Educating students in the gender-conflict-COVID-19 intersection

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a single case study that examined the impact of COVID-19 on the education of female university students from conflict-affected contexts. The study examined a university's experience in addressing the educational needs of students during the 2020 national lockdowns. The paper draws from semi-structured interviews conducted with students from both conflict-affected and stable contexts, faculty members, and university administrators (n=20). The study found that university closures compelled students from conflict-affected countries to return home, where they suffered from not only poorer access to learning resources but also from the risk of violence. The study concludes that, in addition to the disruption of classroom instruction faced by all students, female students from conflict-affected contexts are likely to be further disadvantaged due to their insecure home environments. The paper hence highlights the need for the education in emergencies community to develop strategies to address the security risks girls are likely to face at home during school closures.

Key Words

girls' education, COVID-19 impact, contexts of conflict, remote learning

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions around the world to stop face-to-face instruction and operate online. University staff members and students were unexpectedly and immediately forced to adapt to new methods of instruction that included online teaching. This brought with it a multitude of challenges. Attending class from home added levels of complexity for students from conflict-affected contexts. This situation was further compounded for female students, due to the opposition to girls' education in some societies (Burch, 2004; Lingard, Henry and Taylor, 1987; Purewal and Hashmi, 2012; UN Women, 2019).

This paper is based on a study that examined the COVID-19-related experiences of female students from conflict-affected contexts at a higher education institution in a stable, low-income country in Asia. The institution was one of the country's 165 universities that discontinued face-to-face instruction during COVID-19. The institution, which is located in a major city, is an international university for women. The student population includes women from 23 countries.

The student population is a mix of domestic and international students, most of whom are on full scholarships. The international student body includes women from conflict-affected contexts, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Myanmar. Prior to COVID-19, approximately one-third of the students were from conflict-affected contexts. Students who are residents of the city live with their families, while international students and domestic students who are non-residents live on campus. A full scholarship for domestic and international students covers tuition, food, accommodation, and travel expenses. The university staff comprises both men and women. During COVID-19, the university transitioned to

online instruction, which lasted from March 2020 to January 2022. Nearly all of the approximately 600 students living on campus returned home after the first national lockdown was announced. Approximately twenty Rohingya students were allowed to stay on campus.

Literature review

Given that the disruption of education due to COVID-19 is a recent phenomenon, the literature on the impact the pandemic had on the education of girls pursuing higher education in conflict-affected contexts is relatively limited. While there is an increasing number of studies about the impact of COVID-19 on school education (Brehm, Unterhalter and Oketch, 2021; Daniel, 2020; Hammerstein *et al*., 2021; Kuhfeld *et al*., 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021; Schleicher, 2020), insufficient attention is generally paid to education at the university level in low-income contexts. The effects of the pandemic on the education of girls from conflict-affected contexts is also under-explored, and it therefore is vital to study the transition to online instruction during COVID-19 for girls from conflict-affected contexts.

COVID-19 impact

Researchers have examined the impact of COVID-19 on education, as well as on the economy, public health, and mental health. Schleicher (2020) examined indicators from the Education at a Glance publication of the Organisation for the Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which provided insights into the impact of COVID-19 as of June 2020 on the public financing of education in OECD countries, international student mobility, the loss of instructional time delivered in a school setting, measures taken to continue student learning during the school closures, teachers' readiness to support digital learning, when and how to re-open schools, class size, and vocational education. Guglielmi *et al*. (2021) provide a guidebook that highlights five key considerations for promoting girls' learning in emergency contexts, including COVID-19: context, teaching and learning, inclusion, modalities, and data and evaluation.

COVID-19 and disruption of higher education

Some studies have analysed the extent of the disruption of education caused by COVID-19 at universities and colleges.[1] Marinoni *et al*. (2020) investigated the impact COVID-19 had on higher education institutions and the strategies the institutions employed to sustain teaching and learning, as well as research and community engagement. The survey findings revealed the impact of COVID-19 on communications, enrollment, partnerships, teaching and learning, international student mobility, assessment, research, and community engagement. The study found that a substantial number of institutions had to be completely shut down.

