



Invisible Crimes, Lost Classrooms: Addressing Under-Reporting and Impunity in Attacks on Girls' Education

Briefing Paper



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A girl in Afghanistan looks out of a window at home. She has been out of school for over a year, since she finished sixth grade.

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Introduction

Attacks on education are rising, with a devastating and disproportionate impact on women and girls. Today, more than 600 million women and girls live within 50 kilometers of armed conflict, a figure that has surged over the past decade.¹ The deliberate targeting of their access to and participation in education, through attacks on schools and universities, military use of educational facilities, and threats along routes to and from classrooms, is eroding hard-won progress and deepening global inequality. The consequences are immediate and generational: over half of girls in crisis-affected regions are now out of school, and adolescent girls in conflict zones are 90 percent more likely to be out of school than peers in peaceful countries, with risks compounded by displacement, disability, and sexual violence.²

When girls are denied education, entire societies are set back. The loss extends beyond the classroom, fueling child marriage, early pregnancy, economic exclusion, and intergenerational poverty, while communities lose future teachers, doctors, and leaders. Conversely, when girls can learn safely, education becomes a force multiplier for health, stability, and peace. Protecting that right requires not only gender-responsive laws and policies, but also robust systems for monitoring, reporting, and accountability to expose violations, support survivors, and deter future attacks. Accurate monitoring and reporting are the foundation for accountability. Without reliable data, attacks remain invisible and perpetrators unpunished.

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Despite global commitments, attacks on girls' and women's education remain under-reported, under-investigated, and rarely prosecuted. Strengthening monitoring and data collection, closing accountability gaps, and integrating a gender lens into protection and justice mechanisms are essential steps toward fulfilling the promise of the **Safe Schools Declaration** and advancing the right to education for all.

In 2018, the **Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack** (GCPEA) published a briefing paper titled ***What can be done to better protect women and girls from attacks on education and military use of educational institutions?*** and since then girls and women have faced increasing challenges and dangers with regard to accessing safe education. In many contexts, the combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased conflict over the past seven years have compounded risks for women and girls, driving higher rates of school dropout and educational exclusion.³ At the same time, authoritarian regimes and non-state armed groups that control territories continue to exclude women and girls from education, often through intimidation and violence. Nowhere is this more evident than in Afghanistan, where the systematic exclusion of women and girls from education and public life has become a defining example of institutionalized gender-based oppression.

As 2025 marks the ten-year anniversary of the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), an international political commitment endorsed by 121 countries to protect education, Afghanistan's reality underscores the urgency of ensuring that the protection of education includes a gender lens. The SSD calls on States to take concrete steps to protect students, teachers, and schools from attack and military use, and to ensure the continuity of education during armed conflict, commitments that are deeply interlinked with the Beijing +30 agenda. Three decades after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2025 review offers a pivotal opportunity to reaffirm global commitments to gender equality in and through education, ensure girls' safe access to secondary education, and end violations of their rights, including child, early and forced marriage.⁴

"The chaos was indescribable and I found myself looking at the terrified faces of my people running, rushing. I looked at the truck that was loading the dead bodies of students. They do not exist anymore - 25 deaths, 57 injuries. I sat in a corner numb with what I had witnessed. Every time I breathe, I feel lucky to be able to breathe again. I felt lucky to be able to go to school again. I was in my class along with my classmates the next day - that's how we fought for education every single day."

- Mina Bakhshi on her experience of an attack on her school in Afghanistan,
at the **launch event for Education under Attack 2024**.

Together, the **Safe Schools Declaration** and **Beijing +30** frameworks form a complementary call to action: to safeguard education as both a right and a space of empowerment for women and girls, and to ensure that protection and gender equality are not treated as parallel priorities but as mutually reinforcing obligations under international law and policy.



