

*Soroptimist International
of the Americas
1709 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103-6103*



215 893 9000 PHONE
215 893 5200 FAX
siahq@soroptimist.org E-MAIL
www.soroptimist.org URL

WHITE PAPER: Women and Education

Adeena is 7 years old and lives on a small homestead in northern Nigeria. At her parents' insistence, Adeena's three older brothers recently completed primary school. They all have plans to continue their education. Adeena's parents are nervous about sending their only daughter to school, but Adeena convinces them to let her try.

At the age of 8, Adeena begins attending primary school. Although her classes are often packed with 90 students or more, Adeena loves her early lessons and decides that she wants to become a doctor. Her parents are happy to see their daughter flourish. They hope that her education will one day earn her a job with a high salary so that she can live comfortably and independently.

Unfortunately, Adeena's education does not last long. In her third year of school, the male students begin to sexually harass her during class. Some follow her to and from school. Adeena also notices that her male teacher only depicts women in positions of subservience to men, especially when discussing careers and household expectations. When Adeena complains, he makes fun of her in front of the class. One by one, Adeena's fellow female students begin to drop out of school. Now the only girl in her grade, Adeena feels isolated and afraid. Adeena drops out of school at the age of 10 and has not returned since.

At the age of 12, Adeena knows that her life as a student is over. She is too afraid to return to school, especially because she has already fallen two years behind. Instead of continuing her education, in a few years Adeena will marry a man from her village and remain dependent on him the rest of her life.

In 1948, the United Nations declared basic education to be a fundamental human right.¹ Sixty-two years have passed since this declaration, but its promise has not been fulfilled. In 2000-2001, over 115 million children were out of school, 62 million of whom were girls.² Today, an estimated 776 million adults – or 16 percent of the world's population – lack basic literacy skills. About two-thirds are women.³

To combat this trend, United Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) was launched in 2000. As a partnership that embraces the United Nations system, governments, donor countries, non-governmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, communities and families, UNGEI

¹ *All Human Rights for All*, the United Nations, <<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>> (15 August 2007).

² *What is Girls' Education*, the United Nations Children's Fund, <http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/index_bigpicture.html> (15 August 2007).

³ *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2009*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, http://www.unesco.org/education/gmr2009/press/efagmr2009_Highlights.pdf (2008).

assists national governments to fulfill their obligations towards education and gender equality for all children, boys and girls alike.⁴

UNGEI's mission is primarily driven by Millennium Development Goals (MDG): 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education with the target to “ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling,” and MDG 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women with the target to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.”⁵ According to the 2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, however, the Millennium Development Goals will not be met by the targeted year of 2015.⁶

On a positive note, in the intervening 10 years since UNGEI was founded, many more girls are accessing education. According to current estimates by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the number of children out of school has dropped to 75 million, and the proportion of girls among those out of school had also decreased by two-thirds to 55%.

Despite these achievements, there is still cause for concern. The aftershock of the global financial crisis continues to deprive children in the world's poorest countries of an education.⁷ A combination of slower economic growth, rising poverty and budget pressures could continue to erode the gains of the past decade.⁸

While exclusion from education is not the only form of gender inequality, it is closely linked to all others. Without access to education, disadvantages faced by all women in a gender-biased world increase. An unschooled woman is even more likely to live in poverty, become infected with HIV/AIDS, and die in childbirth than a schooled woman.⁹ An unschooled woman's children are more than twice as likely to die or be malnourished than children of mothers who have secondary or higher education.¹⁰ By contrast, access to education results in the reduction of infant, child and maternal mortality and increased social and economic participation. According to the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), girls' education remains “the best investment for reducing poverty, improving health and ensuring social well-being.”¹¹

The importance of educating girls has not gone unnoticed. Throughout the 20th century, international organizations made numerous efforts to ensure that early education was provided to all. The most significant of such attempts were the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which contained “mutually reinforcing principles to ensure protection and fulfillment of the rights of girls and to end gender discrimination.”¹² Together, these Conventions

⁴ Cheryl Gregory Faye. *The real girl power*. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative. www.ungei.org/news/usa_2093.html

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Reaching the marginalized: 2010 GMR Report*. Right to Education Project. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (January 2010). www.right-to-education.org/node/743

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “The Power and Promise of Girls' Education” (2005), Save the Children: pages 11-13. Accessed at <http://www.savethechildren.org/publications/mothers/2005/SOWM_2005.pdf> (15 August 2007).

¹⁰ Ibid, page 4.