Education, conflict, and gender during COVID-19

Some researchers have studied the intersection of COVID-19, education, and conflict. Dey *et al*. (n.d.) analysed Twitter conversations and employed topic modelling to identify the important gender equity issues in an international education setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that girls dropped out of school at a higher rate and faced the risk of early marriage, teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, and violence as a consequence of the pandemic. Meagher *et al*. (2020) similarly asserted that women's access to health care in conflict-affected contexts can be enhanced by leadership models based on utilising women's voices to address the pandemic, and by nurturing and mobilising women's leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the likelihood of girls being out of school more than boys (Nesamoney *et al*., 2021). Poverty and malnutrition due to COVID-19 appear to have affected girls more severely than boys, and girls are targeted more often than boys by militants who are opposed to their education. Girls also experience more sexual exploitation than boys in conflict-affected contexts.

Additional research clearly is needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of how COVID-19 impacted the education of girls living in conflict-affected contexts. Given the complex challenges women face in accessing education and the fact that

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1 See Agasisti and Soncin (2021) in Italy; Jena (2020) in India; Jacob *et al*. (2020) in Nigeria; and Abidah *et al*. (2020) in Indonesia.

investing in girls' education transforms communities (UNICEF, 2020), it is vital to understand the intersectional impact COVID-19 had on girls.

Research Questions

The study examines the following research questions:

1. How did female university students from conflict-affected contexts navigate educational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the challenges faced by female university students from conflict-affected contexts compare to the challenges faced by female university students from stable contexts?

These research questions are examined by considering (a) classroom instruction and instructional resources, (b) physical and mental health issues, and (c) physical safety and living arrangements.

Methods and data sources

The study was conducted at a university for women located in Asia; the students come from 19 Asian countries. The university is committed to providing quality education to women from disadvantaged communities. For the purpose of this study, 'students from conflict-affected contexts' is defined as students whose immediate families reside in regions experiencing armed conflict. During COVID-19, almost all residential students were repatriated to their countries of origin, and teaching and learning was delivered to them online. In a few cases, the students were repatriated involuntarily. The students returned to their families in regions of armed conflict during the two years of COVID-19. 'Students from stable contexts' is defined as students whose immediate families resided in regions not currently experiencing violent conflict.

The presence of students from both stable and conflict-affected contexts allowed for a comparison of student experiences during the pandemic. The staff at the university included senior management staff and faculty who were expatriates from North America and Europe, and Asia.

The data was collected online by conducting semi-structured interviews through audio or video calls. Each interview was recorded using a smartphone or the Zoom platform. The interviews with participants from Afghanistan were completed before the withdrawal of coalition forces at the end of August 2021. Permission was obtained from relevant authorities at the university to conduct interviews with staff members and students. The sample consisted of five female students from conflict-affected contexts, five female students from stable contexts, five faculty members, and five members of the senior management team at the university. The study used convenience sampling to select the university, while a mix of purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used in the selection of interviewees.

Data analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the students. Students' experiences were examined from the perspective of the students, faculty, and management staff.

Phase 1 involved employing thematic analysis to examine the data. This included becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and searching, reviewing, defining, and labelling the themes. A graphical representation of the themes generated from phase 1 is presented in Figure 1.

