"It Will Be a Weapon in My Hand": The Protective Potential of Education for Adolescent Syrian Refugee Girls in Lebanon

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Abstract

This study uses over 140 first-person narratives from adolescent Syrian girls and Syrian parents displaced to Lebanon and literature from the Education in Emergencies (EiE) field to examine the concept of the protective potential of education. The findings illustrate the interplay between the risks taken to obtain education versus the protective potential of education for this vulnerable group. For this study population, protection risks frequently outweighed the protective potential of education and ultimately influenced decision-making at the individual level on continuation of education in Lebanon.

Résumé

Cette étude s'appuie sur plus de 140 récits à la première personne d'adolescentes et de parents syriens déplacés au Liban ainsi que sur la littérature existante dans le champ de l'éducation en situations d'urgence afin d'examiner le concept du potentiel protecteur de l'éducation. Les résultats illustrent l'interaction dynamique entre les risques pris pour obtenir une éducation et le potentiel protecteur de l'éducation pour ce groupe vulnérable. Pour la population étudiée, les risques en matière de protection l'emportaient fréquemment sur le potentiel protecteur de l'éducation et avaient ultimement une influence sur la prise de décision des individus concernant la poursuite d'une éducation au Liban.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right protected by international law, with all children, including refugees, having the right to accessible education.[1] Since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, over 5.5 million people have fled Syria, largely to the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, with approximately 1.9 million school-aged Syrian refugee children (three to eighteen years) now in the region.[2] Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world; approximately one million Syrian refugees are officially registered with the United Nations High

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Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon, of whom nearly 600,000 are school-aged children, and over half are female.[3] No formal refugee camps have been established in Lebanon per official policy, with the result that Syrian refugees live dispersed within cities, towns, or in informal tented settlements (ITS) throughout the country.[4]

As of 2018, over 250,000 school-aged Syrian refugee children in Lebanon (over 40 of the total) remain out of both formal education (FE) and non-formal education (NFE), with many having been out of school for at least several years.[5] Adolescents make up a large proportion of those out of school, with fewer than 5 per cent of secondary school-aged Syrian refugee children enrolled in school.[6] While there are approximately equal numbers of Syrian girls and boys enrolled in school in Lebanon, reports have indicated that the reasons for not attending school are varied as well as gender- and age-specific.[7]

Education of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Prior to the Syrian conflict, Syria had made great advances in education, with over 93 per cent of girls and 94 per cent of boys enrolled in primary school as of 2009.[8] The conflict had a catastrophic impact on school enrolment within Syria as well as for Syrian children displaced to other countries.[9] In response to the crisis in education for Syrian refugee children, substantial coordinated efforts have been undertaken, including comprehensive national plans by host countries as well as regional strategies such as the No Lost Generation initiative—a collaboration between UN agencies, governments, donors, local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Syria, as well as neighbouring host countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.[10]

In 2014, Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) developed an ambitious national response plan—Reaching All Children with Education (RACE)—to improve access to and quality of education, not only for refugees but also vulnerable Lebanese children.[11] Lebanon's public educational system, even prior to the start of the Syrian conflict, was weak, with only one-third of Lebanese children attending public schools, and the majority relying on Lebanon's extensive private school network.[12] RACE aimed to have all children enrolled in quality education through interventions such as allowing refugees to enrol in public schools without legal residency, waiving school fees, and introducing a second-shift system specifically for Syrian students.[13] While far from accomplishing the aim to enrol all children in school, there were commendable achievements in providing education, including increases in school enrolment rates from fewer than 20,000 Syrian students in 2011–12 to over 140,000 in 2015–16.[14] The first phase (RACE I) was implemented in 2014–16, with the second phase, RACE II (2017–21) further scaling up educational access and quality, as well as further integrating child-protection principles into its interventions.[15]

Despite these promising gains, as of 2018 Lebanon hosts the highest proportion of Syrian refugee children unable to access education in the region.[16] There are widespread structural barriers to education for the majority of Syrian children in Lebanon, including job scarcity for Syrian parents, extensive poverty, language and curriculum differences between Syrian and Lebanese educational systems, and lack of legal status. Lack of legal status has dire implications for education: Syrian children risk being arrested at checkpoints on their way to school, while Syrian parents are restricted in their ability to search for work, driving child labour and forcing children out of school.[17] An estimated 74 per cent of Syrians in Lebanon lack legal status as the result of residency regulations that require Syrians to be registered with the UNHCR or to have a Lebanese sponsor.[18] Lebanon, which is not signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees, has requested that the UNHCR suspend registration of Syrian refugees since 2015.[19]

