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Opinion – The Hypocrisy of the UK Government’s Plans for Girl’s Education in the Global South

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KEYA KHANDAKER, JUL 19 2021

The UK Government’s recent, renewed efforts towards girls’ education and progress on the 2030 Education UN Sustainable Development Goal are the latest examples of how the pursuit of global ‘gender equality’ and assumptions about girlhood in the Global South have become firmly entrenched in neoliberal logic. Boasting £55million programming towards such efforts as a means of ‘smart investments’, FCDO has, at the same time, cut overseas UK aid expenditure 29% in the last year, and so aid agencies and UK university research programmes are now struggling to effectively plan given the tenuity of their funding statuses. In light of cuts to aid, this article argues the UK Government is hiding behind girls’ education in the Global South as a means invoke wider development outcomes – eradicate poverty, prevent conflict, reduce overpopulation. Bangladesh provides an example of how these funding cuts will impact aid agencies and the communities they serve.

In recent months, the UK Government has renewed efforts towards girls’ education and progress on the UN Sustainable Development Goal on Education, with the aim of getting 40 million more girls in school by 2026, and 20 million more girls reading by age 10. Addressing these targets is a £55 million pledge in pursuit of research into education reforms – What Works Hub for Global Education – “to advise governments across Africa and Asia on the most impactful and cost-effective ways to reform school systems and support female enrolment”. This article argues that such efforts are the latest examples of how the pursuit of global ‘gender equality’ and assumptions about girlhood in the Global South have become firmly entrenched in neoliberal logic.

The UK Government is hiding behind girls’ education in the Global South as a means to invoke wider development outcomes – eradicate poverty, prevent conflict, reduce overpopulation. For example, this new programme is reasoned to “protect the UK from the consequences of conflict”, and “lead to smaller, healthier and better educated families”. Education is made out to be a silver bullet towards female empowerment: an educated girl of the Global South is assumed to be empowered, and thereby stereotyped as a selfless, entrepreneurial, rational economic agent who can supposedly address the structural drivers of poverty and gender inequity. Seen by the UK Government as an “untapped resource”, the lack of educational attainment in Global South girlhoods is falsely imagined as the locus of global inequalities.

The valorisation of girls’ education comes to mask how the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has, at the same time, cut overseas UK aid expenditure 29% in the last year; small charities have been hit the hardest, and aid agencies and UK university research programmes are now struggling to effectively plan given the tenuity of their funding statuses. New thematic categories outline new priority areas for FCDO, framed in accordance with ‘value for taxpayers’, in which girls’ education is included as a cost-efficient fix-all in light of aid reduction. And yet, the 2021 commitment to girls’ education is set at 400million a year, where it was at 672million in the year of 2016. It is also worth interrogating what counts as a baseline in the UK’s targets towards girls’ education, given the immediate need to recover girls that have dropped out of school in light of the pandemic on top of pre-pandemic global targets.

FCDO has put aid agencies around the world in precarious positions, with country budgets still unannounced, terminated contracts, and no consultation in these actions. This is particularly apparent in Bangladesh, a notable

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exemplary country given its history as a once British colonial territory under the larger ‘British India’. In Bangladesh, though girls’ secondary school enrolment has increased from 39% in 1998 to 67% in 2017, girls’ secondary school dropout rates sit at 47% in recent years – demonstrating that ‘getting girls into school’ is only half the story in educational attainment. Factors such as child marriage and household responsibilities, particularly in rural areas, are certainly responsible, which are attributive of a context with deep economic and employment inequalities. Despite these needs, with no commitment from FCDO going forward, Bangladesh rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) have cut down on targeted support towards “the ultra-poor, education and work on women’s empowerment”. The Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center notes that, given around half of Bangladesh’s population is under 25, the withdrawal of FCDO from the youth development is “disappointing”. In light of the emphasis on girls’ education, it is also deeply counterintuitive.

Since 2017 Bangladesh has been reckoning with humanitarian crisis brought on by a mass migration of Rohingya refugees, fleeing violence in Myanmar to seek refuge across the border in Bangladesh. It is thought around 700,000 Rohingya refugees – more than 50% of whom are children – are now in Bangladesh and face inadequate and unsafe shelter and living facilities. Cuts in UK aid to Bangladesh has put in crisis a commitment to the Rohingya children, who require “basic services including food, water and healthcare, as well as protection for women and girls”.

And yet, UK aid cannot be considered an inherent force for good, given the deep parallels between the modern aid system and coloniality. Self-interest in the UK aid framework is not lost. As a cheap expression of British soft power, aid ‘recipient’ countries and their citizens are hoped to be more favourable to the UK: the UK can benefit from being less drawn into conflicts and prosper as a location of brain gain (receiving highly skilled and qualified immigrant workers). At the very least, aid may provide more opportunity for aid agencies and researchers to more aptly allocate funding rather than as a means of the UK’s own introversion. The guise of supposedly improving girls’ agencies through education has come during an epistemological period of ‘bottom-up’ development that seeks to give more decision-making abilities and funding resources to local partners. And yet, the UK government has opted to pull the rug out from under these actors.

Education – of all genders – is deeply embedded in wider systemic issues of equity and must take into account actual quality of the learning environment. Girls and students who are not gender conforming, are disproportionately vulnerable to erasure, discrimination, and violence from teachers, staff, and peers. Such understandings are lost in the FCDO’s latest actions. Girls’ education is instrumentalised to push aside more complex understandings of gender inequities, particularly those that attribute exploitative capitalism and structural adjustment. And so, getting girls into school is a much more political matter than meets the eye; one that can be used to mask deep financial cuts for aid agencies worldwide and burden the responsibility of global ‘gender equality’ onto a young girl.

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