In phase 2, the data analysis proceeded from noting patterns and themes to within-case comparisons between students from conflict-affected contexts and those from stable contexts. This was done by identifying the similarities and differences between the themes that emerged out of the experiences described by the students, faculty, and management, as represented in Figure 2.
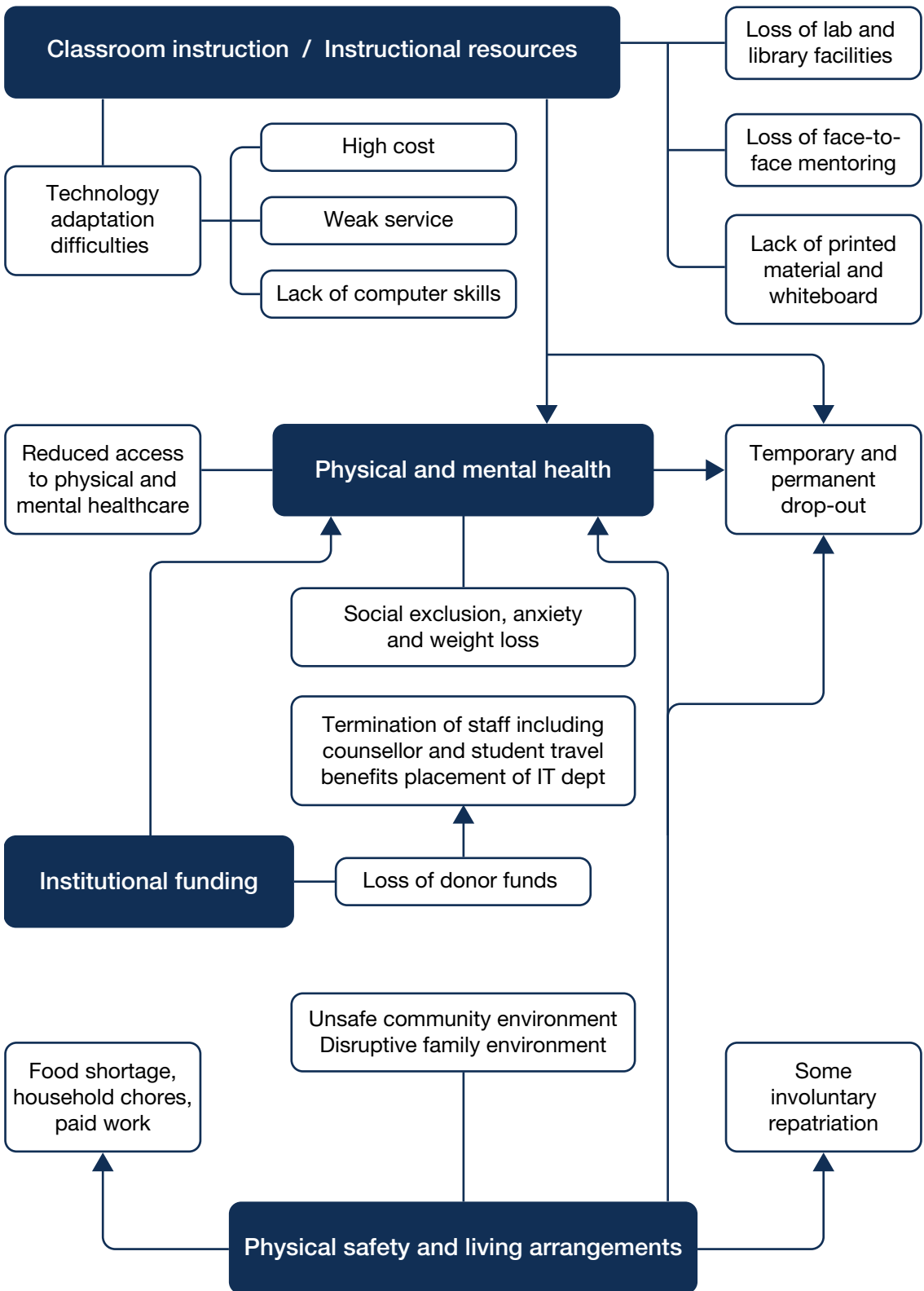
Figure 1: Initial thematic map

Classroom instruction / Instructional resources	Loss of lab and library facilities
	Loss of face-to-face mentoring
	Lack of printed material and whiteboard

Technology adaptation difficulties
- High cost
- Weak service
- Lack of computer skills

Reduced access to physical and mental healthcare

Physical and mental health

Temporary and permanent drop-out

Social exclusion, anxiety and weight loss

Termination of staff including counsellor and student travel benefits placement of IT dept