¹¹ *All for Girls' Education!*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=14091&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (15 August 2007).

¹² *The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child*, United Nations

established the international legal framework necessary to enforce the rights of women and girls around the world.¹³

Undeniably, legal frameworks such as the ones mentioned above, have been very helpful in overall efforts to reduce the total number of out-of-school children worldwide. In 2006, primary school enrollment in developing countries reached 88 percent on average, up from 83 percent in 2000.¹⁴ Yet increases do not ensure that the goal of gender parity is met. In 2006, of the 176 countries with data, 59 had achieved gender parity in both primary and secondary education—20 countries more than in 1999.¹⁵ At the primary level, about two-thirds of countries had achieved parity. However, more than half the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia and the Arab States had not reached the target.¹⁶ Only 37 percent of countries worldwide had achieved gender parity at secondary level.¹⁷ Moreover, only a projected 16 percent of countries without gender parity as of 2005 stand a chance of achieving it by 2015.¹⁸ The sobering reality is that more than 60 million girls worldwide are denied the basic human right of an education, while millions of others receive an education inferior to that received by boys.¹⁹

Why Education?

The benefits of education have been well-established: access to quality education results in the social and economic advancement of children, their families and their communities.²⁰ These benefits are particularly advantageous for women, who already comprise a disadvantaged social group by virtue of their gender. However, equally crucial to the discussion of education are the consequences of lacking one. Uneducated women are left without options: without opportunities for equitable employment, political participation, financial independence, and informed family planning. As a result, uneducated women are far more likely to be trapped in lives defined by poverty and exploitation, and are significantly less likely to raise educated, healthy children.²¹ Education is thus essential not only for the development of the individual women, but also for the survival of future generations and of the global community. Universal education must not be seen merely as a benefit, but rather as an absolute necessity.²²

Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in collaboration with UNICEF: Expert Group Meeting, Florence, Italy, 25-28 September 2006, page 5. Accessed at <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/elim-disc-viol-girlchild/ExpertPapers/EP.15%20Khattab.pdf>> (23 August 2007).

¹³ Ibid, page 3.

¹⁴ *End Poverty 2015 Millennium Development Goals*, United Nations.

www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2008highlevel/pdf/newsroom/Goal%20%20FINAL.pdf (September 2008).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, p.1. Accessed at http://www.ungei.org/resources/1612_1631.html (14 February 2008).

¹⁹ *Facts and Figures on Girls' Education*, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, <www.ungei.org> (15 August 2007).

²⁰ *Girls' Education: a World Bank Priority*, the World Bank,

<<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0,,contentMDK:20298916~menuPK:617572~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:282386,00.html>> (15 August 2007).

²¹ *All for Girls' Education!*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=14091&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (8 September 2007).

²² While significant correlations have been drawn between health, income and education, it bears noting that education does not guarantee perfect health, nor does it guarantee a life free from poverty and exploitation. (Anju Malhotra, Rohini Pande, and Caren Grown. "Impact of Investments in Female Education on Gender Equality (2003)" *The International Center for Research on Women*: page 7. Accessed at

Economic Advancement

Education facilitates the economic advancement of women, which in turn facilitates their independence both in the home and in their communities. Educated women are more likely to enter the formal labor market, where earnings are higher than those of informal or home-based work. Also, an extra year of education beyond the average boosts girls' eventual wages by as much as 20 percent.²³ Studies also show that a mother's ownership of assets makes a "significantly greater contribution" to a child's well-being than the father's ownership of assets, since women tend to spend their earnings on essential goods and services, whereas men are more likely to spend theirs on personal goods.²⁴ Finally, the larger community also benefits disproportionately from girls' participation in education: studies show that educating girls produces greater gains in productivity and income than educating boys, and cross-country studies examining the impact of female education on gross domestic product (GDP) "consistently demonstrate positive effects."²⁵

Health and Family Planning

Education helps mothers learn what they and their children need to do, and can do, to stay healthy.²⁶ For example, educated women are more likely to engage in protected sex with partners, thereby avoiding such major pandemics as the AIDS virus and other sexually-transmitted diseases. According to the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), 700,000 cases of HIV in young adults could be prevented annually if all children received a complete primary education.²⁷ Educated women also are more likely to marry and become pregnant later in life than women without an education; in countries where girls often marry at age 14 or younger, later marriages and pregnancies greatly

<<http://csde.washington.edu/~scurran/files/readings/May12/ImpactInvestmentsFemaleEdu.pdf>> (25 August 2007).

