



World Vision

Building a better world for children

Barriers to Education Globally: Getting Girls in the Classroom

**Testimony before the
Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western
Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security,
Democracy, Human Rights and Global Women's Issues**

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June 15, 2016**

Thank you, Chairman Rubio and Ranking Member Boxer, for inviting World Vision to share our experiences addressing girls' barriers to education and the vulnerability of children to violence. With more than 62 million girls currently not in school, this discussion is timely and important to our foreign assistance objectives and for the future of countries around the world.

World Vision is a Christian relief, development, and advocacy organization that serves millions of children and families in nearly 100 countries. Our 45,000 employees are dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice. This work includes emergency relief and preparedness for people impacted by natural disasters and armed conflict; long-term economic development; prevention and response to all forms of violence against children; mobilizing children, youth, and local communities to hold their governments accountable; and advocating for effective systems and laws that provide a safety net and protection for vulnerable populations.

More than one million private donors, in every state and congressional district, support World Vision. We partner with over 10,000 U.S. churches, as well as corporations and foundations. Last year, World Vision implemented more than \$2 billion in programming for children and communities. This included our response to 132 major disasters and humanitarian emergencies worldwide that reached nearly 11 million people impacted by these crises.

World Vision believes that every child should be able to experience life in all its fullness. We believe every child should be healthy, protected, and able to receive an education. But our hope for children is still far from reality. One in 11 children are out of school around the world today. Of the 62 million adolescents between the ages of 12-15 who are out of school around the world, half are girls. Moreover, global aid for education fell by ten percent between 2010 and 2012.

In conflict zones, one in four children do not attend school. Girls living in conflict-affected contexts are more than twice as likely to be out of school and 90 percent more likely to be out of secondary school than girls living in countries not affected by conflict. Despite these staggering trends, less than two percent of all humanitarian assistance is spent on education.

Children are unable to attend school due to lack of access to safe, quality, and affordable education, poverty, and social norms that do not value education for all children. Often, girls bear the primary burden of these barriers. Today, I would like to highlight two key issues where barriers to girls' education require critical attention: children in conflict-affected contexts and adolescent girls in secondary education.

The barriers to girls' education are context specific and can be multidimensional: socio-economic conditions, lack of appropriate hygiene facilities in schools, violence against girls in school, lack of female teachers and other role models, social norms and attitudes, long distances

to school, unequal distribution of household chores, limited livelihood opportunities for caregivers, discrimination, and conflict. I will argue that addressing the barriers to education for girls requires a multi-sectoral response and the involvement of influential relationships in a girl's life, including governments, schools, religious and community leaders, community members, and the girl's family.

My testimony today will highlight why families struggle to send their daughters to school, whether that is due to being unable to afford education costs, sending girls into the labor market to help support the family, social norms that do not value education for girls, inaccessibility of schools, or that girls are not prepared to effectively transition to host country curriculum after they have been displaced. Tragically, tackling the root causes of gender inequality in a holistic way continues to be poorly understood and under resourced. We need to carefully consider the needs and barriers girls experience in order to more effectively meet their evolving educational, psychosocial, and life skills needs. By incorporating more of a multi-sectoral, gender-sensitive response to address the needs of girls, we can see more effective results that provide girls with supportive environments to learn, dream, and live up to their full potential.

Mellisa is thirteen years old and lives in Zimbabwe. She is in the seventh grade and participates in a project run by World Vision with eight partner organizations called Improving Girls Access through Transforming Education (IGATE). In 2014, she joined a girl's club called Power Within, run by a partner of World Vision. Through the girl's club, Mellisa participated in various art and sport activities at school. She is also able to sew sanitary pads and learn about personal and menstrual hygiene. Her grandmother is member of IGATE's Village Savings and Lending Group to help increase the family's access to livelihoods and assets. Mellisa said, "Before the introduction of the IGATE project in our school and community, I never thought I would manage to proceed to grade seven because my grandmother was struggling to pay my school fees and also secure other basic education necessities...I no longer lack anything that is needed at school."