The Protective Potential of Education

Education in emergencies (EiE) is a relatively new but burgeoning field, with a growing body of increasingly empirical research that has improved the humanitarian sector's understanding of the educational needs of children and adolescents affected by disaster and conflict, as well as the interventions to best improve educational outcomes.[20] Education has been promoted as a central means of protection in emergencies, offering "physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection that can sustain and save lives" as stated by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, and education is now considered a core component of humanitarian response.[21] As described in Graça Machel's seminal 1996 report *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, school can "be a haven of security that is vital to the well-being of war-affected children and their communities."[22]

This conceptual framework of the *protective potential of education* (PPE) from EiE is the key justification for humanitarian provision of education. EiE is upheld as a means to protect against threats of abduction, violence, discrimination, economic exploitation, and child labour, as well as for creating a sense of normality, supporting psychological healing from traumatic experiences, and enabling access to other life-saving services.[23] Despite intentions that education be protective, there is a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the protective effect of EiE and how this can best be achieved. Furthermore, the research comes largely from grey literature reports, which suggest that education may have both positive and negative consequences, especially for girls.[24] The documented rise of targeted attacks on

education (against students, educators, and/or their institutions) during armed conflict, summarized in a series of four reports since 2007 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, has further convoluted the conceptualization of the PPE in emergencies. According to the 2018 *Education under Attack* report, more than 1,000 students or educators have been harmed or killed, in addition to a multitude of physical attacks on schools, military use of schools, and recruitment and sexual violence at or en route to schools between 2013 and 2017.[25]

The literature on PPE has focused largely on the evidence for psychosocial benefits of education, with schools acting to enrich social support, provide meaningful activity, and provide a sense of hope, as described in one of the earliest studies on the topic conducted among Chechen adolescents in the early 2000s.[26] The concept of "child-friendly" spaces/schools has also demonstrated positive protective effects of education for children and adolescents affected by conflict.[27] More recently, however, a study from three regions, including several affected by conflict, has also shown mixed evidence of the effect of school enrolment on risk of emotional, physical, and sexual violence in adolescents; in several of the countries studied, enrolment increased the risk of violence among both females and males, although it was protective for females in another country.[28] A randomized-controlled trial in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) also showed mixed results in a project designed to improve social and classroom interactions, with students reporting higher level of perceived support but no effect on reported level of well-being.[29]

Education for Adolescent Refugee Girls

Adolescent refugee girls worldwide have been identified as a marginalized group within education programs because they face unique barriers to accessing education. While all refugee children have far lower school enrolment rates, compared to non-refugee children (with primary school enrolment rates of 61 per cent versus 91 per cent, respectively), refugee girls are at greater disadvantage since tasks such as domestic duties and care of family members often fall on girls.[30] Refugee girls in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) are less likely to be enrolled in school, with the gender gap widening as girls get older.[31] Discourse regarding the PPE for adolescents is commonly framed in gender-specific terms, with protection for adolescent girls focused on reducing threats of sex- and gender-based violence (SGBV) and early marriage, while for adolescent boys on reducing threats of recruitment by armed groups.[32]

Research suggests that girls and boys have different vulnerabilities and needs in emergencies and supports a gender-responsive approach to addressing protection concerns regarding education. For example, a study from 2013 in Afghanistan demonstrated that decreased distance to school, while having a positive impact on enrolment for all children, was especially significant for girls.[33] Another study from Afghanistan also showed that having higher proportions of female teachers in schools increased girls' enrolment.[34] There is also evidence that interventions on psychosocial protection affect girls and boys differently—a study of a psychosocial intervention for Palestinian children showed that post-traumatic stress symptoms were reduced for boys, but only for a subset of girls with low levels of baseline trauma.[35]

Study Objective

This study reviews the efforts to provide education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and specifically highlights the struggles a uniquely vulnerable group—adolescent girls—to obtain education. The work analyzes first-person narratives from adolescent Syrian girls and Syrian parents residing in Lebanon. These perspectives are discussed within the conceptual framework of the PPE and emphasize this concept as the fundamental dynamic that frames decisions about continuation of education with implications for adolescent refugee girls in conflict-affected contexts.

