

PAKISTAN'S DISPLACED GIRLS AND WOMEN—AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EDUCATION

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Violence in northern Pakistan has forced millions of people to flee from their homes. Even with the dire living conditions of these displaced communities, there is a hidden opportunity in the midst of this crisis to improve the educational status of women and girls. Despite recent media attention, the fighting in northern Pakistan did not just begin recently, and by most accounts, it will not end soon. Starting in November 2008, fighting between the Pakistani government and Taliban militants has forcibly displaced an estimated 2.5 million people in the North West Frontier Province. With on-going violence, it is the civilians—Pakistani girls and boys, women and men—who are suffering the most.

Displaced people are overwhelming social service systems as they stream into host communities looking for safety, shelter, food and water. The vast majority, up to 80 or 90 percent, are in host communities with relatives, friends, and in community buildings such as schools and clinics. There are not enough doctors and medicine to attend to spreading diarrheal disease and the emergency health needs of children, youth and adults. Currently there are insufficient funds to meet all the humanitarian needs and humanitarian aid agencies on the ground are planning for the displaced population to swell to up to four million in the future. Only \$140 million, of the \$543 million needed, has been received, with only a further pledge of \$43 million.

The population in this region has long been forgotten by Pakistani government investment and social service provision—one of the root causes fueling this conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in education, especially for girls and women. In the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, female illiteracy is 96 percent—vastly higher than in other parts of the country. Recent fighting has damaged schools, with 60 percent of all schools in the Swat district destroyed. There are recent reports of the Taliban threatening displaced families with violence if they send their girls to school.

Despite this dire situation, there are real opportunities in the midst of this crisis to improve the education situation of girls and women. Lessons from other humanitarian crises such as in Afghanistan and Darfur show us that seeds for real social change can be sowed in the most perilous of times and that the social disruption that occurs amidst displacement can open a window of opportunity for girls and women. The following are three reasons why education services should be an important component of the humanitarian response for displaced and host community Pakistanis.

There is a window of opportunity for girls and women who previously did not have access to education to begin to improve their educational status. This window is largely due to disrupted family and community structures, which give women new roles – and sometimes new freedom – in the household, and to increased provision of educational services through civil society mobilization and support of government actors. In Darfur, more girls were accessing education during the conflict than before the conflict—a result of an increased supply of educational

services due to humanitarian assistance. Pakistani girls and women who are able to access education now, have a better chance of sustaining their families and communities' support for their education over time. In some conservative Afghan refugee communities, initial opposition to educating girls lessened. Support from the community developed through on-going, open dialogue and the demonstration, and understanding, of the value of educating girls.

Successful strategies exist to educate girls and women in difficult situations. Displaced and host-community Pakistani's face numerous challenges to educating their girls and women—from overwhelmed government education services to threats from Taliban militants. Despite what may seem like an impossible task, education strategies have been developed and proven to work in similar situations. In the case of Pakistan, it will be essential to partner with local communities to support existing, grassroots efforts to improve educational access for girls and women. There are a number of moderate, secular voices in the displaced community, which should be the entry point of any contentious education work. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) has created a repository of good practice strategies, which are codified in the globally accepted Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crisis, and Early Reconstruction. Below are examples drawn from the INEE Minimum Standards of successful education strategies that could prove useful. Some organizations, such as the International Rescue Committee, are already actively pursuing these strategies on the ground in Pakistan:

- * increasing the capacity of schools in host communities to absorb displaced girls and boys by moving displaced people who are staying in schools to better shelter, creating temporary learning spaces, sharing learning materials among students, and having teachers teach in shifts;
- * rapidly creating schools where displaced people are living in camps outside of communities by identifying teachers from the displaced population and organizing temporary learning spaces;
- * where there is no ability to access schools, supporting women—young and old and with any amount of education—to share their knowledge with girls in their community through holding regular classes in their homes;
- * support regular, private gatherings of women to learn important tips about keeping their children healthy in a new environment, and within that, infuse teaching of basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Educating girls and women is central to long-term progress for the northern region of Pakistan. With poverty and exclusion important contributing factors to the chronic instability and discontent, any long-term solution to the current conflict will have to find ways of improving the socio-economic status of the population. Educating girls and women is one of most highly leveraged investments in long-term development. Learning to read and write opens up a world of possibilities for girls and women in terms of their self-confidence, their ability to make informed decisions, and their capacity to avoid manipulation by false information—all things inherently valuable in resisting oppressive forces. But educating women and girls has also been shown to improve the health status of children and the economic development of their communities. One 63-country study found that educating women was credited for 43 percent of the progress made in reducing child malnutrition. Another study across 100 countries found that every 1 percent increase of women's education generated .3 percent increase in economic growth.

There is a window of opportunity amidst the dire crisis in Northern Pakistan to support education for girls and women, something that will sow long-term benefits for the region's recovery and development. However, to do this, it is imperative that the remaining \$403 million required to address urgent humanitarian needs, including education, are given, not only pledged, by the international community. Given the probability of increased fighting and displacement, the international community should be prepared to provide long-term support for what will likely be long-term humanitarian and recovery needs.

Sources:

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