Numerous other risk factors contribute to and detract from a woman's wellbeing. For example, the availability of health care also has an impact on a woman's use of medical services. In a study of Peru conducted by researcher Irma Elo in 1992, uneducated women in the city of Lima were found to be more likely to receive medical assistance for delivery and prenatal care than the most educated women in rural Sierra, since there was limited or no access to health services in the latter area. (Anju Malhotra, Rohini Pande, and Caren Grown. "Impact of Investments in Female Education on Gender Equality (2003)" The International Center for Research on Women: page 7. Accessed at

<<http://csde.washington.edu/~scurran/files/readings/May12/ImpactInvestmentsFemaleEdu.pdf>> (25 August 2007). UNESCO concludes that girls' education needs to be addressed in "a broader context that acknowledges the need to fight against hunger, rural poverty and other barriers to gender equity." (*What strategies are needed?*, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,

<http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=14506&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html> (15 August 2007).

²³ Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What To Do about It* (Centre for Global Development, 2007). Chapter 1, page 25. Accessed online at <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>> (28 October 2007); Psacharopoulos, George, and Harry Anthony Patrinos. 2002. "Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update." World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 2881. Washington, D.C.: World Bank; Psacharopoulos, George. 1994. "Returns to Investment in Education: A Global Update." *World Development* 22 (9): 1325-43.

²⁴ "The State of the World's Children (2005)", UNICEF: page 24. Accessed at <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc05/english/sowc05.pdf>> (16 September 2007).

²⁵ E.A. Hanushek and D.D. Kimko. 2000. "Schooling Labor Nations." *American Economic Review* 90 (5): 1184-208; Barbara Herz and Gene B. Sperling. "What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World" (2004). The Council on Foreign Relations: p. 21. Accessed at <http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Girls_Education_full.pdf> (13 September 2007).

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 28.

²⁷ "Facts and Figures on Girls' Education (2006)", the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative. Accessed at <http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/Ungeifactsheet_Nov06.pdf> (15 August 2007).

reduce the likelihood of infant or maternal mortality.²⁸ On average, infant mortality declines as much as 10 percent for each year of girls' education, and research in Africa indicates as much as a 40 percent increase in child survival for mothers with five years of primary education.²⁹

Children and Education

The benefits of education span generations, as educated women are far more likely to send their own children to school.³⁰ In many countries each additional year of formal education completed by a mother translates into her children remaining in school for an additional one-third to one-half year.³¹ A 2000 study of 14 countries suggests that an additional year of a mother's education raises the likelihood of her children's enrollment by as many as 6 percentage points.³² The significant link between mother and child's education can be seen in West and Central Africa, where 54 percent of children with unschooled mothers are out of school. Even greater disparities are found in South Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, where children of unschooled mothers are at least 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than those whose mothers have some education. In some countries, the gap widens to threefold and greater: Venezuela (4.8 times as likely), Suriname (4.4 times as likely), and India (3.3 times as likely).³³

Patterns of Exclusion

One hundred and fifteen million children are currently out of school: a figure representing 28 percent of all children at official school-entry age.³⁴ These children have been denied access to early education in one of three manners. The first is total exclusion: they never have attended school and they never will. The second is late entry: they will enter school late. The last is early drop-out: they have left school without completing their education.³⁵ Globally, two out of three children who were not in school in the 2001-2002 academic year will probably never attend during their primary school-age years.³⁶ Twenty-nine percent of the total number of out-of-school children will enter school late.³⁷

Among individual countries, patterns of exclusion (total exclusion, late entry and early drop-out) occur in varying degrees. In West, Central, East, and Southern Africa, the majority of children out of school will never attend.³⁸ The same is true in South Asia: 36 percent of children at entry age are not in school, and most of them never will be. By contrast, in Latin America, East Asia, the Caribbean, and industrialized countries, out-of-school children will typically enter school late.³⁹ Notably, the

²⁸ Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What To Do about It* (Centre for Global Development, 2007). Chapter 1, page 25-26. Accessed online at <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>> (28 October 2007).

²⁹ Ibid, 25.

³⁰ "Children Out of School: Measuring Exclusion from Primary Education (2005)", the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics: 48.

³¹ *Girls' Education*. The World Bank.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0,,contentMDK:20298916~menuPK:617572~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:282386,00.html#how> (2009).

³² Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What To Do about It* (Centre for Global Development, 2007). Chapter 1, page 26. Accessed online at <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>> (28 October 2007).