Methods

This study utilized data collected from a cross-sectional, mixed-methods study conducted by the ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality and Queen's University from July to August 2016 to examine the concept of the PPE among adolescent Syrian girls and Syrian parents in Lebanon.[36] This study utilized Cognitive Edge's SenseMaker®—a smartphone/tablet-based data collection tool that aids researchers in extracting meaning from a collection of narratives shared on people's experiences. First, participants share a narrative, in the form of an audio or text recording in response to their choice of open-ended prompts. Participants then self-interpret the shared narrative by plotting their perspectives using sets of predefined variables on the tablet (see figure 1 for an example of a "triad" with three variables), which allows for more varied responses than typical categorical questions. Additionally, as participants self-interpret their narratives, this reduces researcher bias. The predefined variables used in this survey were selected on the basis of results from a pilot study conducted in May 2016. Full details of the study implementation, including further description of the SenseMaker instrument, have been previously published.[37]

Individuals had to be thirteen years of age or older to be eligible for participation. Participants were prompted to share an audio-recorded anonymous narrative about the

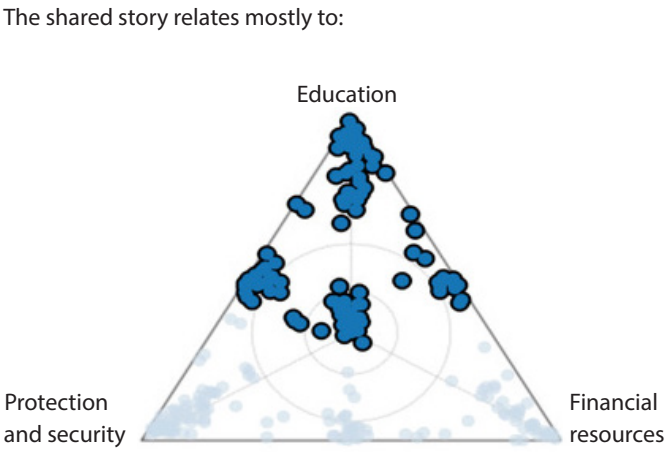

Figure 1. SenseMaker "Triad" used for selection of narratives related to education

experiences of Syrian girls in Lebanon using one of three open-ended prompts written in colloquial Syrian Arabic in order to ensure comprehension for all target groups:

1. Suppose a family is coming to Lebanon from Syria, and the family has girls under the age of eighteen. Tell a story about a Syrian girl in Lebanon that the family can learn from.
2. Tell a story about a situation that you heard about or experienced that illustrates the *best or worst* thing about the life of a Syrian girl (under the age of eighteen) in Lebanon
3. Provide a story that illustrates the biggest difference between life for Syrian girls (under the age of eighteen) living in Lebanon in comparison to life for Syrian girls in Syria.

Demographic information including gender, marital status, length of time residing in Lebanon, etc., was collected. Multiple-choice questions were used to collect information such as whom the story was about (about me, someone in my family, someone else I know, someone I heard about). The survey was drafted in English, translated to Arabic by a Syrian translator, and then back-translated to English to check for accuracy with discrepancies resolved by consensus. A variety of participant subgroups were recruited to capture a wide range of perspectives—only the narratives of Syrian girls and Syrian parents were included in the present analysis.

The data collection team consisted of nine Syrian interviewers (six female, three male) who were selected on the basis of their place of residence, gender, nationality, and prior work experience. Interviews were conducted in three locations: greater Beirut area, Tripoli, and Bekaa Valley. All interviewers participated in a four-day training session prior to data collection. A convenience sample of participants was recruited from public spaces, although all efforts were made by interviewers to recruit participants from a diverse range of backgrounds and geographic locations. If participants did not want to have their voice recorded, the interviewer listened to the participants' narrative and then recorded it in Arabic in the third person.[38]

Data Analysis

Only first-person narratives were included, to provide the richer detail necessary to understand the nuanced decisions that girls and their families made about education in Lebanon. Narratives were selected for further screening by using participants' responses to the triad question that asked, "This story mostly relates to: education, financial resources, protection & security." All first-person narratives by Syrian girls who indicated that their narrative mostly related to education (figure 1) were transcribed and translated from Arabic to English. In order to capture concerns of Syrian parents, thirty first-person narratives shared by parents and interpreted to be about education were also included in the analysis. All narratives were independently screened for inclusion by two researchers (SG and SH) blinded to each other's selections. Narratives describing experiences regarding education in Lebanon were retained for analysis. Researcher SH listened to narratives using the original Arabic recordings to ensure capture of tone, subtle cues, and nuances that may have been missed in the English translations. Where there were inclusion discrepancies between SG and SH, researcher SB reviewed the narratives, and a determination regarding inclusion was made by consensus of all researchers.[39]