Mellisa is now confident that she will pass the seventh grade and proceed to secondary school because her grandmother is able to pay school fees, provide necessary school materials, and buy food for the family. Mellisa has plans for her future studies: "After completing my studies," she told World Vision, "I want to be a nurse and the encouragement that I am giving to other girls within the community is that they should value education and never drop out from school."

15-year-old Fatmeh, a Syrian refugee who fled to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley with her family, now works instead of continuing her education. World Vision collaborated with NPR to tell her story. Fatmeh used to be a top student at her school in Syria before her family was forced to leave their home. "Bombs and fighting were everywhere," Fatmeh told us. "So we left to survive." Now,

she and her four siblings work 14-hour days in agricultural fields to help pay their family's debt to a Lebanese landowner who gave them a loan to help them escape.

"I had a dream that when I came here to Lebanon I would study here and go to school here and become an Arabic language teacher here," Fatmeh said. "And then [I hoped] when I go back to Syria, my dream would have been achieved. But it did not work at all with me here." Now, her days are spent in the fields of Bekaa Valley. Despite these many hardships of living as a refugee, Fatmeh still holds onto a "very small hope" of returning to school someday.

In Times of Crisis: Children Want to Go Back to School

In crisis contexts, education systems are three times as likely to be disrupted. When World Vision talks to children in emergencies about their needs, education consistently is one of their main responses. Children tell us they are out of school because of military use of schools, violence in schools, food insecurity, and discrimination, particularly because of ethnicity or disability. When children talk to us about how important education is to them, they closely link their future livelihood opportunities to their education.

After Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, a girl told World Vision, "We should study hard to finish school in order to get a better job with better salary to have a good future and be able to provide for our family. I can't be like my parents without a stable source of livelihoods." Girls, in particular, may not go to school due to child marriage, increased work, or child care responsibilities in the home. While barriers to girls' education exist before a crisis, children tell us these barriers continue or are exacerbated by a crisis.

Iraq: Transitioning to School after Displacement

Since the current humanitarian crisis started in Iraq in 2014, more than three million children and adolescents have been identified as in need of education in emergency interventions. One million school-aged children are out of school in Iraq. Some communities experienced numerous shocks prior to the current humanitarian crisis and have now been displaced several times. World Vision's education programming provides students displaced from conflict in Iraq with language classes, skills training, and preparation to transition into the formal education system. We found that the absence of these programs form barriers for displaced children attending school.

World Vision's Let Us Learn project in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) was designed to meet the needs of over 12,000 displaced children in emergency contexts with an intense back-to-school campaign. Let Us Learn delivers education and child protection interventions that contribute to learning continuity, psychosocial well-being, and increased resilience of children affected by conflict.

Our work in the KRI required extensive consultations with those who had been displaced to ensure that their children were prepared to begin formal schooling and were properly supported as they adjusted to a new environment. After consulting with students, families, and local government authorities, World Vision found that our education programming needed to focus on supporting children and parents to overcome existing challenges to school enrollment, including fear of once again being displaced, loss of hope for their future, and insufficient information about registering as Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). Education programming in conflict-affected contexts have a unique set of challenges. Our program in the KRI was particularly impacted by lack of teachers because of an overburdened education system due to high numbers of IDPs, insufficient space in schools and classrooms to accommodate additional students, and lack of education materials, including textbooks, book bags, and even winter and spring clothing.

Children in crisis-affected contexts need specialized support through the education system to more safely and confidently navigate their changed environments and circumstances. Their recent experiences of displacement and violence reinforced the need for resilience and life skills training to effectively adjust to a challenging new context. The displaced children we work with in KRI needed to learn everything from simple actions to prevent diseases (such as washing their hands), to understanding their circle of family and community support, to an awareness of their rights and responsibilities. We also found that psychosocial programming provides a framework for children to rebuild support structures, learn coping mechanisms, and integrate more successfully into the education system.

