely hampers the education system. According to a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), ongoing armed conflict leads to the destruction of schools, displacement of teachers, and disruption of education programs, particularly in conflict-prone regions such as Afghanistan, Syria, and parts of Africa (UNESCO, 2020). As a result, many girls are either unable to access education or are forced to abandon their studies due to the constant threat of violence.

Furthermore, gender discrimination and traditional societal norms play a significant role in restricting girls' education in conflict areas. In many cultures, girls are seen as less worthy of education than boys, a situation exacerbated by the stress of war and economic instability. Research from the World Bank shows that in conflict zones, the prioritization of boys' education often outweighs that of girls, as families in desperate circumstances are more likely to see girls' education as a secondary concern compared to immediate survival needs (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, deep-seated patriarchal structures limit the opportunities available to women, especially in fragile states, where cultural expectations often dictate that women stay home to take care of domestic responsibilities or marry at an early age.

The systematic targeting of educational institutions by militant groups also contributes to the difficulty women face in accessing education during conflict. Terrorist organizations such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Boko Haram in Nigeria have specifically targeted schools and girls' education. In 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped over 200 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, highlighting the extreme measures taken to prevent girls from attending school in conflict

zones (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Such attacks have created a climate of fear, making it dangerous for families to send girls to school, thereby further reinforcing gender disparities in education.

Lastly, limited financial and institutional resources in conflict-affected countries further exacerbate the situation. According to UNICEF, the breakdown of governmental structures and the diversion of resources toward military expenditure rather than public services such as education leaves very little support for the reconstruction of schools or the provision of adequate teaching staff, especially for girls (UNICEF, 2021). This lack of infrastructure and resources disproportionately affects women, who are already marginalized in these societies.

The issue of advancing women's education in conflict countries is deeply connected to the overarching theme of the conference, "Displacement and Discontents: Revisiting Broken Promises." Displacement, in this context, goes beyond the physical movement of people and encompasses the denial of fundamental rights, particularly the right to education. For women in conflict zones, this displacement is not only geographical but also systemic, as they are often deprived of opportunities for education and self-empowerment—resources that are essential for creating a society of equality. While global aspirations call for gender parity and universal access to education, the reality in conflict-stricken regions starkly contrasts these promises, with millions of girls and women denied an education due to war, displacement, and entrenched gender discrimination. This gap between what we aspire to achieve and what is currently happening highlights the urgent need to address the compounded vulnerabilities of displaced women and ensure that they are not left behind in the pursuit of global gender equality.

History of the Problem

Gender inequality and armed conflict have been persistent global issues since the dawn of human history, contributing to the widespread concern over the lack of access to education for women, particularly in conflict zones. In 2016, the Taliban attacked over 300 schools in Afghanistan, closing more than 210 girls' schools and denying education to over 51,000 girls. Similarly, in 2012, around 150 Afghan women seeking education were poisoned. In Iraq, Yazidi women and girls have been systematically persecuted by **Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)** since 2014, with reports indicating the abduction, rape, and enslavement of over

7,000 Yazidi women. In Somalia, girls already attending school were kidnapped by the militant group Al-Shabaab to be forcibly married to fighters. In 2010, the group abducted girls across the country to use them as rewards and propaganda tools; those who resisted were either killed or disappeared.

The issue of women's education in conflict zones is not a new one; it has been a historical challenge shaped by both social and political forces. In the aftermath of World War II, many women in Europe were denied access to education due to the social and economic instability caused by the war. This trend continued into the Cold War era, where political regimes in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo used education as a tool of control, limiting women's access to schools in order to suppress their rights and maintain patriarchal dominance. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's rise to power in the late 1990s marked a dramatic setback for women's education, with girls banned from attending school and facing extreme punishment if they defied the ruling. This policy continued into the early 2000s until international intervention sought to address the educational needs of Afghan women. However, as of 2021, despite years of advocacy and development work, girls in Afghanistan continue to face barriers to education, with the Taliban's return to power once again threatening to close girls' schools across the country (UNICEF, 2021). Other regions, such as Syria and Sudan, have seen similar patterns, where education for women is compromised or completely halted due to ongoing conflict, displacement, and extremist ideologies. Historical evidence underscores the cyclical nature of these challenges, as women in conflict zones continue to bear the brunt of both the violence of war and the denial of their right to education.

These interconnected issues demonstrate the complexity of the challenges faced by women globally. Gender inequality, while often most stark in conflict zones, persists even in the wealthiest and most stable communities. Despite centuries of advocacy by women and feminists, gender inequality continues to affect the educational and living conditions of women worldwide. As we focus on the lack of education for women in conflict areas, the gravity of this issue should be self-evident.

These interconnected challenges underscore the complexity of the issue. Gender inequality and the denial of education to women have persisted throughout history, often exacerbated by conflict. While some progress has been made, especially in the wake of global movements for women's rights, the historical pattern remains clear: women in conflict zones have continually been marginalized, their access to education restricted, and their roles in society

limited. Even in periods of peace, the legacy of these historical inequities continues to affect the living and learning conditions of women worldwide. In conflict-ridden countries, where violence disrupts both everyday life and educational systems, women are disproportionately affected by the barriers to education, reinforcing the cyclical nature of their exclusion.

