

High-level Advocacy Event Stand up for Malala – Girls' Education is a Right!

Monday, 10 December 2012

Historically, girls and women have been excluded disproportionately from education. Although gender equality and girls' education was set as a clear goal and necessary precondition for the attainment of all the Education for All (EFA) goals and the Millennium Development Goals, they face significantly more challenges and have fewer opportunities than boys to access, complete and benefit from education. Indeed, girls are the majority of the 61 million children¹ that are out of school at the primary level alone. This is both a cause and a result of multiple and often overlapping factors. Poverty, residence in remote rural areas or conflict zones, domestic chores, forced marriages and early pregnancies, gender-based violence and other harmful and discriminatory practices and attitudes about the role and status of girls and women negatively affect girls' education. Furthermore, shortfalls within education systems exacerbate gender inequalities and continue to have a negative impact on girls' access to, retention and progress in schools. Discrimination in education laws and policies, negative gender stereotypes in learning material, discriminatory teaching practices, as well as unsuitable and unsafe learning environments and gender-based violence in and around schools push girls to drop out or compromise their performance.

On 9 October 2012, the international community was shaken by the brutal assassination attempt against Malala Yousafzai, a fourteen year-old girl from Pakistan. Malala was attacked by extremists while she was on her school bus because of her known efforts from an early age to promote the right to education for girls, defying obstacles and even death threats. Malala started writing a Blog for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in early 2009 under the pseudonym "Gul Makai" (the corn flower), detailing her life under Taliban rule, their attempts to take control of the valley and her views on promoting education for girls. The New York Times documented her life as the Pakistani military intervened in the region, culminating in the complete control of Swat Valley by the Government of Pakistan. Malala became a prominent Girls' Right to Education activist, nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize by Desmond Tutu and, later on, she was awarded Pakistan's first National Youth Peace Prize in 2011.

Politicians, international organizations, civil society and eminent personalities, as well as students and citizens all over the world, have condemned the assassination attempt and demonstrated their resolve and deep commitment to ensuring the right of girl to education. The attack against Malala was not an isolated phenomenon. However, it was a reminder of the harsh discrimination, violence and abuse to which girls can be subjected simply because they pursue their right to education.

Thanks to her courage, Malala has become a global icon of hope and inspiration, igniting a positive reaction and leveraging support for girls' education worldwide. Pakistan, Malala's home country, reacted firmly and instantly, expressing its determination to renew commitment and impetus to protect and promote girls' education and the achievements of the EFA goals. Beyond the frontiers of the country, the Government of Pakistan wishes to take this opportunity to mobilize the international community in support of the right of girls to education.

¹ Source: UNESCO (2012). EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012: Youth and Skills - Putting education to work, Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO, the UN specialized agency for education and a persistent advocate for gender equality, fully supports Pakistan in this effort and reaffirms its commitment to advocating for, promoting and defending the right to education for all, especially for girls. Education and gender equality are engrained in UNESCO's Constitution and mission as fundamental and inalienable human rights that all children, boys and girls, should enjoy unconditionally. In order to create learning opportunities for girls and ensure that education systems are adapted to receive them and respond to their specific needs and circumstances, UNESCO works at multiple levels, reviewing education laws and policies so that they are aligned with the provisions for gender equality, and strengthening the national capacities of education policy-makers, planners, managers and teachers to enable them better to reach girls through good quality, gender-sensitive educational contents, teaching and learning approaches.

Discrimination against girls' education is a serious impediment to attaining the EFA goals and MDGs, as well as to sustainable development. There is not only a need to intensify advocacy efforts and raise awareness on the special challenges and obstacles that girls face in education, but also on the benefits of their education. Investing in girls' education is not just a moral and political obligation; it also is the most cost-effective investment humanity can make for sustainable development and peaceful coexistence. In a study on the cost for EFA, UNESCO estimates that approximately 24 billion USD² are required annually to bridge the gap at the basic and secondary education level. Even if this amount is doubled or tripled, it will still be insignificant compared to military expenditure, estimated at more than 1.7 trillion USD³ in 2011 alone.

With just a few years before the EFA deadline, the international community is intensifying and accelerating efforts towards the attainment of the EFA goals. A prominent example of such efforts is the *Education First* initiative, launched recently by the United Nations Secretary-General to galvanize a renewed commitment to education in order to put every child - girl and boy - in school, improve the quality of learning and foster global citizenship. Another example is UNESCO's *Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education*, which was launched last year and that has already been effective in mobilizing attention and resources in support for girls' education, and in scaling-up successful approaches at the country level.

Purpose

In this context and coinciding with the United Nations Human Rights Day, UNESCO and the Government of Pakistan will host a high-level advocacy event at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (France) on 10 December 2012 in order to advocate for every girls' right to education. UNESCO and the Government of Pakistan will seek to mobilize and bring together representatives of governments, UN partners, international and bilateral organizations, foundations, donors, the private sector, civil society, academics, religious leaders, eminent personalities, the media and other stakeholders in an effort to renew commitment and seek support for girls' education globally.

Goal

Within the framework of EFA and in line with the EFA goals and the priorities of the *Education First* initiative, the overall goal of this event is to advocate for and promote girls' right to education, encompassing all levels and all aspects of education, so that education becomes *available* and *accessible* to all girls, while being *acceptable* and *adaptable* to their specific needs and circumstances.

² UNESCO (2010). EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the Marginalized, Paris: UNESCO.

³ Source: the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Objectives

The objectives of this event are to:

- sensitize the international community about the importance of and the special challenges and obstacles relating to girls' education;
- advance girls' education as an urgent policy priority in view of the EFA Goals; and,
- mobilize support and commitment from various partners in favour of programmes for girls' education.

Expected outcomes

UNESCO and the Government of Pakistan expect that the event will help increase attention on the importance of girls' education globally, and that it will accelerate responses among all stakeholders such as governments, donors, multilateral organizations, civil society, and others partners in order to make girls' education a policy priority and generate funds to meet the goals and targets set for girls' education.