How girls' and women's education is differentially affected during conflict

During armed conflict, women's and girls' education is targeted directly for a number of reasons, resulting in the death and injury of female students and staff, and destroying the buildings where they learn and teach.⁵ Attacks on education, including the military use of schools and universities, and dangers en route to and from school and university, adversely impact female students' and teachers' attendance. When schools and universities are occupied by armed forces or armed groups, even if they remain operational, female students are more likely to be out of school because of the associated risks, including recruitment and sexual violence. In this way, gendered attacks on education cause countless days of lost education worldwide every year. In addition, girls and women with disabilities experience compounding impacts of attacks involving explosive weapons.⁶

Among other impacts, girl and women students experienced more difficulties resuming their education after an attack in many contexts, particularly if they hold additional accessibility needs.⁷ Girls are particularly affected when school infrastructure is destroyed in conflict, and their needs should be considered in rehabilitation plans, as detailed in the **INEE Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery**. For example, a lack of proper sanitation facilities can decrease girls' attendance,⁸ in some cases because latrines that are far away from the main school compound put girls at greater risk of sexual violence, and in some cases due to social taboos surrounding menstruation. During conflict, especially when schools are attacked or used for military purposes, subsequent lack of safe access for girls to water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities and infrastructure can keep girls out of school and prevent them from returning.⁹

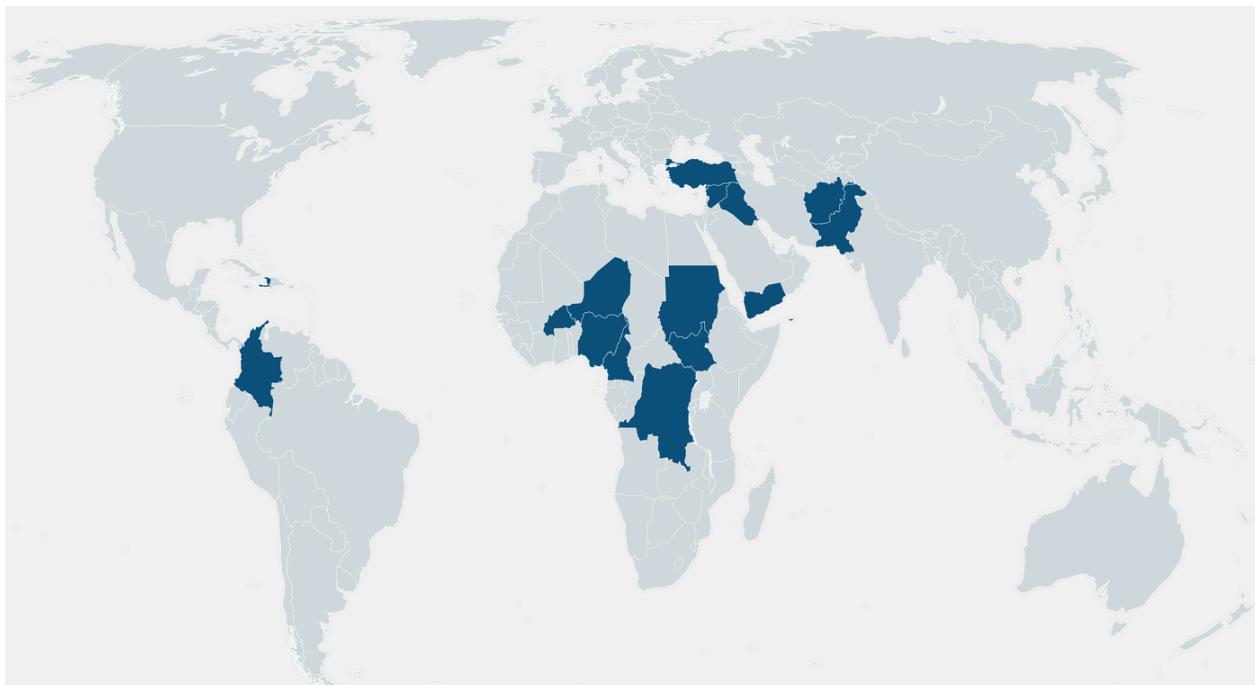
School closures amplify the risk of girls being victims of sexual violence, as well as child marriage and pregnancy, as reported in Kenya and Somalia.¹⁰ In Sudan, children whose schooling was disrupted due to conflict in 2023 faced a greater risk of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking, and girls were especially at risk of sexual violence.¹¹ Further, girls who have been victims of gender-based violence may experience shame, bullying, and societal exclusion due to social and cultural norms, and may not return to school, as reported in South Sudan¹² and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹³