An inductive approach using thematic analysis of participants' narratives was utilized, as described in the literature by Braun and Clarke.[40] This process consisted of familiarization with the data by researchers SG and SH, who read and/or listened to all narratives thoroughly multiple times, followed by independent manual coding by researchers SG and SH to generate a set of initial codes. Initial codes were independently sorted into potential themes representative of the data by researchers SG and SH. All themes were reviewed, and final themes determined by researcher SG, who defined the themes, which are presented below.

Limitations

The participants included in this study were selected using a convenience sample and therefore the findings may not be generalizable to the entire population of adolescent Syrian refugee girls. Particularly, marginalized persons and those

with disabilities, may not be adequately represented. Additionally, physical protection concerns—such as from armed violence, warfare, and abduction—are substantially lower in Lebanon compared to other crisis-affected contexts and limits evaluation of this protective element of education.

Research Findings and Discussion

There were 196 first-person narratives from Syrian girls (age thirteen to seventeen years) collected during the study period; of these, 123 (62.8 per cent) were indicated as mainly relating to education. One narrative was a duplicate and removed. Seven narratives were excluded, as they did not relate to education, leaving 115 narratives for further analysis. Of the 115 included girls' narratives, seventy participants (60.9 per cent) referenced having left school, 33 participants (28.7 per cent) reported currently being enrolled in school (either FE or NFE), and in 12 narratives (10.4 per cent) it was unclear if the participant was in school or not. Thirty-four participants (29.6 per cent) were married and 81 (70.4 per cent) were unmarried. Over 90 per cent of participants had been in Lebanon for more than one year, and over 60 per cent for more than three years. There were 58 first-person narratives from Syrian parents, and of these, 30 (51.7 per cent) were mainly related to education.

Four major themes emerged regarding the PPE for adolescent Syrian girls in Lebanon: (1) risks of SGBV in and around schools, (2) financial vulnerability inhibits schooling and increases child labour, (3) curriculum differences and discrimination affect psychosocial well-being, and (4) education versus early marriage as tools for protection. Interview excerpts were selected on the basis of their relevance and importance in illustrating emergent themes. Additionally, while far from being comprehensive, suggestions for interventions aimed at bolstering the protective potential of education for practitioners, NGOs, governments, and UN agencies that work with adolescent Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon and other host countries are discussed alongside the research findings.

Risks of Sexual- and Gender-Based Violence in and around Schools

While schools are often characterized as being protective from SGBV threats, none of the included narratives explicitly stated this but rather focused on the risks of SGBV faced going to/from and within schools. Frequent experiences of sexual harassment (especially in public spaces), as well as threats of sexual assault and kidnapping, were cited as protection concerns from both girls and parents, and often influenced parental decision-making in permitting girls to attend school. Participant 209, a Syrian girl in Bekaa, explained, "We can't go to school anymore, as girls are being kidnapped on their way to school, and now I am staying at home with no education." Frustration, social isolation, and claustrophobia due to being forced to stay at home (often felt by parents to be the only means of protecting girls) were commonly described in girls' narratives. As participant 511, a Syrian girl in Bekaa, described, "We are currently living in suffocation. We cannot leave the camps because it is not safe for us outside [and] there aren't any nearby schools." The risks of SGBV during travel to/from school appeared to be particularly exacerbated by long transit times, as well as the need to travel after dark for second-shift classes. Several parents stated their concerns were decreased when there was a safe transportation option for girls in close proximity to the home or when schools were located within their ITS/camp.

Importantly, SGBV risks were not isolated to transportation to/from school, since sexual harassment was also described within schools—from students as well as school officials—and also led parents to pull girls out of school. Participant 201, a Syrian mother in Tripoli, described her girls' experience: "[My daughters] were harassed by boys [at school], so they stopped and stayed at home for one year. After that they entered the school again and faced the same situation. Now they are waiting for the opportunity to get married." In addition, multiple narratives also described the common presence of men waiting near schools and harassing girls as they entered or left school. Participant 699, a Syrian girl from Bekaa, described experiencing sexual harassment by a school principal, which eventually led to her leaving school: "My former school principal used to harass the students and teachers. After a while, he started to harass me. Therefore, I hated school and I accepted to get married to the first man who proposed to marry me. Even though I would have preferred to continue my education, I was compelled to marry in order to get rid of the harassment."

