November 2016

Briefing Paper

Addressing School-Related Gender-Based Violence is Critical for Safe Learning Environments in Refugee Contexts

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I. Introduction

Crises, conflict and displacement lead to heightened insecurities – physical, psychological, social and financial -- for affected populations including refugees. The breakdown of family and community support systems and high levels of stress and trauma magnify pre-existing levels of violence and conflict within families and in schools. That there is a rise in sexual and gender-based violence in conflict situations is undisputed. Reports of gender-based violence emerge in the aftermath as systems for reporting and response get established as part of a humanitarian response. Yet data required to produce global estimates is limited.

Within the learning environment, refugee and displaced students are often targets of verbal and physical violence and discrimination because of their status as refugees, in addition to their gender, language, religion, race and ethnicity, nationality and/or being older than other children in their class[1].

Adolescent girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school in conflict and crises contexts compared to their male peers in similar contexts[2]. Refugee children and adolescents, girls in particular, are vulnerable to being targeted – in particular by untrained male teachers and other men in positions of power in a school – to exchange sex for grades or for the payment of fees and other school related expenses[3]. Girls are also more likely to stop going to school when parents resort to early marriage as a coping mechanism or due to fear of violence on the way to and from school. Around the world, and in all settings, girls are vulnerable to violence because of inequities of power and status in society[4]. Boys are also bullied and are victimized when perceived to not conform to prevailing norms of acceptable male behavior or appearance and may face harsher corporal punishment than girls[4].

Boys who have experienced or witnessed extremely traumatic events may become aggressive, violent and withdrawn, especially when they do not have access to structured and meaningful activities like education[5]. Furthermore, attacks and military use of schools have dramatic consequences for girls' and boys' safety and participation in education in many conflict settings[6]. Education in emergency contexts can play a protective role and parents and children themselves often prioritize education as a way to keep safe from gender-based violence in the community[7].

Quality education within safe learning environments can provide opportunities for recovery, healing and empowerment and a means to rebuild lives for displaced children and adolescents[8].

> "...safety within learning spaces cannot be taken for granted in stressed and crisis affected contexts and careful attention needs to be placed on preventing gender-based violence when designing learning environments for refugee children and adolescents."

Safe learning spaces can reinforce principles of gender equality and promote positive gender and social norms that teach girls and boys to develop and practice non-violent coping mechanisms. However, safety within learning spaces cannot be taken for granted in stressed and crisis affected contexts. Careful attention needs to be placed on preventing gender-based violence when designing learning environments for refugee children and adolescents [8].

II. School-Related Gender-Based Violence is a serious barrier to education access in refugee contexts

An estimated 246 million children are targeted in school-related violence every year[9]. While gender-based violence occurs in all school environments, children and adolescents who are refugees are likely to be at greater risk. Refugee children (and parents and communities) see education as a critical means to improve future possibilities and their families' financial situation[5]. The desire to succeed in school makes girls and boys all the more susceptible to abuse within the learning environment[4].

Reports from Lebanon, Jordan and sub-Saharan Africa indicate that SRGBV in learning spaces for refugee children and adolescents can take the form of harassment and violence en route to and from school, corporal punishment and verbal and physical abuse at school[10][11]. Sexual violence in schools, a form of SRGBV, can involve teachers, administrators or students as perpetrators. Reports from West Africa suggest that due to a disproportionate number of male teachers and high dropout rates of girls in lower secondary, girls that remain in the secondary cycle in refugee learning environments become vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation by peers and teachers[12]. Girls also more commonly report feeling unsafe in school as a main reason for non-attendance[13]. Incidents of bullying in refugee schools, which can involve psychological or physical violence, are also documented, although not systematically collected nor shared to provide a full picture of the extent of the problem. Forms of bullying can include verbal taunting, name calling, exclusion from a group and other acts of humiliation and psychological abuse.

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III. What are the challenges to creating safe learning spaces in refugee contexts?

Limited capacity and resources of education systems

UNHCR estimates that in Lebanon, nearly 20% of Syrian refugee children over the age of 12 drop out of school. Low quality of education, discrimination and violence at school are cited as major factors[14]. Refugee communities are often dispersed in urban or semi-urban areas, within host communities and in informal settlements or slums, which makes children's access to schooling more complex and places a heavy strain on the public school system. Over-crowded classrooms with a refugee cohort of students and students with little or no knowledge of the language of instruction place significant stress on teachers. The shortage of trained teachers causes existing teachers to work double shifts and magnifies stresses within the classroom. The double shift system where classes are held in the evening also makes girls vulnerable to harassment and sexual assault. In mixed classes, girls formerly in girls' only classes may be uncomfortable when they are unused to being seated with boys and are prone to being teased or harassed[13]. In many cases, the curricula is often inadequate to meet the learning and psychosocial needs of refugee girls and boys[14]. Further, accountability mechanisms are not always in place to address daily incidences of violence including bullying, corporal punishment, sexual harassment and abuse and other forms of SRGBV that occur between and among host and refugee students and teachers.