School closures also increase rates of child recruitment and reduce avenues of reintegration. In 2024, the UN reported that child recruitment by armed groups had increased in Colombia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, the Sahel, Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Haiti.¹⁴ Education is a vital tool for children to return to a sense of normalcy, establish self-worth and identity separate from that of a soldier, and create social relationships with peers.¹⁵ Even when schools remain open during conflict, girls' parents may withdraw them because of the risk of experiencing sexual violence or being recruited or abducted on the way to and from school, as reported in Somalia,¹⁶ Afghanistan, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea,¹⁷ and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁸ In Pakistan, the UN reported that an additional half a kilometre of distance between home and schools reduces a girl's likelihood of attending school by 20 per cent, demonstrating the perceived and actual dangers girls may face when traveling to or from school.¹⁹

When armed conflict creates or exacerbates economic instability, girls' education may be sacrificed. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, girls and school principals reported that when parents could not pay for all their children to attend school because of the costs of school fees, uniforms, books, and other education materials, they were more likely to send their sons.²⁰ In some cases, families may reduce pressure on household expenses through girl child labor or early marriage, or girls turn to negative coping mechanisms such as survival sex to pay for their education, as reported in Cameroon.²¹

Patterns of attack: Targeting of women and girls in education

During the years 2020-2024, inclusive, GCPEA identified 15 countries where girls and women were reportedly targeted because of their gender in attacks on education: Afghanistan; Burkina Faso; Cameroon; Colombia; the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); Haiti; Iraq; Niger; Nigeria; Pakistan; South Sudan; Sudan; Syria; Turkey, and Yemen.²² These include countries where girls and women were targeted in sexual violence incidents at, or on the way to or from, school or university.



Countries with reports of gender-based attacks on education, 2020-2024

- Afghanistan
- Burkina Faso
- Cameroon
- Colombia
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Haiti
- Iraq
- Niger
- Nigeria
- Pakistan
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Syria
- Turkey
- Yemen

Between 2020 and 2024, GCPEA identified incidents in certain contexts, such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan, where armed groups, armed forces, and other state security forces specifically targeted girls and women.²³ In these contexts, parties to conflict intentionally looted or set fire to schools and universities, or targeted them with explosive weapons and threatened, killed or abducted students or staff, in order to suppress female education.²⁴ This is often because the perpetrators oppose a certain type of instruction, such as girls' learning, or education they perceive as secular or "Western."²⁵ In **Nigeria**, this is part of an ongoing trend; in 2014, Boko Haram abducted 276 girls from their school in Chibok, and GCPEA estimates that at least 1,000 girls have been abducted in Nigeria since 2014.

- **Afghanistan:** On September 30, 2022, an explosive attached to a suicide bomber detonated at the Kaaj private tutoring center in Dasht-e-Barchi, Kabul, killing at least 54 people and injuring at least 114, most of whom were Hazara women and girls.²⁶
- **Pakistan:** On May 21, 2023, explosives reportedly detonated and caused significant damage to two girls' schools in Mir Ali town, North Waziristan district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, disrupting education for around 500 students, according to ACLED and local media outlets The Defense Post and Daily Sun.²⁷
- **Cameroon:** On February 22, 2022, ten teachers, including nine female teachers, were abducted from the Inclusive Government Bilingual Primary School, a school for children with disabilities, in Ngomham neighborhood, Bamenda city, North-West region, as reported by international media VOA.²⁸

Sexual violence

In other contexts, such as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Colombia, DRC, Haiti, South Sudan, and Sudan, armed groups, military, or other security forces abducted or committed sexual violence against girls and women at school or university, or while they traveled to and from educational institutions. Where these attacks happen, girls and women often abandon their studies completely as a result of this risk. Attacks involving sexual violence are also significantly underreported, owing to stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited access to protection or justice mechanisms.