Much of the discussion regarding the PPE for adolescent girls has focused on the capacity for schools to reduce SGBV through physical protection from harassment and threats of assault, as well as more broadly, for teaching both boys and girls about gender equality, healthy relationships, and safe sex. However, this protective potential is greatly constrained if girls are not able to even reach schools safely and when school environments themselves place girls at risk for SGBV.

Any interventions to improve school attendance for adolescent girls must make it a priority to address sexual harassment in public spaces, especially during transportation to and from school for all girls. Dedicated school buses for girls, perhaps driven by female bus drivers, would be beneficial, as would more female teachers and improved oversight within schools. Collaborations between protection and education sectors could also create novel programs to combat SGBV, such as special training for teachers, school administrators,

and parents in SGBV awareness and referral mechanisms. Strengthening the capacity of MEHE's Education Community Liaisons program, which facilitates communication between schools and families, to identify cases of harassment and SGBV is greatly needed.[41] Additionally, ensuring anonymous reporting mechanisms for harassment and threats of SGBV (such as MEHE's plans to introduce a confidential hotline) and enforcing a no-tolerance policy for harassment within schools should also be implemented.[42]

Financial Vulnerability Inhibits Schooling and Increases Child Labour

Schools have also been asserted as a means of protection from exploitation and child labour. However, the narratives frequently described the difficult decisions that forced families to choose between using strained financial resources to meet basic needs for survival (housing, food, health care) instead of sending children to school, and financial constraints were parents' most-cited reason for which adolescent girls were not in school. Descriptions of parents' severe distress when forced to take girls out of school to ensure the families' survival were common. As described by a Syrian mother (participant 623) in Beirut, "We can't afford the schools' tuition fees. There's no mercy: we have up to four kids per family and they won't give us even the tiniest reductions on the fees. We also suffer from rent … we don't even eat and drink."

While child labour is often purported to disproportionately affect boys compared to girls (especially in regard to paid labour), many narratives described girls working in paid unskilled jobs (farming, selling vegetables and clothing, building houses, etc.) and unpaid work (household duties, care of family members, etc.) to support their families. As boys were not the focus of this study, further comment on the differential effects of child labour on boys versus girls cannot be made, although the subject warrants further study. While some participants cited parental pressure to work, many girls stated a personal desire to help provide for their families as the reason for deciding to leave school: "I [was] confused and torn between saving up for my education and helping my parents with the money. I had to work and I lost my chance. I forgot my education and felt the responsibility of helping my parents out," stated participant 1035, a Syrian girl in Beirut. Narratives also frequently described prioritization of schooling for younger children over adolescents. Beyond the opportunity costs of lost income, other education-related costs such as the high fees required for secondary school, as well as "hidden costs" of clothing, books, and transportation, increased financial vulnerability for Syrian families with descriptions of threats of eviction, food insecurity, and inability to pay for medical expenses.

While education can enable girls' long-term financial independence and security, the direct and opportunity costs of attending school often reduced families' ability to meet basic needs and drove the need for child labour. This relationship between financial vulnerability and ability to prioritize education have been long recognized by the humanitarian sector. In Lebanon, two studies on cash-transfer programs for Syrian refugees have been conducted, which both showed that cash assistance increased access to education; the Min Ila unconditional cash-transfer program (implemented in 2016–17) showed increased school attendance at the midpoint, but because schools were filled beyond capacity, the effect on endpoint enrolment could not be proven. However, the program did increase subjective well-being, health, and decreased household work, especially for girls.[43]

Financial vulnerability often places increased pressure on families to marry girls early in order to lessen financial and protection responsibilities. Reducing financial constraints, including providing scholarships for secondary schools and providing transportation assistance and school supplies, are greatly needed. Ensuring that refugees have access to basic necessities of life is the backbone needed to allow children to resume their education. Cash-transfer programs targeting families with adolescent girls may also reduce the overall financial vulnerability families face that drives adolescent girls out of school and towards child labour or early marriage.

