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Girls’ Education in Ethiopia: Pandemic and War

Summary

Girls’ futures in Ethiopia are in dire straits. Due to the unprecedented global pandemic and a bloody civil war, over two million children have not had stable access to education since March 2020 (“Ethiopia Closes Schools”). Now, at this very moment, millions of girls are facing further violence, displacement, and malnourishment: all factors that severely exacerbate existing disparities with female education and undo decades of progress that brought greater equal academic opportunities for young girls. However, girls’ education cannot be efficiently addressed without first providing significant aid for severely time-sensitive humanitarian needs, like food and medical supplies. The international community must take immediate action by sending aid to the civilians of Ethiopia and beginning a concrete plan for rebuilding educational infrastructure, particularly for girls.

Even prior to present pressing events, females in Ethiopia have faced social inequality and gender-based violence, significant factors that prevent long-term education. At its very core, there is a strong preference for male children in education and opportunities (“UNICEF Factsheet”). The following statistics pertain to data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNICEF, there are 15 million child brides in Ethiopia, and 4 out of 10 girls marry before the age of 18. Of the child brides, 90 percent will never attend school. Those married in childhood are more likely to have less access to education and face issues like domestic abuse. Furthermore, an alarming “65 percent of women have experienced female genital mutilation.” The main barriers preventing girls in Ethiopia from accessing education include distance to school, marriage and childbearing, and the need to earn money for their families. According to USAID, “though the primary school enrollment of girls in Ethiopia has climbed from 21 to 91 percent in the last three decades[,]...only half of the girls…ever make it to grade 5.” As the girls become older, “academic participation gets increasingly difficult” due to “time taken away from essential income generating activities” (“Gender Equality”). Only “8.2 percent of Ethiopian students enroll in college,” and only a third of those students are women. The number of Ethiopian female students enrolled in higher education is far lower than that of fellow East African nations and the rest of the world (“UNICEF Factsheet”).

This is not to say progress was not being made. Over the past few decades, with the support of local governments and UN agencies, primary school enrollment rates of girls increased from “51 percent in 2003/04 to 95 percent in 2016/2017.” However, “1.6 million primary and secondary school aged girls are out of school” and “75% of secondary school age girls do not attend secondary school” (“UNICEF Factsheet”). Then, in March 2020, COVID-19 struck and dismantled decades of progress and opportunities for women in Ethiopia.

In March 2020, over 26 million students, including millions of girls, were sent home due to school closures, and education has been majorly disrupted since, especially due to the lack of internet accessibility in Ethiopia. Only 15 percent of the country has access to the internet, making online school impossible for most (“Ethiopia Internet Development”). Schools provide “vital nutrition for millions of children” and are “safe harbors” where teachers identify signs of abuse; since the pandemic began, most students have not had access to these resources (Kim). Schools shortly re-opened in October 2020, albeit with remarkably lower enrollment rates, but the Tigray War began just a month later, in November 2020 (“Schools Reopening”).

The war has left thousands dead and internally displaced over two million people, contributing to famine and leaving two million students out of school, including hundreds of thousands of girls (Walsh and Dahir). All parties involved in the conflict have used schools as military bases and looted them of supplies, like computers and food, so many educational centers have been unusable due to the lack of materials (“Ethiopia: Tigray Schools”). According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, about 25 percent of schools have been severely damaged in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. At least 300 schools have been completely destroyed, says the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, and over 100,000 teachers are in need of psychosocial support (“Northern Ethiopia”). Some schools and universities serve displaced local families, and some have reported being unlawfully shelled, further destroying educational centers. Looting and destruction have left hundreds of thousands of girls lacking access to their fundamental, human right to education. Furthermore, severe reports of sexual violence as a weapon of war by various parties have prevented some families from sending their daughters back to school, according to on-the-ground research conducted by Human Rights Watch (Marks and Walsh and “Ethiopia: Tigray Schools”).

According to the World Food Program, 9.4 million people are in need of food assistance in Northern Ethiopia, which is compounded by famine, government blockades, and soldiers looting (“Millions More in Need”). In a society that prioritizes resources to male children, girls face the brunt of dire circumstances, like malnutrition, which has reached above the global threshold of 15 percent in most regions. No supplies have been sent since December 2021 due to fighting. Without basic humanitarian resources, it is nearly impossible to prioritize girls’ educational opportunities when food and medical supplies are nowhere to be found. Survival has been the absolute priority of most families in Ethiopia, not schooling, and it will continue to be their absolute priority as many humanitarian partners plan on ceasing operations by the end of February 2022 due to funding shortages (“Northern Ethiopia”).

Beyond proposing a ceasefire, the international community must send greater aid and supplies, with planning in regard to avoiding conflict zones and looting from soldiers. Once basic survival needs are met, support can again be provided to girls’ education efforts. Also, local education authorities should devise alternative learning pathways and resources for students, especially female students, to safely engage in until schools can be rebuilt and safely attended. Furthermore, relevant authorities must encourage all parties to stop sexual violence and stop using schools as military bases or resources for looting.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the country’s severely limited internet access, school destruction from war, and humanitarian crises, education is almost completely inaccessible by girls in Ethiopia. In times of moral and economic strife, education is the key for girls and women to develop ways to protect themselves and, ultimately, become self-sustaining forces for peace. The international community must take their existing dedication to human rights and stay true to its commitment to expanding female education. Supporting education efforts, especially for girls, is the answer to raising a new generation of leaders, a new generation of leaders who can prevent violent conflict and promote lasting peace.

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