- **DRC:** In May 2023, students interviewed by the DRC Education Cluster in Kitshanga, Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province, reported that three girls had been raped on the way to school, although details about the perpetrator were not specified.²⁹
- **Haiti:** In 2024, women and girls faced a persistent, daily threat of sexual violence. Members of armed gangs raped girls who were on their way to school, as reported by Amnesty International.³⁰
- **South Sudan:** As reported in April 2023, in Yambio county, a SPLM/A-IO soldier attempted to rape a young girl while she was on her way to school, as reported by her mother, according to the UN.³¹
- **Sudan:** On May 14, 2023, alleged armed group fighters raided a dormitory for teaching staff at the Ahfad University for Women, took two women to another building, and raped them, according to a legal activist group as reported by University World News.³²

Child recruitment

In Colombia, Syria, and Yemen, GCPEA found that armed groups reportedly recruited girls from schools.³³ Girls can be recruited for multiple purposes, for example as fighters, cooks, porters, spies, or for sexual purposes.³⁴ In addition to missing education, girls who are recruited by armed forces or groups face additional risks related to their gender, including gender-based violence, pregnancy, pregnancy-related complications, as well as stigma and rejection when they are released and try to reintegrate into society.³⁵ Below are some attacks GCPEA has recorded in recent years.

- **Syria:** A 13-year-old girl was reportedly abducted for military recruitment as she was leaving a school in Aleppo city and governorate in late March 2022, according to local media.³⁶
- **Yemen:** The UN reported that Houthi forces used schools to recruit female students between 2014 and mid-2020. While boys were often recruited for combat roles, female students were recruited to take on roles such as educators, guards, or medics. Houthi forces also used girls to recruit other students at schools or universities.³⁷
- **Colombia:** On July 13, 2023, a girl student was recruited on her way to school in the Páez de Corinto Indigenous 113 community reservation, Corinto municipality, Cauca department, as reported by Indigenous authorities.³⁸

Lasting Impacts of Gendered Attacks on Education

Women and girls who are deprived of their right to education face short and long-term negative impacts, including: early and forced marriage, early and forced pregnancy and child bearing, reduced employment and economic advantages, and disadvantages in accessing healthcare. Conversely, educated women experience substantial benefits to their quality of lives and have been shown to benefit the societies where they live, contributing to better healthcare, education, peacebuilding, and climate resilience.³⁹

Education equips women with the agency to participate in decision-making and leadership in politics, conflict prevention, and economic development.⁴⁰ Education better enables women to participate in peacebuilding processes, and may increase the success rates thereof. A 2015 study found that women's inclusion in the creation of a peace agreement increases the likelihood that it will last for two years by 20 percent and for fifteen years by 35 percent.⁴¹

Protecting girls' education is not only a moral imperative but an economic and security priority.

Educated women are better able to contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, an especially important consideration given that women produce up to 80 percent of food in developing countries.⁴² In Ethiopia, six years of education increases the chance that a farmer will adapt to climate change through techniques such as soil conservation, varying planting dates and changing crop varieties by 20 percent.⁴³

Girls' education can prevent early marriage and pregnancy. Globally, girls who complete secondary schooling are up to six times less likely to marry during childhood.⁴⁴ Young marriage often results in young pregnancy, too. Children born to teen mothers are more likely to be delivered prematurely or stillborn and face lower chances of surviving infancy.⁴⁵ Globally, maternal conditions are among the top causes of disability and the second leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19.⁴⁶ Educated mothers can better seek help when their child is ill, ensure their child has access to vaccinations and clean water, and protect their child from threats.⁴⁷ Finally, women with a secondary education are more likely to ensure that their own children go to school.⁴⁸