³³ "Children Out of School: Measuring Exclusion from Primary Education (2005)", the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics: 45.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 29.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

highest rates of exclusion occur in low-income countries. Countries with exclusion rates greater than 10 percent include those in Africa, in addition to Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Lao PDR and Cambodia.⁴⁰

Barriers to Accessing Early Education

It is impossible to examine girls' unequal access to education without examining the factors precluding it: sexist cultural norms, poverty, poor health, and safety issues. Girls are already disproportionately disadvantaged in these areas. Of the 1.5 billion people living in absolute poverty, 70 percent are women.⁴¹ Of the 550 million working poor, 330 million (60 percent) are women.⁴² Worldwide, 62 percent of 15 to 24 year-olds infected with HIV are female; in sub-Saharan Africa, young women are three times more likely than young men to be living with the disease.⁴³ These factors are frequently intertwined with one another, contributing not only to low educational participation early in life but to a lifelong cycle of exclusion from economic and social advancement: poor women are less likely to be educated, and uneducated women are more likely to be poor.⁴⁴

Sexist Cultural Norms

Sexist cultural norms constitute the most deeply-entrenched and widespread barrier to girls accessing education and remaining in school. Parental preference for the education of boys over girls is a particularly prevalent norm, linked to larger cultural values that exclude women from economic and political participation.⁴⁵ In many countries, education of girls is not seen a worthwhile investment. In a recent World Values Survey (1999-2004), roughly two-thirds of male respondents in Bangladesh indicated that university education for boys should be "prioritized" over that of girls; this perspective was indicated by at least one-third of male respondents from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mexico and Uganda.⁴⁶

In addition to parental preference of boys, sexist cultural norms may also be manifested in the classroom, such as in curricular stereotyping. For example, teachers may use textbooks or other material that either depict women performing stereotypical domestic work, or do not depict them at all.⁴⁷ Gendered divisions of labor in the larger society are also frequently mirrored in school: girls are more often made to perform school maintenance tasks or are denied physical exercise.⁴⁸ Finally, sexual harassment and assault by male students and teachers is a prevalent problem linked to

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

⁴¹ *Women and the Economy*, the United Nations Platform for Action Committee, <<http://www.unpac.ca/economy/whatcauses.html>> (13 September 2007).

⁴² *A Global Call to Action for Women Workers' Rights*, International Confederation of Trade Unions. <http://www.icftu.org/www/pdf/Factsheet_womenEN.pdf> (15 August 2007).

⁴³ *No Easy Journey*, United Nations Girls Education Initiative, <<http://www.ungei.org/gap/educationJourney.php>> September 2007).

⁴⁴ Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What To Do about It* (Centre for Global Development, 2007). Chapter 2, page 47. Accessed online at <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>> (28 October 2007).

⁴⁵ *The barriers to educating girls*, UNICEF, <http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/index_barriers.html> (23 August 2007).

⁴⁶ "The State of the World's Children (2007)", the United Nations Children's Fund: page 8. Accessed at <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/docs/sowc07.pdf>> (1 September 2007).

⁴⁷ *The barriers to educating girls*, UNICEF, <http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/index_barriers.html> (23 August 2007).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

culturally-prevalent attitudes supporting the devaluation and objectification of the female body.⁴⁹ A 2000 study reported that 22 percent of adolescent Ecuadorian girls had been victims of sexual abuse in an educational setting.⁵⁰ A 2000 report by the South African Medical Research Council found that 50 percent of schoolgirls had been forced to have sex against their will; one-third of such encounters were perpetrated by teachers.⁵¹

Poverty

A family's income and the availability of low-cost education contribute greatly to a family's decision to send children to school. Recent survey data of 80 countries show that children of primary school age who live in the poorest 20 percent of households are three times more likely to be out of school than children living in the richest 20 percent.⁵² In the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the disparities are even greater: children in the lowest 20 percent are 4.5 times more likely to be out of school than those in the wealthiest 20 percent.⁵³ In 2002, 68 percent of parents surveyed in Tajikistan considered family poverty and the increased costs of education as the primary reason for girls' non-attendance.⁵⁴ In addition to tuition, other gendered costs associated with education may limit its accessibility. For example, the direct costs of schooling were estimated to be 14 percent more for girls than for boys at primary level, due in part to unequal prices of school uniforms.⁵⁵ The costs of books and transportation are other considerations. Poverty is a particularly significant barrier in developing countries, which lack the resources needed to provide low-cost or free education to low-income children who need it the most.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the current global economic downturn threatens the progress of educational outcomes by reducing the ability of both households and governments to invest in education. School enrollments are at risk during this crisis, especially for girls who are often denied education in preference to boys, with the greatest risk in poor countries suffering the effects of diminished fiscal resources and fewer jobs.⁵⁷

Child labor

In many developing countries, one of the most common reasons for children's absence from school is that their parents put them to work.⁵⁸ The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 218 million children between the ages of five and 17 currently work in developing countries. Of these,

⁴⁹ "Global Monitoring Report" (2003-2004), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: pages 144-147. Accessed at <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (13 September 2007).