Girls, in particular, need specialized care in conflict-affected contexts. We have found success in designing separate classes for girls so they can share their experiences, dreams, and make friendships in a comfortable, safe environment. We have also found that sports can be an effective way to address gender stereotypes, and our female students are playing on football and volleyball teams.

Sadly, displaced girls in the KRI are especially susceptible to child marriage. In fact, child marriage is one of the most common forms of gender-based violence in Iraq. Displaced children from the Mosul area, for instance, are about twice as likely to experience child marriage as other displaced children. We are engaging with parents about the importance of education for girls and provide cautionary messages about child marriage.

Lebanon: Child Labor and Lack of Access to School

In Lebanon, child labor is a deeply concerning trend among Syrian refugee children that limits school enrollment. 60 percent of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are involved in child labor.

This is approximately 82,000 refugee children between the ages of 12-17. 50 percent of Syrian refugee children aged 3-18 in Lebanon are now out of school. Only 5 percent of Syrian refugee 15-17 year olds attend secondary school or higher. Now, a total of 482,608 refugee Syrian children are in need of education. Indeed, we could witness a lost generation of Syria's children if such significant portions of Syrian refugee children continue to not attend school.

Lebanon, in fact, has one of the highest proportions of working children in the world. Many refugees in Lebanon face ongoing displacement and other incredible hardships, such as high rent for inadequate shelter, that pressure refugee parents to send their children into the labor market. Rent can amount to the largest household expenditure for refugee families that leaves few remaining resources for food, hygiene, education, or health services.

The majority of Syrian refugees are not permitted to legally work in Lebanon. Refugees must sign pledges that prohibit work for those over the age of 15 as part of the permit renewal process in Lebanon. As the Syria crisis enters its sixth year, refugees are increasingly vulnerable: they have depleted their lifesavings and are now going into debt. Consequently, refugee parents are sending their children to work and children are becoming the primary breadwinners. As a result, younger and younger children now support their families through entering the labor market.

Relief organizations have found that cash assistance increases access to education. When correlations between cash assistance and child labor were studied, we found decreases in child labor, dangerous work, and selling productive assets when cash assistance was received by refugee families. World Vision is helping support families through cash assistance programming. Through partnering with other NGOs on this program, we provide \$174 monthly to 16,500 vulnerable Syrian refugee households in Lebanon. Over 90 percent of our recipients use cash assistance for its intended purpose, including rent, repairs to existing household structures, food, winter clothing and fuel for winter, education expenses, and health care.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon need effective, ongoing access to education and support to transition into the local Lebanese education system. Simply addressing enrollment will not sufficiently meet the needs of refugee children. World Vision has found an increasing need for Non-Formal Education (NFE) that can help with preparation for the formal school system. This non-formal approach targets the numerous barriers that impede success for Syrian children in Lebanese schools: insufficient capacity in some formal schools to host refugee children; language instruction in formal schools that is in French or English (Syrian children have been taught in Arabic); lack of familiarity with the Lebanese curriculum; lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills to successfully integrate into the formal education system; and the need for psychosocial support. The absence of school preparation through NFE can lead to learning difficulties and dropouts.

World Vision offers this necessary school preparation through our early childhood education programming. We serve over 800 children aged 3-6 in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. 55 percent of these children are girls. Our programming ensures that children who have never attended school are provided with the necessary education and life skills to be able to transition into the Lebanese school system. Furthermore, our program reaches the parents of our students with awareness around early childhood development, health, positive parenting, and child protection.

Zimbabwe: Transformation through Holistic Programming for Girls

In Zimbabwe, World Vision leads a consortium of nine organizations with funding from the UK Department of Foreign Investment and Development to improve access and quality of education for 60,000 girls aged 10-18 years old. Before the project began, World Vision conducted a baseline to understand the reasons girls are not in school. The baseline cited poverty, distance, traditional family norms, and issues around menstruation and burden of household activities on girls as the key barriers preventing girls from accessing education. Girls were dropping out in the last two to three years of primary school at the age of 12-14. 84 percent of the households indicated that it was difficult to send a girl to school. 75 percent of in-school girls were over-age for their grade. During menstruation, 20 percent of rural primary school girls do not attend school and 54 percent of girls reported being teased due to menstruation. Of the girls interviewed, 25 percent said that there are things that they “are not good at” in school and 17 percent reported being afraid some of the time in school. Moreover, 68 percent of household heads did not have a job, leaving families food insecure.