Institutional funding — Loss of donor funds

Unsafe community environment Disruptive family environment

Food shortage, household chores, paid work

Some involuntary repatriation

Physical safety and living arrangements

Figure 2: Final thematic map

Comparison of COVID-19 impact on the education of girls from conflict-affected contexts vs girls from stable

Similarities

- Loss of lab and library facilities
- Loss of face-to-face mentoring
- Lack of printed material and whiteboard
- Moderate household chores
- Minimal food shortages
- Minimal gender bias specific to COVID-19 context
- Termination of staff
- Social exclusion, anxiety and weight loss
- Lack of computer skills

Differences

Girls from stable contexts

- Termination of travel benefits less disruptive
- Reduced access to wi-fi
- Moderate technology cost challenges
- Safe communities disruptive family environment
- Moderately reduced access to physical and mental healthcare
- Few temporary and permanent dropouts
- Voluntary return home
- Paid work less likely

Girls from conflict-affected contexts

- Termination of student travel benefits more disruptive
- Minimal or no wi-fi
- Severe technology cost challenges
- Unsafe community or disruptive family environment
- Severely reduced access to physical and mental healthcare
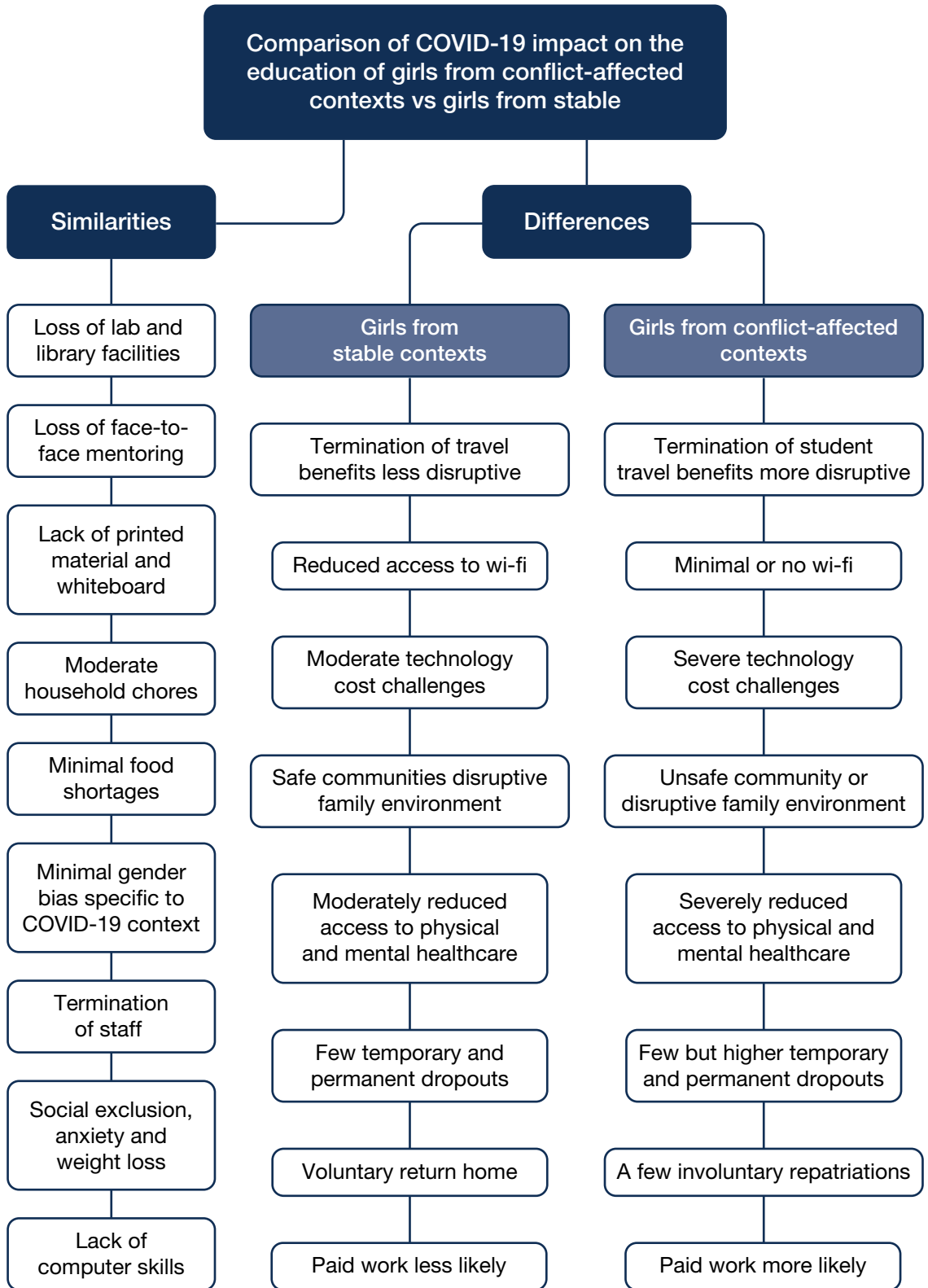- Few but higher temporary and permanent dropouts
- A few involuntary repatriations
- Paid work more likely