In Afghanistan, where the Taliban has established extreme barriers to female education, a lost generation of educated women is creating a gap of female doctors, nurses, teachers, and professionals, limiting individual potential and undermining the country's long-term socioeconomic development.⁴⁹ In fact, keeping girls out of secondary school costs Afghanistan 2.5 percent of its GDP annually, which doesn't include resulting costs, such as increased costs of healthcare for adolescent pregnancy.⁵⁰

Progress and potential for gendered implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration

Since 2015, the **Safe Schools Declaration** (SSD) and its accompanying **Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict** represent a unified international political commitment and have been instrumental in elevating global awareness of attacks on students, educators, and educational institutions, as well as the military use of schools and universities. With 121 endorsements to date, it has evolved into an internationally accepted standard – reflected in policy, law, military training, and global discourse. Many endorsing countries have included gender-specific developments in their implementation of the SSD:

- **Burkina Faso and Mali:** SSD committees include representatives from the Ministries of Gender.
- **Cameroon:** Cameroon adopted a roadmap on SSD implementation, which includes the participation of women and girls in activities such as determining measures to prevent attacks, developing risk analyses and early warning systems, and safety and security plans.
- **Mali:** The Ministry of Education created a girls' education division and included protection against gender-based violence as a topic in the national curriculum, and also took measures to collect data disaggregated by gender in their national information system.
- **Nigeria:** The Trainer's Guide and Participants' Manual for Nigerian Security Agencies includes a session on mainstreaming gender and vulnerable groups in the implementation of the SSD. Also, the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence Free Schools has a strong focus on gender mainstreaming. Under the Ministry of Education Roadmap 2024-2027, gender disparity is identified as a challenge, and school safety and security are described as central to addressing barriers to girls' education.

Without stronger monitoring, reporting, and enforcement, these promising practices risk remaining isolated rather than institutionalized.

Breakthroughs in Protecting Women's and Girls' Right to Education

In recent years, international and regional bodies have significantly strengthened the legal framework protecting girls' and women's right to education, recognizing that gender-based exclusion and attacks on education can constitute serious violations of international law. These developments provide States with clear legal and policy guidance, yet implementation remains limited and inconsistent, leaving millions of girls and women without effective protection.

A major breakthrough came in 2025, when the **International Criminal Court (ICC)** issued an arrest warrant recognizing the deprivation of education for women and girls as a crime of persecution and, therefore, a crime against humanity.⁵¹ This precedent elevates education, particularly for girls and women, from a social good to a protected legal right under international criminal law. It reflects growing consensus among UN experts and human rights bodies that gender-based denial of education is a form of gender persecution. In particular, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, has described the exclusion of girls and women from education as a defining feature of "gender apartheid."⁵² The ICC decision reinforces this interpretation and aligns with the GCPEA Guide ***Enhancing accountability for attacks on education: investigating and prosecuting education-related crimes*** and current civil society efforts to ensure that the draft Treaty on Crimes Against Humanity explicitly includes justice for children and demands for gender justice. Further, the ICC's recognition underscores the importance of reliable, gender-disaggregated data and survivor testimony, without which accountability mechanisms cannot function.⁵³

The International Criminal Court's recognition of denial of education as a crime of persecution elevates learning to a protected legal right.

At a regional level, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), through its General Comment No. 9 on the right to education (2025), reaffirmed States' obligation to adopt gender-responsive interventions, and policies that support girls' education, including protection from school related gender-based violence, access to menstrual hygiene management facilities, and re-entry policies for adolescent mothers.⁵⁴ These standards reflect a comprehensive approach to safeguarding girls' education even in conflict-affected settings.