Curriculum Differences and Discrimination Affect Psychosocial Well-being

Adolescents often face higher barriers in transitioning from the Syrian to Lebanese educational system compared to younger children and are often placed at least several grade levels below their age level, principally as a result of differences in language of instruction. Beginning in primary school, a significant portion of the Lebanese curriculum is taught in English or French, while the primary language of instruction in Syria is Arabic.[44] Many narratives described negative consequences on psychosocial well-being (feelings of embarrassment, demoralization, and futility) as a result of being placed in classes far below their age cohort. As participant 1148, a Syrian girl in Tripoli, explained, "I was fifteen [and] was developed as a woman, [so] I was ashamed of going to school." While the provision of emotional and psychosocial support has been asserted as a key protective effect of education for refugees, the negative consequences for adolescents such as demoralization and lack of peer social interaction are not sufficiently acknowledged. One Syrian mother in Bekaa (participant 161) explained, "They placed her in grade five, which affected her psychologically, because all the students with her in class are younger than her, so became ashamed of herself, because she was tall and

they were smaller than her, and she wore a veil while they didn't, and they could play but she couldn't…. Thus, the situation affected her and pushed her to prove that she is old and can be a woman [and] to get engaged."

Girls' narratives also described being victims of discrimination, bullying, and even physical abuse from Lebanese students, staff, and/or teachers and described difficulties making friends and feelings of isolation. Contrary to being protective, school was sometimes described as a hostile environment with fears of bullying and humiliation. While discrimination and bullying affect all Syrian children, this often took on a distinctly gendered tone in the narratives, especially with comments targeting girls' reputation. Participant 559, a Syrian girl in Beirut, described discrimination against Syrians by her teacher: "[The teacher] came to me in class and told me, 'Don't you feel any shame? You're Syrian and you should have some respect for your hijab.' She accused me of going out in a car with a guy in front of school. [I told her] I was not even in school that day. That day when she humiliated me in front of everyone and said shameful accusations about Syrians, I hated the school [so] I left."

Conversely, some girls' narratives did describe the positive protective effect school had on their psychosocial well-being, such as making friends, as well as giving them meaningful activity and hope. Girls also described valuing the opportunity to learn English and technical skills (such as hairstyling, sewing, nursing, and business) in order to later obtain a job. Importantly, a majority of the positive protective experiences were discussed in reference to NFE/training centres specifically for Syrian students. Narratives often described schools for Syrians, especially when taught by Syrian teachers, more positively in comparison to Lebanese public schools. As participant 345, a Syrian girl in Bekaa explained, "When I came to Lebanon, I enrolled in a public school for two years, but I failed both years because the curriculum was hard … the teachers made us feel that we are not part of the school, and they would isolate themselves from us. Currently, we are registered in training centres specific for Syrian refugees; they teach us English and nursing and so on. I advise every Syrian family to register their children in training centres specific to Syrians instead of public school."

Programs that help adolescents transition back to FE, such as foreign language, Basic Literacy and Numeracy (BLN), and Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP), should be prioritized in RACE II and strengthened with greater financial support. As students placed in classrooms with children much younger than themselves may feel demotivated, normalizing return to school after prolonged absence, as well as providing safe spaces or specialized classrooms for adolescent girls to re-enter FE or vocational schools while also providing them with a social network of peers can be psychologically healing and protective. Continued improvements in the quality of public education, as well as development of curriculums responsive to youth desires for practical, vocational skills, are also needed to remove demand-side barriers to education.

As discriminatory comments and bullying may take on gender-specific dimensions, especially aimed at adolescent girls' "honour" or reputation, increased sensitivity to these issues and training on the influence of gender on classroom dynamics, especially in mixed-gender classrooms with students of highly varying ages, can be important for ensuring girls' psychosocial well-being in school. Increased support for reporting mechanisms and enforcement of a no-tolerance policy for discrimination and bullying are needed.

Education versus Early Marriage as Tools for Protection

Nearly all narratives from both girls and parents indicated a strong desire to continue girls' education, identifying the transformative and protective effect education could have on their lives, although they expressed significant frustration and disappointment regarding the path their futures would take without school. The benefits were nearly universally framed in terms of the long-term empowering benefits of education for providing financial security and obtaining higher status in the community. And multiple narratives described education as a "weapon" or "tool" for protecting girls. As stated by participant 535, a Syrian girl in Beirut, "I decided to leave my fiancé and continue my education.… It will be a weapon in my hand in the future." Many girls specifically cited hopes to become teachers, doctors, pharmacists, architects, and business women; however, these aspirations were commonly hindered by the short-term realities of the barriers preventing girls from continuing their education. As participant 290, a Syrian mother in Bekaa, reported, "Education is important for girls so they can secure themselves when they are older. I prefer that girls get educated, so they can deal better with their lives when they get married and have kids. I know a lot of people who got their daughters married and stopped their education, just so they can get rid of the burden of them going to school."