Today, this historical neglect persists, and in some areas, it has worsened. Recent events, such as the resurgence of the Taliban's control over Afghanistan, reveal how easily gains made in women's education can be reversed in conflict zones. With approximately 129 million girls worldwide currently out of school, and the dropout rate for girls in conflict zones being 2.5 times higher than for boys, the situation remains dire (UNICEF, 2021). The latest global conflicts, such as the ongoing Israel-Palestine war, illustrate the continuing vulnerability of women and girls to educational deprivation in areas affected by war. As we shift focus from the historical background to the present crisis, it becomes clear that the lack of access to education for women in conflict zones is not just a relic of the past—it is a pressing, ongoing issue.

Past Actions

In the past, multiple countries within the UN have joined forces in an effort to resolve this pressing issue, implementing initiatives such as promoting educational programs in affected countries, raising awareness of gender inequality, and fundraising for women's education. UN Women's solutions are based on the following key concepts:

1. Providing access to quality secondary and higher education,
2. Educating girls and women in the use of science and technology,
3. Ending gender-based discrimination.

Currently, the right of girls and women to an education is enshrined in international human rights law, particularly through important conventions such as the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention), the 1960 UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966. However, it was another decade before the covenant formally entered into force for the 35 required states. Among its many purposes, the ICCPR safeguards the right to equality between men and women, and the treaty laid the foundation for subsequent international agreements promoting gender equality.

Building on the principles established by the ICCPR, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, along with its Optional Protocol. CEDAW has since played a pivotal role in addressing women's inequality and is often referred to as an "international bill of rights for women." The convention defines discrimination against women and outlines an agenda for national action to eliminate such discrimination. It describes gender discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made based on sex that impairs or nullifies the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field, irrespective of their marital status." CEDAW has ensured women's right to access various opportunities, including voting, employment, and education.

In addition to these significant frameworks, the international community has created measures to address the issues surrounding internal displacement. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, adopted in 1998, offer critical guidelines for protecting and assisting **internally displaced persons (IDPs)**. Following this, the African Union adopted the Kampala Convention in 2009, aimed at the protection and assistance of IDPs in Africa. These frameworks have played a key role in shaping the response to displacement caused by conflict and disaster, ensuring that the rights of displaced civilians are upheld.

However, despite these efforts, many countries hosting refugees and IDPs have not made adequate progress in fulfilling the rights of women and girls. Resistance from various political and social groups, often influenced by traditional or religious beliefs that reinforce male superiority, has impeded meaningful action on this issue. Patriarchal voices have delayed the advancement of women's educational rights. In summary, the current situation in affected countries is one where national legal frameworks often offer limited protection and support for girls' and women's right to education. Much more work remains to be done to ensure that all women and girls, regardless of their circumstances, have access to the education they deserve.

Potential Solutions

Education enables upward socio-economic mobility and is a key to escaping poverty. The UN women's goal is to advance quality education to females in conflict countries and fulfill one

of the sustainable development goals for 2030. Despite all the action taken, proficiency rates remain disturbingly low. In 2018, some 773 million adults—two thirds are women are still illiterate whether reading or writing. They either live in war zones or economically undeveloped countries. Thus, solutions must be proposed to ensure inclusive and quality education for all in conflict zones and promote lifelong learning.

What does action look like? It could be cross-sectoral and conflict-sensitive learning programs or international funds raised by the UN and some developed countries and it should be accessible for girls all over the globe. It may also include powerful gender-equal policies that legislate legal frameworks for the protection of rights and the prevention of violence within schools and prioritizes female education.

One feasible solution for countries facing cultural, historical, issues against traditions would be the enforcement of legal frameworks protecting the freedom of quality education for women. This right to education can be summarized as four essential principles: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. Other policies regarding quality gender education may contain the time of education, number of schools, and the safety during education, and the expenses of education. For example, the Chinese government provides 9 years of mandatory education, which ensures every student receives at least a middle school education. This has resulted in a much higher literacy rate and far less child marriage.

Furthermore, regarding war-affected and economically undeveloped countries, the UN women can provide free **ICT (information and communications technology)** lesson programs. Funding programs from the UN are significant in the steps to achieving quality education.

Another aspect is reinforcing school security system to prevent students from being affected by war by adding more school gate keepers and physical protection around the school using the raised funds.

Finally, increasing awareness among teachers and parents about the dropout rate of female students is also a possible way to prevent further loss. This could be done by. Establishing a school-based report and response mechanism to help create long-term parent-teacher connections and encourage female students to speak up.

Quality education is a long-term goal yet to be achieved. Too often, the problem lies not in the country's economy but in its deep rooted culture. The tradition of women staying at home to do chores is carved deep into many civilizations, and in order to change this reality, both governments and societies must change. Only when all are educated, may we have a truly equal world.