To address these barriers, World Vision and our partners focus on nine key areas of transformation through a project called Improving Girls Access through Transforming Education. The nine key areas work to transform the top influencers in girls’ access to education. The project starts with the girls themselves so that they understand their own potential, power, capacity, and knowledge. Mothers and other caregivers join mother’s groups to understand girls’ potential, the need for education, and the benefits of education to their daughters, granddaughters, and the rest of their family. This is coupled with financial support to the family to support girls’ education. To address the distances students have to travel to school, the project provides bikes to both girls and boys. Long distances can present risks and leave students physically tired by the time they make it to school.

The project works to build school capacity to ensure schools are girl-friendly places of learning. World Vision is working with religious leaders to address issues such as child marriage and other harmful practices that have negative consequences on girls’ sexual, social, and educational health and well-being.

Cultural norms in the target communities place a lower value on girls and leave decision-making rights with males. In response, one of our partners is building male champions for girls' education. To help boost literacy and numeracy, the project is training skilled teachers. Lastly, we work with communities on social accountability with the government. Partnership is key to ensure girls have access to education. Therefore, these activities are done in concert with the relevant government ministries to promote sustainability. While this four-year project is still ongoing, we are already seeing changes in parental approaches, application of religious practices, and girls returning to school.

Through our experience in addressing the barriers to education for girls, World Vision has learned that we must seek to understand the complex reasons children, especially girls, are out of school and address these barriers through multi-sectoral approaches that involve those in a girl's life: governments, schools, traditional and religious leaders, parents and caregivers, communities, and children themselves. If we are to sustainably reduce barriers to education for girls, we must work in partnership with that girl's community and family to create quality, accessible education, address social norms, establish safe school environments, and promote the participation of children and youth.

Policy Recommendations:

The U.S. government has several opportunities to strengthen its investments in education around the world. The current USAID strategy highlights the educational needs of girls and challenges of children affected by conflict. Education for girls and gender equality is a cross cutting theme in the strategy. *Let Girls Learn*, which was launched this year, takes this a step further for adolescent girls. It looks specifically at barriers that keep adolescent girls from secondary education, including physical, cultural, and financial obstacles. The U.S. can lead in addressing the barriers to education for vulnerable children. World Vision recommends the following:

- As USAID develops its next education strategy, it should consider a holistic approach that takes into account the complex barriers to education and places specific emphasis on the most vulnerable, especially girls, ethnic minorities, and children with disabilities.
- Funding for education should be robust in our foreign assistance, including funding that focuses on the barriers to education for vulnerable children in all settings. In particular, we recommend funding the Development Assistance Basic Education Account at \$800 million.
- The Senate should strongly consider introducing a companion to H.R. 4481, the *Education for All Act*. We understand that such efforts are underway and would welcome a bipartisan effort to strengthen the U.S. commitment to basic education.
- Since the average length of displacement is now 17 years, the U.S. government must not solely rely on short-term humanitarian financing to support displaced populations, especially with critical education programming. In protracted crises, education for displaced people

should be integrated into national development assistance plans to strengthen their resilience and lessen dependence on humanitarian relief. More than half of the world's 60 million displaced people are children under the age of 18.

- World Vision welcomes the U.S. initial commitment of \$20 million towards *Education Cannot Wait: A Fund for Education in Emergencies*, launched at the World Humanitarian Summit. As the fund continues to grow and meet the needs of children out school because of conflict and disasters, we urge the U.S. to continue support for the fund.

Thank you, Chairman Rubio and Ranking Member Boxer, for your commitment to girls' education and for your steadfast dedication to remove barriers that inhibit girls from receiving or completing their schooling. World Vision looks forward to further working with the subcommittee to address these critical concerns.