

Gender imbalance in secondary schools

by Catherine Howgego Mugisha

Significantly fewer girls than boys attend schools in refugee camps. As the level of education increases, there is a corresponding decrease in the numbers of female participants. This has resulted in a severe gender imbalance in refugee secondary schools.

"How will I pay the school fees if I don't work?"

Located on the banks of the River Nile in the northwest corner of Uganda, Rhino Camp hosts approximately 26,000 refugees, the majority of whom are from southern Sudan. Rhino Camp consists of widely-scattered residential areas over an area of 225 sq km, interspersed with agricultural land cultivated by the refugees. There is one secondary school in the settlement.

In Rhino Camp, sensitisation campaigns and practical strategies such as the construction of separate toilets and washing facilities, the provision of sanitary materials and soap and the introduction of school feeding by the World Food Programme in the settlement have contributed to an increase in female participation in secondary education. The gender imbalance, however, remains high. In Rhino Camp's secondary school only 15% of students are females, the majority in early years of secondary education. Refugees cite a variety of unresolved issues, challenges and concerns that hinder their, or their child's, attendance at secondary school.

"We live too far from the school for my daughter to walk every day."

Only a small percentage of students live within reasonable walking distance of the camp's only secondary school. Travelling to school on foot is simply too time- and energy-consuming for many girls. One solution would be to provide school accommodation for the female students or, alternatively, land where the students could build themselves temporary houses. This would involve providing the young women

with construction skills or mobilising the community to build dormitories for the female students.

Reports that wealthy men come to the school premises to proposition the female students for sexual services have caused some parents to refuse to allow their daughters to attend. Ensuring adequate female supervision, however, is difficult: there are few qualified refugee women who want to remain in the settlement to work. Training and incentives are needed to encourage them to stay. Female staff are also essential for offering support and counselling, as positive role models for both boys and girls, and to help change community attitudes towards girls' education.

"Who is going to do the housework if my daughter goes to school?"

The average female student in Rhino Camp does three times more work at home (housework and caring for family members) than her male siblings. These activities often cause female students to be late for school or too tired to study or to miss school altogether. Although sensitisation campaigns can usually raise awareness of these issues, practicalities – such as lack of childcare facilities – mean that the situation tends to remain unchanged. Encouraging the refugee community to re-establish support networks to help one another with tasks such as caring for children, the sick and the elderly may enable more young people to attend school. This is particularly important for the young single mothers; extensive evidence points to a positive correlation between an educated mother and a healthy family.

The need to earn money to pay school fees was cited as one of the main reasons affecting both male and female refugee participation in secondary education. It was unsurprising, therefore, to find that 94% of students interviewed were also involved in income-generating activities (32% of girls and 18% of boys on a daily basis). All felt that these activities interfered with their school attendance and ability to study. Approximately 40% of the female students interviewed were involved in alcohol production, an activity requiring them to stay up late at night. It is important that these young women in particular are taught other income-generating skills that do not interfere with their education.

Despite being the main breadwinners, very few of the female students in Rhino Camp had control over the money they made. The majority immediately hand over their profits to male elders; rarely was money then available to pay for the girls' school fees. In several refugee schools in northern Uganda, the Jesuit Refugee Service has introduced a cost-sharing scheme for female students; criteria for selection include financial need (ie without a parent or guardian capable of generating income) and regular attendance in class. In Rhino Camp female students under this scheme are expected to contribute approximately \$3 (25% of the school fees) per term. Initial results show this affirmative action to be successful.¹

Several students in Rhino Camp had dropped out of secondary education to participate in short-term vocational courses, run in other parts of the settlement. Although vocational training is important, refugee youth should not be forced to choose between one or the other. While carpenters, masons and tailors are important professions, so are doctors, engineers and teachers – which

typically require secondary education. Introducing certain income-generating activities into the school curriculum would not only teach students additional skills for survival and income generation but could also help generate money for school materials and students' school fees. Care should be taken, however, that such activities do not reinforce restrictive traditional gender roles.

"My sister isn't allowed to go to school. My parents are worried that if she mixes with other tribes they won't get a good brideprice for her."

Cultural practices such as forced marriage and payment of 'brideprice' were frequently cited as reasons why many refugee girls were not attending secondary school. In several cases, extreme poverty was driving refugees to force their daughters into early marriage in order to obtain their bridewealth. Several of the parents of male students were also more concerned with saving for their son's dowry than paying school fees. There is no easy solution to this issue. Sensitisation and awareness campaigns have helped and camp officials report that these practices are gradually dying out. Meanwhile, cultural and traditional practices need to be discussed with the refugee community when designing campaigns to overcome gender-based discrimination and reduce the gender imbalance in education.

"They [male students] abuse me and try to kiss me. I can't concentrate and I feel depressed when they do this".

90% of female students interviewed reported that they had been harassed by their male counterparts to the point that it was affecting their studies. This abuse - which includes teasing and sexual harassment - stems from a general negative cultural attitude towards female education and stiff competition for a diminishing number of academic scholarships. Although it was not



reported that any female students had dropped out of school because of harassment, their self-esteem and academic grades certainly suffer. More positive female role models, as well as inclusion of male students in sensitisation workshops, may help overcome these negative attitudes.

Recommendations

Attitudes cannot be changed overnight. Sensitisation and awareness-raising strategies will only really have an impact in the long term and must therefore be combined with appropriate practical strategies to reduce the gender imbalance in the short term.

- Sensitisation campaigns should be based on extensive gender-focused research (preferably by a gender specialist) to understand the gender imbalance in education, taking into consideration the different cultures and traditions that exist in the refugee camp.
- Issues arising should be discussed in separate male/female groups (including youth) in a participatory and gender-sensitive manner in order to generate possible solutions.
- Teachers and school authorities should be included in awareness campaigns and be available to provide guidance for young refugees facing difficulties in accessing education.

- Affirmative action for girls unable to pay school fees should be introduced.
- Female teaching staff must be employed; incentives may be required.
- Support for young refugees with children or other family responsibilities should be established within the refugee community.
- School accommodation is vital at secondary level, especially in larger refugee settlements. Consideration of the separate needs of male and female students is essential and adequate supervision must be ensured.

Secondary education for displaced people should not be considered a luxury for it is essential for return, reconstruction and development. Without understanding the situation from a gender perspective and incorporating gender awareness into the planning, establishment and running of schools, gender imbalances will continue to persist.

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1. For further information on JRS's work in education in Africa, see: www.jrsafricaeducation.org

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