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THE CURRENT: What's the state of global girls' education during COVID?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to a special weekend edition of The Current. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. We're coming to you this weekend because Sunday, October 11 is the UN's International Day of the Girl Child, which recognizes the need to address the specific challenges that girls face and to promote girls' empowerment and the fulfilment of their human rights.

With us today to talk about this is Christina Kwauk, a fellow in our Center for Universal Education here at Brookings. Christina, thanks for talking to us today.

KWAUK: Thanks for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

PITA: Maybe you could start us off with sort of a brief overview about the UN's priorities and what kind of progress has been made for empowering girls globally in recent years.

KWAUK: Yeah, well, the last decade has seen tremendous progress when it comes to empowering girls globally. And a lot of that is thanks to the millennium development goal-era work in the first decade of our present millennium. That was focused on increasing girls' access to primary school and particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Since 2000, the number of countries with large disparities and girls' enrollment has been halved, with most of the gains happening in South Asia and most of those gains also seen at the primary level.

And then now we're in the sustainable development goal era. We have a renewed focus on access plus learning. And so here we're seeing extra efforts by NGOs at ensuring girls not only have the equal opportunity to go to school, but to also receive an empowering education where they learn about their rights as human beings and as citizens of their countries. There have been great efforts by organizations like FAWE, the Forum for African Women Educationalists, to train teachers to implement gender-responsive teaching in the classroom. And there's been increased attention by NGOs like Education and Cultural Society in Bangladesh to address girls' access to STEM fields of study or science, technology, engineering and math; organizations like Room to Read addressing girls' life skills, education, and leadership opportunities, where girls can gain the confidence and the sense of agency to pursue dreams that have been traditionally closed off to them because they're girls. And there have been tremendous efforts by NGOs, communities of practice like Amplify, and

researchers to address harmful social and gender norms that are held by parents, families, and communities that have held girls back.

But despite these efforts, there is still a very long way to go. Only half of countries in the world have achieved gender parity at the secondary school level, and only a fourth of countries have achieved gender parity at the upper secondary level. So, we've seen a plateau in progress over the last few years, and it's largely because investments in girls' education and girls' empowerment has been a bit piecemeal rather than systemic. It's fallen under the purview of NGOs and the philanthropic community rather than of governments and their ministries of education and finance. I think pre-COVID there are, you know, in terms of statistics, there was still 130 million girls who are out of school. 3 million girls every year were at risk of undergoing female genital mutilation and 21% of girls, or about 12 million girls a year, are being forced to marry as children. And when you look at these statistics by country the variation is even more startling. So, for example, 76% of girls in Niger are married before they reach 18, for example.

So, the challenge with working to empower girls is that you can't achieve empowerment through an isolated after-school program that only girls go to. You have to also address the mindsets, the attitudes, beliefs and practices of boys, men, mothers, cultural and political leaders, and so on. You have to address empowerment through transformative systems change that disrupts the underlying structures of inequality and deeply embedded patriarchal structures of oppression, but it's oftentimes easier to target individuals and as a result, change is slow. Empowerment, like agency, is a relational achievement. Those already with power must recognize and respect the power gained by those with less power and it really, you know, empowerment can't be achieved in a vacuum.

Unfortunately, girls don't have time to wait around for the slow pace of change. Unlike working to empower women, for example, there's a very limited window of time to change the life course of a girl for the better. And in fact, those in the field of girls' education like to break this window of approximately 15 years in a girl's life into three critical transition periods in girlhood. First, there's the time when the girl should enter primary school. So that's when she's around five to seven years old. The second time is the time right before and at the onset of puberty. So, between 10 and 14, when harmful gender practices, including child marriage are triggered because her changing body signals to others that she's becoming a woman. This is also the period when she should be transitioning to secondary school, but we see a large drop-off. And then the third critical transition is the time that she should transition and complete upper secondary school, or between 14 and 18, where we see some of the highest rates of out-of-school girls and the highest rates of unwanted pregnancies.

PITA: Sure. You're talking about some of the trends in the pre-COVID era, as you mentioned, how has the pandemic and ensuing economic recessions, how has that challenged some of the gains that we were seeing and changing how different groups and actors try to pursue those goals?

KWAUK: Yeah, like everything else, COVID has complicated everything and threatens to undo decades of progress. On the one hand, lockdowns around the world mean that NGOs can't gain access to some of the most vulnerable girls in their communities. And we know from the data that this is pretty bad news. Gender-based violence and sexual violence against girls and women appear to be skyrocketing during COVID.

The UN FPA estimates that for every three additional months of lockdown, we can expect to see these numbers increased by 15 million additional cases of gender-based violence.