⁵⁰ Ibid, page 144.

⁵¹ Ibid, page 127.

⁵² "Children Out of School: Measuring Exclusion from Primary Education (2005)", the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics: 42.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Global Monitoring Report" (2003-2004), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: page 135. Accessed at <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (13 September 2007).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What To Do about It* (Centre for Global Development, 2007). Chapter 1, page 19. Accessed online at <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>> (28 October 2007).

⁵⁷ *Education at a Glance*. The World Bank.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0,,contentMDK:20040939~menuPK:282393~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:282386,00.html> (April 2009).

⁵⁸ "Global Monitoring Report" (2003-2004), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: page 120. Accessed at <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (13 September 2007).

122.3 million children work in the Asia-Pacific region, 49.3 million work in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 5.7 million work in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵⁹ The nature and prevalence of child labor is frequently gendered. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) confirms that girls are "often the first to be withdrawn from school in times of financial distress."⁶⁰ In fact, the ongoing global financial crisis continues to force more girls into work as financially squeezed families withdraw their daughters from school to seek jobs.⁶¹ In addition, due to sexist cultural norms girls are more likely to be sent to work regardless of household need. In rural Pakistan, a 2000 study found that boys work only when their income contribution is necessary to household survival, whereas girls are forced to work even when their households could subsist without the money.⁶² In Somalia, more than 50 percent of girls between the ages of five and 14 are working.⁶³ It is important to note that these figures are all estimates. No global data exist with regards to how many children routinely perform domestic chores and other household work that does not lead to marketable output.⁶⁴ Girls, who are far more likely than boys to perform such labor, are therefore more likely to be underreported as working.⁶⁵

Early Pregnancy

Many schools are unequipped or unwilling to enroll pregnant students. This is a particularly prevalent problem in Sub-Saharan African countries, where many girls become pregnant during their early adolescence. Data compiled by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in eastern and southern Africa confirms that many girls are expelled from school, or drop out, after becoming pregnant.⁶⁶ Similar trends have occurred in Malawi, Chile, and the United Republic of Tanzania, in which pregnancy was cited as an "important reason" for girls dropping out and being expelled from school.⁶⁷

HIV/AIDS

The impact of HIV/AIDS differs for boys and girls, resulting in increased barriers to accessing and staying in school.⁶⁸ The gendered impact of HIV/AIDS is largely attributable to sexist cultural norms, such as girls' traditional role as caregiver; girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school to care for an infected family member. HIV-positive girls are less likely than males to receive family support and resources, and therefore succumb more quickly to the virus. Girls orphaned by the death of parents due to AIDS are also more likely to be withdrawn from school than boys in order to work.⁶⁹

Safety

⁵⁹ *Child Labor*, Human Rights Watch, <<http://hrw.org/children/labor.htm>> (8 September 2007).

⁶⁰ "The State of the World's Children (2005), UNICEF: page 17. Accessed at <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc05/english/sowc05.pdf>> (16 September 2007).

⁶¹ *Financial crisis could force more girls into work*. IRIN, a project of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (June 2009). <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=84817>

⁶² "Global Monitoring Report" (2003-2004), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: page 125. Accessed at <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (13 September 2007).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Global Monitoring Report" (2003-2004), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: page 120-121. Accessed at <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (13 September 2007).

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 121.

⁶⁶ "Global Monitoring Report" (2003-2004), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: page 125. Accessed at <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (13 September 2007).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Safety of the girl—both en route to school and in the classroom—is an important consideration for parents. In times of conflict, safety issues are of particularly high concern due to the increased threat of rape and sexual exploitation by soldiers.⁷⁰ The link between conflict and access to education is significant: of the 25 countries with the lowest levels of female adult literacy, 10 are either experiencing armed conflict or recovering from it.⁷¹ Of the 17 Sub-Saharan countries in which enrolment rates declined in the 1990s, six are states that are affected by or are recovering from major armed conflict. It is currently estimated that 50 percent of out-of-school children live in countries in the midst of or recovering from conflict.⁷² However, even during times of peace, safety remains a concern for women and girls: rape and sexual harassment do not occur exclusively in times of war. Many families prevent their daughters from attending school, particularly if the school is a great distance from home, out of concern for their well-being en-route.⁷³ As discussed earlier, the high prevalence of sexual harassment and rape at school is another reason for gender disparities in enrolment and level of education attainment.

