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The State of the World's Children 2004 – Girls, Education and Development

UNICEF Says Getting More Girls into School Is First Step to Reaching Global Development Goals

Millions of Girls Are Left Out Every Year, With Major Consequences for Nations

GENEVA / CAIRO / NEW YORK, 11 December 2003 – International development efforts are drastically short-changing girls, leaving hundreds of millions of girls and women uneducated and unable to contribute to positive change for themselves, their children, or their communities, a major UNICEF report released today contends.

The agency said that without accelerated action to get more girls into school over the next two years, global goals to reduce poverty and improve the human condition would simply not be reached. Conversely, it said that bringing down the barriers that keep girls out of school would benefit both girls and boys – and their countries.

UNICEF argued that the adjustment in development strategies needed to get girls in school and keep them there would jump-start progress on the entire development agenda for 2015, known as the Millennium Development Goals.

“International development efforts have been glaringly inadequate at getting girls into school in too many countries,” said UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy, releasing UNICEF’s flagship report, *The State of the World’s Children*. “We have to ask ourselves why this is, and what the consequences are. In this report the findings are clear: Gender discrimination is hampering development efforts, starting with the fundamental right of every child to go to school.”

UNICEF noted that illiteracy rates are still far higher among women than men, and at least 9 million more girls than boys are left out of school every year – statistics that have lasting implications not only for girls and women, but for their children and families as well.

“We stand no chance of substantially reducing poverty, child mortality, HIV/AIDS and other diseases if we do not ensure that *all* girls and boys can exercise their right to a basic education,” Bellamy said. “In daily life, knowledge makes the crucial difference.”

The report presents compelling evidence that enabling girls to get a basic education of good quality would improve other indicators of human well-being. For instance, it shows that the majority of countries with the lowest secondary enrolment rates for girls also have among the highest rates of child mortality – where more than 15% of children die before age five.

Why It Matters

The report shows that girls denied an education are more vulnerable to poverty, hunger, violence, abuse, exploitation and trafficking. They are more likely to die in childbirth and are at greater risk of disease, including HIV/AIDS.

But according to *The State of the World's Children*, the positive impact of educating girls is equally dramatic: As mothers, educated women are more likely to have healthy children, and more likely to ensure that their children, both boys and girls, complete school.

"A child's lack of education not only limits her individual potential, but dramatically reduces hope that her children will be able to escape a lifetime of poverty and hardship," Bellamy said. "That's why UNICEF recognizes this issue as crucial to the entire development agenda. It prevents the loss of vast amounts of human potential."

In example after example, the UNICEF report details how bringing down the barriers that keep girls out of school makes schools more welcoming for boys as well as girls. Those barriers include schools that are too far from home, lack clean water and separate toilet facilities, and where the threat of violence is ever-present in and around the schoolyard.

"This is not about choosing to put girls into classrooms instead of boys," Bellamy emphasized. "It's about approaching a key development challenge with strategy, sensitivity, and smarts. The things that get more girls into school, and keep them there, are the things that make schools better. And they make development efforts better, too."

What's Gone Wrong

The report argues that the standard approach to achieving universal education has fallen short because it assumed that generic efforts to enrol more children would benefit all children equally, an assumption that has not examined or addressed the specific barriers faced by girls. Although global enrolment rates show gradual improvement in gender balance, 9 million more girls are still left out of the classroom completely, and girls who are enrolled drop out faster, on average, than boys.

"Because of the persistent and often subtle gender discrimination that runs through most societies, it is girls who are sacrificed first – being the last enrolled and the first withdrawn from schools when times get tough," the report states.

The report argues that education must be approached as a human right rather than a privilege or an expected outcome of economic progress. When education is considered a right, governments are obligated to mobilize the needed resources so that all children can complete a quality education. And parents are more likely to hold their governments accountable for failing to do so.

What Must Change

The report presents an agenda for action, calling on development agencies, governments, families, and communities to focus and intensify their efforts on addressing the challenges that keep girls out of school. Essentially, the report calls for adjustments in how development is approached from the start.

Among specific measures, the report calls for:

- Creation of a *national ethos* recognizing the value of educating girls as well as boys
- Education to be included as an essential component in *development plans*
- The *elimination of school fees* of every kind
- The integration of education into national plans for *poverty reduction*
- Increased *international funding* for education

The report found that, with few exceptions, industrialized countries and international financial institutions have failed to meet their commitments to fund education.

"Despite donor nations' 1990 promises for extra funding for education and their 1996 commitment to ensure universal primary education by 2015, total aid flows to developing countries actually declined during the 1990s, and bilateral funding for education plummeted even further," the report states.

The greatest need is in sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of girls left out of school each year has risen from 20 million in 1990 to 24 million in 2002. (Eighty-three percent of all girls out of school live in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and East Asia & the Pacific.)

Why It's Urgent

The first of the *Millennium Development Goals* to come due is the goal of gender parity in education by 2005. UNICEF argues that major progress toward achieving that goal is still possible with the strategic acceleration of national efforts and international support.

One year ago, UNICEF made its own commitment to achieving the goal by launching "25 by 2005" – an urgent campaign to help 25 gender-gap and low enrolment countries eliminate the barriers that keep girls and boys out of school. The report details the progress of the campaign thus far, with a comprehensive set of examples of what's working and why.

"Educating girls on an equal basis with boys, addressing the needs of all, is not an optional investment," Bellamy said. "None of the world's wealthier countries developed without making a significant investment in education. That's a lesson we need to keep in mind if we're serious about really doing things differently in this world. This is a test for us. Whether we pass or fail will have major and lasting consequences."

Officially launching *The State of the World's Children* at the World Summit on Information Society in Geneva, Bellamy said that technology could help children, but that it could not replace basic literacy and learning.

"It's truly amazing how far information technology has come in the past 25 years, and yet every year more than 121 million children never see the inside of a classroom," Bellamy said. "All the technology in the world cannot replace what these children are losing. Which just shows that when it comes to ensuring every child a quality basic education, we don't need a revolution, we just need to take responsibility."

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Available for advance interviews:

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