And on top of this, at the peak of COVID, you had nearly 1.6 billion learners out of school, creating an additional 750 million girls who were in school who are now out of school as a result of worldwide school closures. And this is also incredibly bad news because we know that girls in low- and middle-income countries are 23% less likely to have access to internet, essentially cutting them off from the opportunity to engage in distance learning compared to their brothers. And this is if their countries are engaging in online distance learning. And then on top of this – the list just keeps going -- we've learned from other school closures from previous epidemics and natural disasters that girls are less likely to return to school when schools reopen. The Malala Fund, for example, estimates that an additional 20 million schoolgirls will be added to that 130 million out-of-school girls statistics that I mentioned earlier as a result of things like unwanted and unintended pregnancies that resulted from sexual violence, like rape, due to decreased mobility during lockdown or from transactional sex due to increase economic hardships experience during the economic slowdown.

So, while we don't yet know the full extent of the impact that COVID will have on girls, we do know that they will be dramatically affected and that their life courses will be dramatically affected. We're talking about millions of girls here.

But you know the good news, I guess, is that the folks leading the charge on girls' education are not taking a break. And if anything, COVID has caused them to work double-time on even more limited budgets to pivot their programming to reach as many girls as possible. Programs like Educate! in Uganda are turning to SMS texting and radio shows and other low-tech means to ensure girls continue to learn in some way. And in India, at Prerna girls school, a cadre of community teachers are being trained in bringing school to students during lockdown. So there's a lot of work that needs to happen because of that really long list of really bad things that COVID creates for girls' education and girls' empowerment, but we have extremely dedicated champions of girls' education around the world who are trying to make sure that these statistics don't become reality.

PITA: Great. You recently wrote a piece for the Brookings 19A series -- this series highlights gaps in gender equality still remaining a century after the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified. Where you recommended in this piece that the U.S. pursue a feminist foreign policy. What does that mean? What would a feminist foreign policy look like?

KWAUK: Yeah, well, here I draw on the amazing work of colleagues at the IC RW, the International Center for Research on Women, who have outlined a brilliant vision for feminist foreign policy. It simply means that a country like the U.S. defines its interactions with other states and other and non-state actors in a manner that centers, prioritizes, promotes, and protects gender equality, human rights, environmental integrity, and peace while disrupting colonial, racist, and patriarchal power structures. So, this would mean our international trade, diplomacy, humanitarian assistance and development aid, among other sectors, would integrate issues of gender and the protection of women's rights and human rights into the very center of their work. In the case of international development, it would mean that every program of bilateral aid would conduct a gender analysis to

understand how issues of gender inform, intersect with, and/or exacerbate the problems experienced by groups marginalized by their socio-economic status and geographic location. It would mean that every bilateral aid program considers how issues of gender, peace, and environmental integrity can inform how programs, solutions, and investments are designed so that they can be more effective and so that our dollars have more equitable, sustainable, and long-lasting impact.

What it doesn't mean is that we only think about women and women's issues. On the contrary, it ensures that we think about social equity issues and that we deliver a foreign policy that's informed by an ethics of care.

PITA: So, where are those priorities now in terms of current U.S. policy? And what are some of your hopes for the future implementation?

KWAUK: Yeah. Well, for starters, right now, gender gets tacked on a lot of our policy objectives as an afterthought and as a separate checkbox criteria that has to be met in order for funds to be approved or for an evaluation to be deemed satisfactory. So, you know really what this would mean what a feminist foreign policy would mean would be that we make considering and addressing gender issues less of an add-on, and more of a fundamental component of foreign policy. Right now, there are only a handful of countries that have adopted a feminist foreign policy. It includes Sweden, Canada, France and Mexico. But even then, we have to look at these examples with caution because it's not just the title of being "a feminist foreign policy country" that we're looking for, but also the follow through.

We looked at the ODA or the overseas development assistance of countries that have adopted a feminist foreign policy and compare that to other countries' ODA. And countries that have adopted a feminist foreign policy certainly rank among some of the highest countries who invest in gender equality overseas. So, for example, Sweden contributed over 80% of its bilateral aid to achieving gender equality and 20% of that was to programs that held gender as a principal focus. However, there are other feminist governments like Spain, Australia, and the Netherlands that haven't officially declared a feminist foreign policy but are investing a larger share of their ODA to gender equality as a principal goal. So, for example, Spain contributes 23% of its bilateral aid to gender as a principal target, compared to Canada, which is a feminist foreign policy country that only contributes 5% of its bilateral aid to gender as a principal target. So, while we want to see the U.S. declare itself a country with a feminist foreign policy, what we really want to see is that investments in gender equality are followed through. And right now, we have sort of a space where this can happen. In fact, Congresswomen Jackie Speier, Lois Frankel, and Barbara Lee have just recently introduced legislation that would support the goals of the feminist foreign policy. And there's also legislation in the Senate that would extend Obama-era strategies aimed at empowering adolescent girls through education. So, I think there's a lot of potential and we need not only Congress**women**, but also Congress**men** to take up the helm for girls globally.

I go back to thinking, you know, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 25 years ago where then-First Lady Hillary Clinton gave her historic speech about "women's rights are human rights." We need both men and women to really champion the empowerment of girls and men today.

PITA: Wonderful, thank you, Christina, thanks so much for being here for this special weekend talk and I hope we all have good things to look forward to in the future.

KWAUK: Thanks so much for having me.