Quality of Facilities

In efforts to increase girls' participation and retention in school, a school's physical environment is just as important as school safety, especially after the onset of puberty.⁷⁴ Inadequate sanitation disproportionately affects school participation and retention of female students.⁷⁵ In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, half the female dropouts in primary school are due to poor water and the lack of separate latrines.⁷⁶ However, when efforts to improve school facilities address the needs of girls, a direct increase in female enrollment follows. For instance, after a UNICEF school sanitation program was implemented in Bangladesh, female enrollment increased by 11 percent.⁷⁷ In addition, natural disasters impact a girl's ability to receive an education. Whether the Haiti earthquake or floods in Pakistan, re-establishing education is vitally important, so that both boys and girls are provided with structured safe spaces to learn and play.⁷⁸ In its rebuilding efforts, it is critical for the international community to ensure that the education system is built back better to provide children, girls and boys alike, with a quality education that is their right.⁷⁹

Is Primary School Enough?

While universal primary education is the world's current goal, it must not be the last. Achieving universal enrollment in secondary education raises the next big challenge for the global community.

Like primary education, secondary education facilitates the economic and social advancement of women and their communities. However, women's secondary education also brings economic and social benefits above and beyond those brought by early education: "Female education at higher levels is consistently associated with improved health outcomes and with stronger effects than lower

⁷⁰ "Global Monitoring Report" (2003-2004), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: page 129. Accessed at <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (13 September 2007).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, p.86. Accessed at <http://www.ungei.org/resources/1612_1631.html> (14 February 2008).

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

⁷⁸ *Statement on UNGEI Secretariat on the situation in Haiti*. United Nations Girls' Education Initiative. (January 2010.) www.ungei.org/news/index_2348.html?q

⁷⁹ Ibid.

levels of schooling.”⁸⁰ In its 2007 “State of the World’s Children” report, the United Nations’ Children’s Fund similarly reaffirmed that secondary education is “singularly effective in delaying the age at which a young woman first gives birth and it can enhance freedom of movement and maternal health.”⁸¹ Secondary education also has been proven to “further strengthen women’s bargaining power within households” and it remains a significant factor in providing opportunities for women’s participation in political decision-making.⁸²

Despite its many benefits, global attention to secondary schooling has suffered during recent efforts to ensure that all children worldwide complete primary school.⁸³ Moreover, this focus on primary school enrollment disproportionately affects the enrollment of female students at the secondary level. While secondary-school enrollment varies greatly by region—25 percent of girls attend secondary school in Africa, while more than 90 percent of girls in Europe attend secondary school⁸⁴—worldwide only 37 percent of countries have achieved gender parity at the secondary level.⁸⁵ And in some countries, girls’ enrollment at the secondary level has stalled altogether. In South Asia, female secondary school enrollment is 75 percent of boys’ and in Sub-Saharan Africa it is 80 percent of boys’.⁸⁶

Establishing universal secondary education, and providing it to women regardless of their age, should be the world’s ultimate goal. However, the process to establish universal education must be taken step by step, and universal primary education is undoubtedly step one.

Taking Action

Eliminating the many barriers to universal education has long been a United Nations’ goal. In the 1960s, a set of conferences convened by United Nations’ Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established the target date of 1980 for the achievement of universal primary education. The second target date was established in 1990, when the World Conference on Education for All promoted a new vision for education and restated the universal primary education goal for achievement by the turn of the century. Again, the target date passed without the goal having been achieved.

In September 2000, the largest group of world leaders in history gathered for the Millennium Summit at United Nations headquarters in New York. Representatives from 189 Member States convened to address global crises such as poverty and AIDS. By the end of the convention, leaders set down the “Millennium Declaration”, a series of collective priorities for peace and security, poverty reduction, preservation of the environment and increased protection of human rights. Dubbed a “blueprint for a better future”, the Millennium Declaration consisted of eight Millennium Development Goals, the second and third of which sought to combat barriers to education (specifically those faced by women):

⁸⁰ Anju Malhotra, Rohini Pande, and Caren Grown. “Impact of Investments in Female Education on Gender Equality.” The International Center for Research on Women: 2003, page 4. Accessed at <<http://csde.washington.edu/~scurran/files/readings/May12/ImpactInvestmentsFemaleEdu.pdf>> (25 August 2007).