For many, a dichotomous relationship between education and early marriage formed a central part of the decision-making about continuation of schooling for adolescent girls. Adolescence often marked a turning point in whether girls were able to continue school, with narratives describing parents waiting until girls were a certain age (varying between twelve and eighteen years) before marriage was considered. In the majority of cases, marriage was viewed as far less desirable and school as more protective in the long term by both girls and parents; however, as a result of the myriad barriers to enrolling in school, marriage was compelled in

order to secure girls' futures. As participant 658, a Syrian girl in Bekaa, stated, "There are a lot of girls who are thirteen years old or so, and their parents get them married because they are unable to provide them with all their rights, and to protect them from guys' harassment, and the education problem, and a lot of other problems."

While some girls described being happy in their marriages, other girls' narratives described marriage as causing decreased protection because their marriages ended quickly in divorce/separation, their husband left to look for work in another country (often unsuccessfully), and they even experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) and abuse. These descriptions support findings from prior studies that show that early marriage increases girls' risks of IPV compared to those who marry at an older age.[45] Participant 432, a Syrian girl in Bekaa, described her experience of IPV after being married at age fifteen: "Here I was unable to continue my education. I was forced into getting married, and I couldn't get along with my husband. I was a teenager, and I was so young. I had a daughter and he still beat me. He divorced me, and he took my daughter. I endured our abusive relationship for two years."

Improving educational access for adolescent girls has a compounded benefit—both in securing girls' financial and personal independence, and in reducing the negative psychosocial impacts and health risks of early marriage and childbirth, which have been extensively described.[46] The frequent description of early marriage among the narratives corroborates reports that rates of early marriage among Syrian refugees are up to four times higher than among Syrians before the conflict, although the reasons are likely multifactorial. Recent studies have shown this may be due to differences in population composition between the pre-conflict Syrian population and Syrian refugees in host countries.[47]

Increased community engagement to improve awareness of the long-term protective value of education and negative consequences of early marriage for adolescent girls and their families should also be prioritized, such as the peer-led training by the UN Population Fund aimed at fathers as well as girls themselves to reduce cultural norms of early marriage and increase awareness about the health risks of early marriage and childbirth.[48]

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article uses a diverse sample of narratives from adolescent Syrian girls and Syrian parents residing in Lebanon to examine the PPE in emergencies and finds that protection concerns are fundamental to decision-making regarding continuation of education. While girls and their parents deeply value girls' education, the short-term risks often ultimately outweigh the largely long-term protective benefits of education for adolescent girls. The narratives included in this article also describe a stark discrepancy in perception between humanitarian practitioners/academics, who largely view education in emergencies as protective, versus adolescent girls and their parents, who often view education in terms of the risks posed. Over half the narratives described concerns regarding harassment/threats of SGBV as well as early marriage as factors that influenced decisions about school enrolment, emphasizing the need to prioritize gender- and age-specific interventions when developing educational programming for Syrian refugees, as these concerns overwhelmingly affect adolescent girls.

The findings of this research argue that the delicate balance between the potential of education to protect versus to increase risk is highly dynamic and influenced by age, gender, socioeconomic, and legal status, among other factors, and must be understood at minimum at the subgroup level (for instance, by age and gender). Further studies on protection concerns for education of other subgroups, such as adolescent boys (who may face even greater risks of child labour, for instance) or children with disabilities are also greatly needed. Overlooking or understating the risks that education may place on refugees is both negligent and potentially dangerous, and furthermore overlooks potential for collaboration between education and protection sectors that may have compounded benefits.

In many refugee communities, education is often viewed as the greatest symbol of hope for a better future. While all Syrian children face substantial barriers and risks to continuing their education in Lebanon, the immediate risks posed, especially to adolescent girls, make them particularly vulnerable to missing out on the benefits of education. If protection concerns regarding education persist, this generation of Syrian girls will ultimately largely be compelled into early marriages and reduced financial security, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability for generations to come. For refugee girls, continued advocacy for education once they reach adolescence is imperative, as these individuals are far too often ignored or neglected as they transition abruptly and prematurely from childhood to becoming the caretakers of the next generation.

Notes

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