Insecure journeys to school

Safety considerations on the way to and from school are a major cause for concern for refugee parents and caregivers. Many prefer to keep their children, especially daughters and younger children, at home. The presence of armed groups en route to school, and military use of schools in particular, often result in girls not attending class or dropping out completely, due to fear of sexual violence[15]. In urban areas, schools may be within walking distance but girls are disproportionately impacted by threats of violence and harassment while walking through busy areas to get to school. Rates of sexual harassment and assault are also reported to be high on public transport in urban areas[16]. As a result of these perceived or real threats, girls are at a greater risk of dropping out or being pulled out of school. These girls are unlikely to return, even when threats become less severe.

Limited data and evidence on SRGBV in emergency contexts

The silence and stigma around reporting on gender-based violence and the increased isolation and lack of access to social networks experienced by refugee women and girls leads to low reporting of violence[17]. This contributes to the lack of data on incidence and prevalence of GBV in conflict settings.

Limited evidence exists on the extent to which GBV in refugee communities permeates into learning spaces for refugee children and adolescents. Dispersed populations and constant movement of refugee populations due to heightened insecurity makes it difficult to track and monitor children's access to basic services including education. Anecdotal accounts record incidences of SRGBV within refugee learning environments, but in general, SRGBV is not systematically monitored.

"Education provides protection when schools are physically safe, psychologically and emotionally healing and cognitively transformative."

IV. Survey on SRGBV in learning spaces for refugee children and adolescents

In October 2016, UNGEI in partnership with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) launched a global survey to gather information on approaches and responses to SRGBV being adopted by development and humanitarian actors working in situations of conflict.

The purpose of the survey was to generate a snapshot of strategies currently being used to address GBV in learning spaces for refugees, and identify gaps in programming and policy. The survey was translated into four languages (Arabic, Spanish, French and Portuguese) and disseminated widely through the INEE and UNGEI networks. A total of 65 responses were received, representing INGOs, CSOs and youth organizations, UN, bilateral donors and representatives from Ministries of Education (MoE) in 22 countries. Responses referenced programs addressing the recent refugee crisis in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan as well protracted crises in Uganda, Chad, Burundi, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Representatives from Ministries of Education were not specifically targeted and respondents were in majority from INGOs, UN and civil society. The analysis below provides an overview of responses from the survey.

V. Key Findings: Common approaches to addressing SRGBV in refugee learning spaces

A majority of the respondents were operational in either informal settlements or urban settings or both. The survey asked questions about: whether incidents of SRGBV were known to occur, the nature of violence most often reported, heard of or witnessed (see Fig 1), and the nature of interventions or strategies that are being implemented. The range of interventions that were reported were broadly categorized into three areas: working with individuals or groups to prevent and respond to SRGBV; community based prevention and response approaches; and policy advocacy and systems reform.
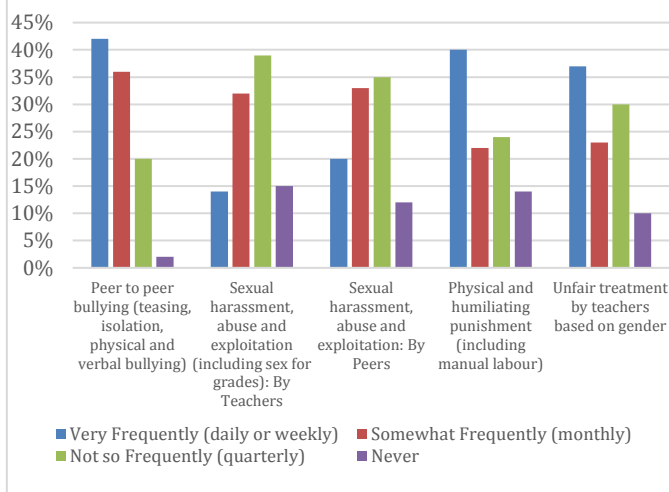
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Fig 1: Common forms of violence known to occur as reported by agency staff and respondents

(Source: The Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence, (October 2016). 'Gender-Based Violence in Learning Spaces for Refugee and Displaced Children and Adolescents' Survey)

➢ **Working with girls and teachers to prevent GBV was a primary strategy**

Several organizations mentioned life skills education and curricula which included knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and rights; girls' empowerment initiatives included financial literacy and income generating activities; "Girls Empowerment Movement" clubs within schools and girls mentorship initiatives. These strategies aimed to increase girls' knowledge and awareness of gender-based violence, and in some cases, provided skills on how to protect themselves from sexual violence or "avoid" rape. Safe spaces or girls clubs included described activities which prepared teachers and students to identify survivors of GBV and report and refer incidents of GBV.

