

GIRLS EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

In 2000, Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 pledged that all children, girls and boys, would complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. In 2014, despite progress in many countries, 57 million children are still missing out on school and the goal is unlikely to be met¹.

In the early 2000s there were significant advances towards achieving universal primary education, as countries increased enrolment and cut or abolished school fees. However, progress slowed towards the end of the decade. Along with poverty, three major barriers to achieving universal primary education at the global level stand out. They are gender, disability and conflict. A disproportionately large number of the children who are not in school today are girls, disabled and/or live in conflict affected countries. Almost all of them are poor.

Three fragile and conflict affected countries account for 21 million of the 57 million children out of school. They are Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The campaign led by Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai, who survived an assassination attempt for speaking up for the right to go to school, and the abduction of 276 girls from their dormitory in Chibok, northern Nigeria, in April 2014 have highlighted the particular vulnerability of schoolgirls in conflict zones.



A long walk to school in Afghanistan is frequently a barrier to girls' attendance.
Photo Mohammed Alam/Oxfam

¹ Statistics from www.sendmyfriend.org

The academic Mark Duffield² has pointed out how resilient and adaptable markets are to violence and conflict. The same is rarely true for public services such as education and health. In many cases the issues preventing children from attending school are as much to do with poverty and the long term breakdown of government services as with acts of violence, fear and intimidation directed against them.

In 2011, the report 'High Stakes: Girls' Education in Afghanistan' was published³. The report was a collaborative effort between Afghan civil society organisations and INGOs, including Oxfam. Researchers interviewed 630 parents, 332 teachers and 687 schoolgirls and the report highlighted how everyday issues; like a long walk to a faraway school, an absence of sanitation and virtually non-existent school facilities, became significant barriers to school attendance that particularly affected girls. Everyday risks to girls' safety often came from frequent harassment and low level community and domestic violence alongside the violent episodes that play out regularly on our television news.

However respondents also reported poverty was the biggest single obstacle to girls' access to education, with 41.2% of those interviewed naming poverty as a major barrier to girls' attending school. This finding raises challenging questions about the primary causes of school exclusion and whether solely making school more accessible and secure will improve attendance in the long term.



Only 41.7% of schools in Afghanistan had a building.
Photo: Shah Bibi/ACBAR

² Mark Duffield – 'Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security' (Zed – 2014)

³ Joint NGO Briefing Paper – 'High Stakes: Girls' Education in Afghanistan' (2011)

<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/high-stakes-girls-education-in-afghanistan-125287>

The UK has a significant aid programme in Afghanistan. The UK plans to fund 200,000 school places for Afghanistan's children, of which at least 40% are for girls.⁴ This makes a big difference. The challenge lies in sustaining an ambitious level of support, particularly when the UK government is faced with multiple demands on its limited resources and poverty remains so widespread in Afghanistan.

Since 2011, conflicts in Syria and Iraq have added significantly to the numbers of children out of school. Both countries had relatively well educated populations before the onset of current violence, but commentators are now speaking of a 'lost generation'⁵ and schooling for refugee children has struggled to keep up with the rapidly expanding level of need. The questions raised by studying access to education in Afghanistan can be asked of other places.

This resource asks young people to think critically about what it is like to go to school in Afghanistan and to identify practical improvements to the education system that would make a difference. The barriers facing Afghanistan's children affect both girls and boys, but young people should be able to identify and explain the particular challenges facing girls, and suggest changes to improve girls' attendance. A final important question is whether improvements in education are sustainable without a significant reduction in poverty.

Curriculum making

Oxfam has other resources about the nature of contemporary conflict and how conflict affects children. They include the following;

Making Sense of World Conflicts (2007)

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/making-sense-of-world-conflicts>

Syria: A Children's Crisis? (2013)

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/syria>

Syria Seen and Heard (2014)

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/syria-seen-and-heard>

Please note: the Syria Seen and Heard postcard campaign finished in 2014.

The statistics cited in these resources were accurate at the time of publishing and are likely to have changed. There are links in the teachers' guides of both Syria resources to direct visitors to regularly updated data.

Send My Friend to School: resources about education for all and the annual Send My Friend campaign are at: www.sendmyfriend.org

⁴ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmintdev/403/40307.htm>

⁵ For example see comments by Justine Greening, Secretary of State for International Development <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/syrian-children-face-third-winter-of-misery-warns-greening>

Afghanistan's progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is tracked by the UNDP at <http://www.af.undp.org/content/afghanistan/en/home/mdgoverview/>

Afghanistan's latest MDG country report was published in 2012 and is at <http://www.af.undp.org/content/dam/afghanistan/docs/MDGs/Afghanistan%20MDGs%202012%20Report.pdf>

Due to its exceptional circumstances Afghanistan's target date for completing the MDGs is 2020. There are interim targets for 2015.

Background reading

Joint NGO Briefing Paper – 'High Stakes. Girls' Education in Afghanistan' (2011)
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/high-stakes-girls-education-in-afghanistan-125287>

Education for All Global Monitoring Report – 'The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education' (UNESCO – 2011)
<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/reports/2011-conflict/>

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