Findings and Discussion

After the announcement of the first national lockdown, the university made the decision to transition from face-to-face instruction to online instruction. The initial few weeks were marked by the several challenges discussed below, some of which were addressed successfully while others remained unresolved. By December, almost all expatriate staff members had left for their countries of origin. Local staff members visited the campus to access office files, maintain the campus property, and address the needs of the students who remained in residence on campus when possible.

Classroom instruction and instructional resources

The most immediate impact of the COVID-19-induced national lockdown was the disruption of classroom instruction. The university transitioned to online instructions using the Zoom platform in mid-March. Some faculty used the live-session format to conduct classes, while others utilised a hybrid version of both live and recorded lecture formats. As a result, faculty members taught classes from their homes, which were primarily university accommodations. The local students attended classes from home, and residential students attended classes from their university accommodations. Wi-fi services for the students and staff members residing on campus were provided by the university. Students and staff members who were residing off campus were expected to have their own internet connections. The biggest critical challenge with online instruction was two-fold: many students and staff members were not familiar with the use of Zoom, and a number of students living off campus could not afford laptops and internet services. Those who had computers often experienced poor internet connectivity, which made it difficult to participate in online lectures, group activities, and assessments. In an effort to minimise connectivity problems, the Zoom video facility was usually turned off. The teaching faculty reported that being unable to read the students' body language made them often unsure whether the students were attentive. The lack of visuals may also have caused students to lose their motivation to engage in online classes. A student from Afghanistan described the disruption of classroom instruction:

For my studies, I am happy to be on campus because there are more facilities for my education for study. Like here in Afghanistan, we have a hard situation of electricity and now the North part of Afghanistan is fully in war…We import electricity from other countries…Here the Taliban rent many lines of electricity and we had no electricity for more than one or two weeks. In this situation, here the data package doesn't work for our google classroom, our email…and it's extremely hard to study online in Afghanistan in such a situation. So, for my studies, I love to go back to my campus. (Participant S3AAd, 2020)

In terms of instructional resources, the financial strain brought about by COVID-19 greatly reduced the number of resources available to students and faculty. Students lost access to the library and could no longer check out books, use the library computers and internet facilities, download and print instructional materials, or use the library as a quiet space for focused study. Faculty members were also unable to make use of the library facilities and could not print handouts, prepare other instructional resources, or use the whiteboard to explain concepts. They also couldn't access their offices, as noted in the quote below, which they had previously used to advise students face-to-face. One of the faculty members explained:

There was no office [or] being able to meet my students face-to-face in that office, you know, having appointments, counselling them…physical classroom with a whiteboard…Being a very visual person, that visualisation helped me… [but] there was no classroom. I was on Zoom like everyone else. I couldn't use a whiteboard, I tried to do that…I didn't know where I could get one because I was nervous about going outside…I didn't know where to get a whiteboard, so I tried to use notebook paper, that didn't work very well…I used WhatsApp a lot. I am not proud of it but I did the best that I could…We had a lot of power outages and that really affected the online instruction. (Participant F2M2, 2020)

Students and faculty members could no longer use the science laboratories, even though labs are a critical component of science instruction. Students taking courses in physics, chemistry, and biology missed out on opportunities to learn and comprehensively understand the practical

aspects of theory. Students were sometimes unable to complete assignments because they lacked a thorough understanding of the concepts. All these challenges increased faculty members' and students' frustration with everyday tasks, the academic programme, and life in general.