Similarly, the **Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**, in its General Recommendation No. 36 on girls' and women's right to education (2017), called on States to adopt measures to protect girls' and women's right to education. These included legislative, military, and policy reforms to prohibit the use of schools by armed forces, as well as proactive steps to prevent attacks on education, and ensure accountability for such attacks.⁵⁵

Building on its General Recommendation, CEDAW has increasingly integrated the SSD and the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* into its reviews of State parties, including for contexts that are not high-intensity conflict. In its 2025 exceptional report on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, CEDAW urged the government to fully implement the SSD and the Guidelines, including by preventing school occupation and ensuring investigation and prosecution of attacks on education. Similarly, in Niger's fifth periodic review in 2024, the Committee recommended concrete actions to prevent the military use of schools and to operationalize the SSD in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021). In its 2024 concluding observations on Benin, CEDAW emphasized that SSD commitments should be applied even outside high-intensity conflict contexts, underscoring their preventive and gender-responsive relevance. The Committee also welcomed the Central African Republic's adoption of a national "Safe Schools" programme as an example of concrete implementation, and in its review of South Sudan in 2021, it linked national obligations to prevent attacks and occupation of schools directly to SSD commitments.

Through such recommendations, CEDAW has positioned the SSD as a central tool for advancing both protection and gender equality in and through education, reinforcing the idea that safeguarding education from attack is integral to fulfilling women's and girls' rights. Yet, despite this normative progress, national implementation remains uneven, with many States failing to translate SSD commitments into binding laws, education policies, and accountability mechanisms that effectively protect learners and teachers—particularly girls and women—in situations of conflict and insecurity.

Recommendations for donors, humanitarian and development actors, and education providers

1. *Safeguard and strengthen monitoring and reporting*

- Expand training for education personnel and other monitors, with an increased focus on collecting data disaggregated by type of attack, gender, age, location, responsible actor, duration of school closure, and type of institution, to inform prevention and response efforts.
- Protect and sustain monitoring and reporting capacities nationally and globally through reliable funding and technical support, with an emphasis on gender based violations and prioritize the monitoring and reporting mandate of UN missions and humanitarian coordination bodies.

2. *Advance deterrence and increase reparations*

- Increase non-discriminatory assistance to survivors, taking into account gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities related to disability, displacement, or socioeconomic background.
- Pursue accountability and justice for gender-based violations of the right to education by investigating, prosecuting, and punishing perpetrators—including those responsible for sexual violence in or near schools—while ensuring survivor-centered, trauma-informed processes and access to medical, psychological, and educational reparations.

Recommendations for States

- Endorse and implement the **Safe Schools Declaration** in a gender-sensitive and gender-responsive manner, ensuring that the specific rights, needs, and experiences of female students and education personnel are systematically addressed.
- Ratify the **CEDAW Convention** and its **Optional Protocol** without delay. States should implement the Safe Schools Declaration in a child-rights-based, gender-responsive, and disability-inclusive manner to strengthen compliance with, and accelerate implementation of, the CEDAW Convention and related international standards.
- Advance the inclusion of access to justice for children in a future Crimes Against Humanity treaty, with consideration for forced marriage, forced pregnancy, recruitment, and attacks on education.
- Intensify prevention efforts by prohibiting the use of educational facilities by armed forces and armed groups during conflict and by explicitly criminalizing this practice in domestic law. Donor governments should seek assurances that schools built with their funding are not used for military purposes.
- Adopt special measures to ensure that women and girls affected by conflict—including those displaced, survivors of sexual violence, married as children, or pregnant—are not excluded from resuming education. Eliminate gender-based barriers caused by conflict through the provision of safe transport, childcare, flexible learning, and financial assistance.
- Maintain safe access to education during armed conflict by developing gender-responsive risk-reduction strategies and comprehensive safety and security plans in collaboration with schools, universities, and relevant stakeholders.
- Integrate gender-responsive education into peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Recovery efforts should prioritize dismantling discriminatory practices, revising curricula to promote gender equality, and addressing harmful gender stereotypes that worsen during conflict.

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