Possible Stances

Countries where gender equality is not an issue (Albania, Canada, Costa Rica, Lithuania, Sweden, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, Iceland, Portugal, Peru, Nicaragua, Namibia, Philippines, United States, United Kingdom, Guyana)

In these countries, gender inequality and education are not considered major issues. First, women are protected by law. For instance, in Albania, the Constitution prohibits gender-based discrimination (Article 18/2). The definition of discrimination against women in Law 9970/2008 on Gender Equality (Article 4/3) aligns fully with Article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Law on Protection from Discrimination (2010) outlines detailed protections against various forms of discrimination, including gender-based. These legal frameworks aim to prevent manipulation, financial exploitation, or any actions that could threaten individuals' physical or mental health. Second, these countries rank highly on the Gender Gap Index, with Canada at number 30 and Iceland at number one. Despite these high rankings, gender inequality remains an issue. In the UK, the gender pay gap continues to be a significant concern. In 2022, only 9% of FTSE 100 companies and 4.8% of FTSE 250 companies had female CEOs. This underrepresentation of women in top positions contributes to the overall gender pay gap, which stood at 14.9% for all workers in 2022, and 8.3% for full-time workers. The pay gap is more pronounced in older age groups and in certain industries, such as finance and insurance, where the gap reached 31.2% in 2022, the widest of any sector in the UK.

Countries where gender equality or education is an issue (Afghanistan, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen)

These countries are predominantly developing nations where the “marginalization of women in economic development, and social and political spaces is a worldwide phenomenon.”

The first factor contributing to gender inequality in countries like Somalia and Yemen is ongoing armed conflict, which destabilizes society and disrupts education. More importantly, the foundational resources and infrastructure necessary for education are frequently destroyed. As noted, “From attacks on schools in Cameroon in 2022, to the Taliban’s control over schools in Afghanistan, to Boko Haram’s kidnapping and insurgent activities in Nigeria — schools have been under attack, impacting education around the world.”

Second, in many countries, particularly Muslim-majority nations, religious practices hinder gender equality. In some Muslim traditions, women are prohibited from traveling without the accompaniment of a Mahram—a male relative such as a father, brother, or husband—which limits their mobility and opportunities, including access to education.

The third factor is early marriage, which often leads to social isolation, disempowerment, and abuse. Early marriage forces girls to drop out of their education, and sometimes even leaving their families and communities. It perpetuates traditional gender norms, typically positioning women as subordinate to men. This practice is widespread in countries such as the Central African Republic and Nigeria. In Niger, for instance, 76% of girls are married before their 18th birthday, and 28% are married before the age of 15.

Key Terms

Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) countries: FCV countries are nations suffering from instability due to weak governance, ongoing conflicts, and social inequality. These countries face challenges like human rights abuses, poverty, and disrupted access to essential services. FCV often hinders development, as state institutions are fragile, and the population lacks security and basic needs (World Bank, 2021).

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): ISIS is a jihadist militant group seeking to establish a caliphate governed by an extreme interpretation of Sharia law. Its brutal tactics, including executions, torture, and terrorism, have caused widespread devastation in Iraq and Syria. Despite territorial losses, ISIS remains a major security threat globally due to its ideology and continued insurgency (Baker, 2019).

Femicide: The killing of women based on their gender, often by intimate partners or perpetrators driven by misogyny. It reflects deep-seated gender inequality and poses a significant barrier to women's rights and safety. Legal and social frameworks are critical to addressing femicide as both a human rights violation and a public health issue (UN Women, 2021).

Gender-based violence (GBV): Harmful actions targeted at individuals due to their gender, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking. GBV perpetuates gender inequality and limits access to education, health, and justice, often impacting women and marginalized groups disproportionately (Heise, 2010).

Quality Education: An inclusive, accessible system of education that provides individuals with the skills, knowledge, and values needed for active participation in society. It includes equitable access to resources, relevant curricula, and support for marginalized groups. Achieving quality education requires addressing systemic barriers like gender inequality (UNESCO, 2016).

Economic empowerment: The process and capacity of people from different genders to participate and contribute to the benefits of economic advancement. Women's economic empowerment means ensuring women can equally participate in and benefit from decent work and social protection, having the ability to access a variety of resources with minimum limits.

Gender inequality: The unequal treatment or access to resources based on gender, often disadvantaging women. It is rooted in cultural, political, and economic systems that perpetuate male dominance and hinder women's social and economic opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Corporal punishment and Gender-based violence: Corporal punishment is the use of physical force to discipline children, commonly in homes or schools. It can lead to long-term psychological and physical harm and is often linked to cycles of violence. Many countries have moved to ban corporal punishment in favor of non-violent discipline (Straus, 1995).

Internally Displaced Persons (IDP): Internally displaced persons are people who are forced to flee their homes due to conflict or disasters but remain within their own country. IDPs often lack access to basic services and are highly vulnerable, facing challenges in finding safety, shelter, and livelihood (Brookings Institution, 2018).

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