At the end of June 2020, students from conflict-affected contexts who resided on campus were facing the same problems as students from stable contexts. Problems with online instruction were aggravated once the students returned to their home countries in regions of conflict. Students complained of frequent power outages and low bandwidth for internet connections. The university's offer of free data plans was retracted in some cases, and the students affected could not afford wi-fi services. This resulted in a few students being forced to temporarily drop out of their academic programmes.

Physical and mental health

Situated on the university campus is a health centre with a qualified doctor, nurses, and a psychologist. Staff members and students living on campus were eligible for health care at the health centre. Physical health-care services continued to be available to students while they resided on campus, but with minor changes. The health centre provided treatment for minor ailments, but if more serious care was required, the students were transferred to a nearby hospital.

A few students who tested positive for COVID-19 were provided the necessary health care. Those who needed mental health care, however, were forced to transition immediately to online services. Because the mental health counsellor was outside the country when the national lockdown was announced, counselling was only available using Zoom. This reduced the students' ability to access mental health care. As with online instruction, mental health care became dependent on the quality of wi-fi services at both the counsellor's location and on campus. The ability to read body language, such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc., is critical to a psychologist's capacity to evaluate a student's mental health and emotional status. It also helps students feel comfortable during counselling. Owing to budget cuts caused by the pandemic, the counsellor's employment contract with the university was not renewed. The students' mental health

seemed to have been a relatively low priority and was not given sufficient attention.

Students thus were left without mental health services starting in July 2021, at a time when they confronted significant challenges to their emotional well-being. The mental distress students experienced is demonstrated in the anguish expressed by one student:

> It was a very tough time for me, especially because I don't know why, for me, I had anxiety. I was depressed. I was crying a lot with myself, I don't know what was the reason, it was just I guess I was depressed. So, yeah, it was very tough and unfortunate. During that time, I lost about 10kg in just three months and for that I was not able to eat anything. I was not eating because I was just thinking to myself, why should I eat because I am going to die here, so I'll not see my family members, so why should I eat [if] I expect to die as soon as possible. Yeah, I can say that I was a bit depressed, but then when I came here about two or three months [ago], I got better because, like you know, in Afghanistan no one is thinking about COVID-19 anymore. They are just saying that it is a common flu. (Participant S8AH, 2020)

The shift to online instruction hindered the daily social interaction with faculty and peer groups. Besides frustration in dealing with online instruction, students were worried about their families' well-being. Families of students experienced loss of income, contracted COVID-19 or other serious ailments, and dealt with the death of family members. The trauma of losing loved ones to COVID-19 and adjusting to a more frugal lifestyle was not addressed. This strained the students' emotional well-being and mental health, as they could not be physically present to comfort and help their families. Furthermore, the extracurricular activities such as student clubs, music and dance activities, field trips, and guest talks that provided a distraction and an outlet for emotional angst were no longer available.

The impact of COVID-19 on the physical and mental health of students from conflict-affected contexts changed once the students returned home. The advent of COVID-19 required prompt access to quality specialised health care, but few students from conflict-affected contexts had access to quality

COVID-19 or mental health care.

Physical safety and living arrangements

After the national lockdown was announced, students from conflict-affected contexts were initially allowed to live in the same facilities but with some minor changes. Since cleaning and cafeteria services were terminated as part of cost-cutting measures, students had to assume some cleaning responsibilities for their own living spaces. However, the university decided to repatriate international students to their home countries, as almost all senior management staff members who were expatriates were expected to leave. The students living on campus and the services they needed became a liability for the university, as the expenditure for residential students became a significant proportion of the total university budget. Given the loss of funding due to COVID-19, the students' return to their families was also expected to allow for better fiscal management. By the end of June, almost all international students had been repatriated. Only graduating students travelling home for the final time were provided with air tickets. First- and second-year students paid for their own tickets or got a loan from the university.

