

Women's Empowerment and Education: How Do We Empower the Displaced Millions?¹

Dr. Faheem Hussain

Education is one of the critical elements to ensure women's empowerment. With effective education, women can aspire for better opportunities in the workforce and can work toward shedding existing socioeconomic exclusions. According to the Brookings Institute, educated women are a boon for any growing economy, correlating with a wide array of beneficial factors such as lower risks of extremism and being better able to tackle issues related to adverse environmental effects.²

The majority of research and findings related to women's empowerment and the role of education has been conducted with several of the same prevailing conditions and assumptions. In general, we assume the population in focus will be static, *i.e.*, the majority of a certain group of people will not move locations. This research has also been primarily focused at the country level, which assumes more structured education, legal frameworks, and organized levels of educational attainment across a populace. This research has provided an evidence base that has helped inform public policy and build the evidence base for high-level treaties such as The Convention on the End to All Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, among others. These international-level treaties were then implemented on a national level.

However, what happens if the assumed static nature of target populations no longer holds true? In recent years, we have seen massive human displacement worldwide, due to political, social, economic, and environmental conflicts. According to UNHCR, in every minute in 2018, 25 people were forced to flee their homes. At present, globally there are around 71 million forcibly displaced people. Approximately 20.4 million are recognized by UNHCR as refugees. And to make the situation more challenging, one-third of the global refugee population have taken refuge in some of the least developed countries, placing further demands on the already-constrained socioeconomic safety nets in those regions.³

In the face of these evolving circumstances, the education sector cannot rely on old information. Stakeholders—new and old—need an evidence base equipped to inform the strategic planning and development of education infrastructures for refugees and displaced population. Have we initiated any significant research to compare and contrast the gender-specific challenges between the traditional education system and the same for the displaced? Are refugee women worse off when it comes to access to education and empowerment in comparison with their male counterparts? What are the ways of co-imagining, co-designing, and co-implementing education services for the displaced millions? Can we scale up these solutions? Can such solutions replace our traditional education system? Would innovative delivery methods, such as online education, stacking credits, soft skills, and alternative curriculum, be more empowering? Overall, how can research utilization and related initiatives help the global development and education sectors to keep up with such dire dynamic needs? How can our

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² Kwauk, C., & Braga, A. (September 2017). Three platforms for girls' education in climate strategies. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/platforms-for-girls-education-in-climate-strategies.pdf>.

³ UNHCR. Figures at a glance. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

research, subsequent policy formulation, and implementation ensure that these displaced girls and women have an equal chance to succeed?

Initial research shows that education services offered for these displaced populations are far from adequate.⁴ There is a real opportunity to advance research and research utilization in this area as host countries and a multiplicity of donors, foundations, and NGOs navigate this evolving reality. These actors are operating without an evidence-based approach on what works in this dynamic and yet enduring situation. We need new research projects to find data and causal evidence beyond the poor enrollment numbers of school-age refugees. In-depth intellectual inquiries will facilitate better understanding of the core challenges refugee women (and men) face in accessing effective, equitable, and long-term education. Such research has the potential to assist in evidence-based, transnational policy-making to solve these problems.

Using the ongoing Rohingya crisis as one case study, we find a clear rationale for research to help design, build, and implement programs where traditional education programming will not work in advancing solutions that will result in impactful international development.

Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted groups at present. According to the latest estimate, about 750,000 have fled to Bangladesh since August 2017 to get away from the brutal oppression of Myanmar's army. For decades, Rohingyas have been consistently discriminated by the army-led administrations in Myanmar, leading to very limited access to education, health, and other basic citizens' rights. In Bangladesh, there are over 530,000 Rohingya children age 3 to 17 who are in immediate need of Education in Emergency (EiE) services, among which more than half are girl children. In a joint assessment on EiE, humanitarian agencies found that for primary age children (6–14), only 57 percent of girls have attended learning centers since arriving in Bangladesh.⁵ For Rohingya refugee women, according to our initial findings, the concepts of self-empowerment through education is somewhat unattainable, due to decades-long discrimination, patriarchy, and other infrastructural challenges.

Gender discrimination has been a constant challenge for Rohingya refugee women since their days in Myanmar. As most of the state-run schools taught girls and boys together, Rohingya girls were required to be in the same space with local ethnic majority (*i.e.*, Rakhaine) students. The close proximity with the Rakhaine population often resulted in mental and physical harassments, racial attacks, and overt discrimination from classmates and school authorities as well. One Rohingya woman from the refugee camp in Bangladesh mentioned:

"(Rohingya) girls didn't want to go to school because the Mong (Rakhaine) boys and girls used to create issues, used to quarrel, fight with them. There was no justice for them."

In the refugee camps, such hostility does not exist, and there has been a special priority to bring the girl children from the Rohingya population to school. In order to make the learning environment more welcoming for the girl students, female teachers from the refugee and host communities are hired as well. There are additional study groups for Rohingya girls, supported by the NGOs. Despite such efforts, many of the girls stop going to school within the camps after reaching puberty.

In addition to hurdles presented by outside groups, the Rohingya clergy are known to be against any "western education" for women. The Rohingya women's struggle to access education perpetuates to informal education spaces as well. The majority of the male-dominated leadership groups are against

⁴ Hussain, F. (December 2019). Women's empowerment and education: Where are the displaced millions?. LinkedIn. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/womens-empowerment-education-where-displaced-millions-faheem-hussain/>

⁵ Strategic Executive Group. (February 2019). 2019 joint resource plan for Rohingya humanitarian crisis. Retrieved from <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2019%20JRP%20for%20Rohingya%20Humanitarian%20Crisis%20%28February%202019%29.compressed.pdf>

women's educational empowerment, especially young women's use of different information and communication platforms (i.e., TV, radio, smartphones, social media). Even many of the senior Rohingya women we interviewed shared similar views. According to them, young Rohingya women face the risk of bringing shame to their families by using any digital media or smartphones, even if the use is to primarily access education or any basic information. A prominent *imam* explained the boundaries of Rohingya women's communication technology usage:

"Women can talk over phone, but they should not be allowed to use the phones."

Traditionally, most countries hosting refugees provide some types of parallel education for refugees (e.g., Chad, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, etc.). The majority of these education systems do not specifically encourage greater participation of refugee women. According to the 2017 Djibouti Declaration on Regional Refugee Education, seven eastern African countries agreed to include education for refugees in their national development plans by 2020. As of this writing, only Uganda has lived up to its promise.⁶

As it is clear from the discussion above: a) recognizing the needs of refugees; b) establishing education institutions; and c) making some learning tools available—although necessary and powerful—are insufficient for solving the education- and empowerment-related challenges for refugee women. We need more in-depth, participatory, and interdisciplinary research into the education–empowerment–displacement nexus. Such works will duly recognize the unique challenges and opportunities in this relatively uncharted and rapidly evolving space. Findings and observations from this research could also enrich the related policy formulation and implementation processes, in the context of local, regional, national, and transnational jurisdictions.

⁶ UNHCR. Left behind: Refugee education in crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/left-behind/>.