Teacher training and toolkits for teachers were seen as the entry point into schools. In programs designed for teachers, organizations mentioned developing toolkits for teachers on preventing sexual abuse in schools; and teacher training on a range of issues including life skills, mentoring, GBV and preventing bullying, and other forms of discrimination within the classroom as well as adherence to codes of conduct. However, none of the organizations mentioned work with school administrators, local and national department of education authorities to develop plans and strategies to address, prevent or respond to GBV.

➢ **Community based strategies had few links to schools as a space where GBV prevention and response activities could be situated**

Community based interventions included awareness raising campaigns on issues of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly within urban communities hosting refugee populations. Several responses included a focus on identification, reporting and referral mechanisms to basic social services including care for survivors of GBV.

Establishing reporting and referral mechanisms for incidence of GBV was mentioned as a community based child protection strategy. Community dialogue and the establishment of community based "prevention committees" comprised of youth, community leaders and women were reported as strategies to prevent GBV. In the context of emergency response strategies, a few organizations mentioned the establishment of safe spaces for girls within the community.

None of the organizations mentioned an explicit focus on working with men and boys around gender and social norms that underlie GBV. Community based protection strategies did not mention links with schools to establish referrals and reporting systems, dialogue including teachers.

➢ **More needs to be done on advocacy and policy reform on GBV within the education sector**

Only two organizations mentioned advocacy efforts to include GBV policy or support to the Ministry of Education to integrate GBV prevention and response within their plans. One organization mentioned curriculum review to include gender issues.

Work with the Ministry of Education on integrating gender issues within education policies and plans, curricula and textbooks and teacher training was stated as an "area of improvement" by several participants. This was also identified as a challenge where participants stated that more could be done to engage with education authorities to bring awareness and action on the issue of GBV within learning spaces for refugee children and adolescents.

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I.   Key Recommendations

The recommendations draw from the findings of the survey as well as from existing literature on the issue of gender and education in crisis and conflict settings.

Preliminary findings point to a need to better understand and address the drivers of violence that are keeping refugee girls and boys out of school, and the social norms which normalize gender violence in and around schools. The recommendations below suggest ways in which governments, humanitarian actors, donors, and national coordination mechanisms can strengthen the protection of girls and boys from SRGBV.

These recommendations are of particular relevance for the Education Cannot Wait Fund (ECW) with its mission to deliver safe, free and quality education to all crisis affected children by 2030. ECW can only achieve this aim by addressing the risks of SRGBV as it shapes its grant making functions and roles in relation to capacity development, improving accountability, strengthening joint planning and response and inspiring political commitments

Recognize and address the gendered impact of crisis and conflict on education: While all forms of gendered and sexual violence must be addressed as a component of humanitarian protection and assistance, humanitarian response must be grounded in a sound understanding of who this violence affects, how and why it happens and how it is best addressed[18]. When designing education programs for refugee and displaced children and adolescents, greater attention needs to be placed on the gendered dimensions of exclusion, violence and discrimination faced by girls and boys in accessing education as well as in and around schools.

GBV prevention and response actions should be integrated within schools: An explicit programming focus on GBV prevention and response within the school or learning space, and involving community leaders and parents, will enable vulnerable and at risk girls and boys to attend and participate meaningfully in school. The INEE minimum standards[19] provide guidance on ensuring the safety and protection of learners in and around the school, including from gender-based violence. Some of these strategies include: separate, well-lit and easily accessible toilets for girls and boys in refugee schools, establishing safe physical spaces, involving more female teachers and community members as role models, making journeys to school safe, developing and enforcing practical reporting and response and code of conduct for teachers and school personnel, providing gender aware psychosocial support services.

Humanitarian and development strategies addressing gender and education should be harmonised so that there is a sustained move towards responding to the unique needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of children and adolescents in crisis contexts. Humanitarian and development assistance should factor gender violence in its teacher training and codes of conduct, curricula revisions, provision of safe spaces, life skills and peace programs, so that policies and plans respond to the systemic drivers of violence faced by refugee girls and boys in host countries. Evidence from UNICEF's Learning for Peace initiative suggests that sustained change should combine systems-level school and classroom based strategies to promote gender equality with wider community-based initiatives aiming to shift gender and social norms[8]

Improve capacity of education in emergencies response personnel to address GBV: Emergency response personnel need better training and preparation to consider gender as a factor when designing education in emergencies responses. This includes assessing prevailing gender and social norms that can support or impede education access, adapting strategies to target the most vulnerable girls and integrating GBV prevention and response approaches with Education in Emergencies (EiE) activities.

More evidence needs to be generated on what it takes to create safe learning spaces for refugee children and adolescents: There is a lack of evaluated education programs in emergencies in general and refugee situations in particular which have looked at GBV prevention or included an explicit outcome for girls[20]. Post-conflict assessments should systematically collect data on dimensions of violence including verbal and emotional abuse in addition to sexual and physical violence as well as reporting of GBV against boys, men and LGBTQ individuals[21]. More evidence is also needed on what has worked to create violence-free learning environments that take into account dynamics of gender discrimination and unequal power. ∎

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