The repatriation of students posed a few obstacles for the university. Some students from Afghanistan did not want to return to their families, due to the ongoing conflict and the cultural opposition to girls' education or the lack of wi-fi services back home. These students were forced to return home despite their protests.

For students from conflict-affected contexts, some aspects of their physical safety and living arrangements changed substantially once they returned to their families. Students who were members of a patriarchal family said their presence was a reminder of the defiance of tradition by educating girls.

Some students experienced domestic violence, which was exacerbated by the impact COVID-19 had on the family members' emotional well-being. A few students who attended online classes had visible bruises from physical abuse at the hands of male family members, which they got for being active on social media. This is reflected in the experience narrated by a faculty member:

> The challenges are multi-fold and multi-level for the Afghan girls because when they are at Uni, all they have to do is focus on their studies, their meals are provided or they talk on WhatsApp back home, they can go to the gym. When they go home, they have more jobs than they have as a student. They are a daughter, sister, or cousin, so they are doing domestic duties when they are at home. I have had three cases [who experienced] significant domestic violence by family members back home. (Participant F1A, 2020)

This faculty member noted that some of his students had been depressed because of the controlling environment and sometimes domestic violence they endured at home, which had adversely affected their studies. Some students found employment to make up for the loss of family income, which also resulted in a loss of study time. They also had minimal facilities to engage with learning. Online classes were interrupted by noise from family members and neighbours or requests to perform a chore. Household responsibilities included helping the family with child care, caring for the sick, cooking, and cleaning. Given the context of armed conflict, some students' movements were restricted to the four walls of their property. A few students from Myanmar were allowed to stay on campus on humanitarian grounds, as their families resided in refugee camps where alcohol-fuelled violence was rampant. The students from Afghanistan were not allowed to stay on campus, as they were expected to go back to families living in less dangerous environments (prior to the Taliban takeover). The university management perceived the interpersonal violence in the refugee camps as more threatening than violence by the Taliban.

Conclusions and implications

The experience of dealing with COVID-19-related challenges drawn from this case study offers some important lessons. Firstly, in pedagogical terms, the students and faculty adapted a hybrid provision of pre-recorded lectures and live instruction to address problems with weak internet connectivity. This enabled students to download recordings at the pace of their internet service while preserving the opportunity to participate in synchronous teaching and learning.

Secondly, the university did not have a well-developed emergency plan to deal with an unexpected crisis. After the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university realised the importance of having an emergency plan to mitigate the effects of future emergencies related to climate crisis, pandemic, or violent conflict. Such plans should involve strategies for how to balance the roles of expatriate and local staff members in administering the university in case the emergency repatriation was recognised; how to ensure transparency and accountability in decision-making during an emergency response; and how to ensure that female students are safe when they return to their conflict-affected home countries.

Thirdly, the disrupted access to learning resources and classroom instruction affected students' academic achievement and retention. Faculty members and students agreed that online instruction limited their ability to fully engage in teaching and learning, which ultimately affected the quality of their education. Most importantly, it was not prudent to send students from conflict-affected contexts back to their homes, given the security risks they were likely to face. Therefore, any decisions about repatriation should have been based on the best interest of the students, including giving them the choice to stay on campus or return home.

In conclusion, those providing alternative education during COVID-19 had to pay attention to the different social circumstances (e.g., ongoing violent conflicts and security risks) in which students were living. Even though all students are likely to be affected educationally by a university closure, students who return home, especially female students from conflict settings, are likely to face physical violence, both in the home and in their communities. Governments and international aid agencies must therefore take into account the types of risks students face while appropriate measures are taken to protect populations from the threat of a pandemic. Universities have an ethical and moral responsibility to protect the safety and well-being of their students, and decisions relating to the emergency response in times of crisis must adhere to the fundamental principles of human rights and the right to education.

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