⁸¹ “The State of the World’s Children (2007)”, the United Nations Children’s Fund: page 4. Accessed at <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/docs/sowc07.pdf>> (1 September 2007).

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What To Do about It* (Centre for Global Development, 2007). Chapter 1, page 24. Accessed online at <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>> (28 October 2007).

⁸⁴ Ibid, page 26.

⁸⁵ *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, p.6. Accessed at <http://www.ungei.org/resources/1612_1631.html> (14 February 2008).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. Target—Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Target—Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and at all levels of education no later than 2015.⁸⁷

The most recent Millennium Development Goals Report (2009) demonstrates that progress has been made. In the developing world, enrollment in primary education reached 88 percent in 2007, up from 83 percent in 2000. In sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, enrollment increased by 15 percentage points and 11 percentage points, respectively, from 2000 to 2007.⁸⁸ Even with these gains, however, sub-Saharan Africa continues to trail behind other regions: 30 percent of Sub-Saharan African children of primary school age are out of school. Worldwide, girls and children from poorer or rural families remain least likely to attend school.⁸⁹

Neither enrolment nor attendance data reflect children who attend school sporadically, nor do data exist for many countries that are in “conflict or post-conflict situations.”⁹⁰ Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that the objectives outlined in will be achieved by the selected date of 2015. Nonetheless, the Millennium Development Goals remain a unique and exemplary step towards achieving gender parity and promoting the economic and social advancement of women by education.

In addition, in 2010 the Dakar Declaration on Accelerating Girls’ Education and Gender Equality was unanimously adopted by 200 participants, including scholars, government officials and education experts, at the conclusion of the “Engendering Empowerment: Education and Equality” conference in Senegal, organized by UNGEI to mark its 10th anniversary.⁹¹ “Powerless and poor girls make up the most disadvantaged group in education,” the declaration stated. “Achieving equity in education will entail putting in place a rights-based empowerment framework that will target the most vulnerable.”⁹²

What can governments do?

There is much work left to be done to improve access to and quality of education for girls. Most countries, even those with relatively high primary enrollment ratios, need to address gender equity issues. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) argues that, not only are national governments largely responsible for such improvement, they have the power to actually make a difference. In several countries where girls’ enrollment has increased sharply since 1999, governments have taken special measures to increase their participation, namely by improving school structures, encouraging the recruitment of female teachers and making learning materials free.⁹³

⁸⁸ “The Millennium Development Goals Report” (2009), the United Nations. Accessed at <http://www.undp.org.sa/sa/index.php/en/newsroom/news-archive/206-the-millennium-development-goals-report-2009>.

⁸⁹ “The Millennium Development Goals Report” (2007), the United Nations: p. 10-11. Accessed at <<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/mdg2007.pdf>> (24 August 2007).Ibid, page 10.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ *Girls’ education conference concludes with strong call to focus on the most marginalized children*. United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative. (26 May 2010) www.ungei.org/news/index_2525.html?q

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, p.7. Accessed at < http://www.ungei.org/resources/1612_1631.html> (14 February 2008).

Although overall gender disparities in access have improved between 1999 and 2005, gender equity remains elusive. Schools remain physically unsafe for female students and lack adequate sanitary facilities; while teacher attitudes and practices, along with curricula and textbooks, continue to be gender biased.⁹⁴ UNESCO argues that achieving gender equality will require a determined effort to move beyond mere parity and will require adopting behavioral and other changes in the quest to make available a full and equal education for all. According to UNESCO, one of the first priorities in achieving gender equity should be the implementation of free and compulsory education. Other priorities include but are not limited to:

- Eliminating child labor
- Supporting gender-responsive schools that allow pregnant girls and teenage mothers to continue their education
- Producing educational content relevant to local cultural and economic contexts
- Providing gender-sensitive curricula and textbooks
- Training more female teachers
- Building schools closer to girls' homes to increase access
- Making schools physically and psychologically safe for girls⁹⁵

In addition to targeting all girls, specific and more intensive efforts are still needed to reach girls who face multiple exclusions—not only due to gender, but also to ethnicity, language barriers and religious beliefs within their communities.⁹⁶ These girls face additional barriers to education, many of which are unique to their regions. Therefore, local governments must also play a role in creating—and maintaining—laws that benefit underprivileged women and girls.

Soroptimists and Education

Soroptimist International is an international volunteer organization for business and professional women who work to improve the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world. Almost 100,000 Soroptimists in roughly 120 countries and territories contribute time and financial support to community-based and international projects benefiting women and girls. Clubs in Soroptimist International of the Americas receive numerous awards, such as the Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards, for implementing projects benefiting girls and women seeking education. Soroptimist also offers funds for club projects through the Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls. Finally, individual clubs can choose to conduct community projects to help girls and women seeking education in the surrounding area.

Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards

The Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards program is Soroptimist's major project. This award improves the lives of women by giving them the resources they need to improve their education, skills, and employment prospects. Each year, Soroptimist clubs in 19 countries and territories assist women in overcoming personal difficulties and improving their lives through education and skills training. The women may use the cash award to offset any costs associated with their efforts to attain higher education, including books, childcare and transportation. Past award recipients include Maria P., who worked as an unschooled field laborer until her husband deserted her and her two children. After her second husband deserted her, leaving her with no income, Maria applied for and received a

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 80-81.

⁹⁵ "Building Momentum to Eliminate Gender Disparities by 2005." EFA Week in Pakistan (2003): pages 2-4. Accessed at <http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/Pakistan_EFAweek.pdf> (15 September 2007).

⁹⁶ Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What To Do about It* (Centre for Global Development, 2007). Chapter 4, page 113. Accessed online at <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>> (28 October 2007).

Women's Opportunity Award from her local Soroptimist club. She went on to win an additional cash award from Soroptimist's Desert Coast Region before receiving the \$10,000 finalist Women's Opportunity Award. Recently, Maria was accepted into a nursing program, and began her course of study. Once Maria graduates and earns her registered nurse designation, she plans to work as a nurse while continuing her studies. Her work as a lab technician has inspired her to further pursue her interests in medicine and science. Maria is one of hundreds of women who credit the Women's Opportunity Awards with providing the financial means to achieve their dreams through education.

Many Women's Opportunity Award recipients have overcome enormous obstacles in their quest for a better life, including poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and in some cases, trafficking. Each year, more than \$1.5 million is disbursed through the awards at various levels of the organization to help over 1,000 women achieve their dreams of a better life for themselves and their families. Since the Women's Opportunity Awards program began in 1972, it is estimated that \$25 million has been disbursed and tens of thousands of women have been assisted. In 2007, the Women's Opportunity Awards received the Summit Award from the ASAE & The Center of Association Leadership, its highest honor, bestowed on associations that implement innovative community-based programs.

Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls

Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls are given annually to Soroptimist Clubs initiating or continuing innovative projects benefiting women and girls. Grants range from \$1,000 to \$10,000. Since 1997, more than \$2.5 million has been disbursed to 427 Soroptimist Club projects, from which nearly 200,000 women have benefited. Recent projects include providing resources for immigrant women fleeing domestic violence; funding a micro-enterprise artisan project for low-income women; providing reproductive health services for women in poverty; and teaching marketable job skills to girls with disabilities. This grant program also benefits women and girls seeking education. For example, a club in Taipei, Taiwan, recently won a Soroptimist Club Grant to provide tutoring and training to low-income teenage girls. The tutoring program emphasized math and English-language skills, and was offered to adolescent girls from aboriginal and low-income families. The classes provided skills training and development, and helped spark interest and excitement about education among the girls. Club members volunteered as tutors and mentors to the girls, and also collected school supplies, including books and stationery for program participants. The program benefited more than 200 young women. Another recent grant, awarded to a Philippines club, went towards a project providing free computer education to women and girls living in the local barangay. The funds were used to pay for instructors, books, instruction materials, meals and transportation to and from the class.

Soroptimist Disaster Recovery Grants for Women and Girls

Soroptimist has a long-standing Disaster Grant program, which is supported by voluntary donations from members. Funds may be distributed to a number of projects directly benefiting women in areas of conflict who are seeking access to education. For example, in 2006, Soroptimist awarded the Center for Women's Development and Research in India a \$40,000 grant for a project designed to provide health education and health services to nearly 2,500 women, and to provide supplementary education, life skills and vocation skills-training to 250 adolescent girls. Also in 2006, Soroptimist awarded \$29,000 to a project named "Project Sri Lanka". The funds went towards moving a girls' school—one of Sri Lanka's leading national schools damaged by the tsunami—and helping fund the reconstruction of four classrooms. In addition, Soroptimist worked with the organization to form a scholarship program, and funded an additional \$18,000 that would enable low-income girls to attend school.