

United Nations Children's Fund
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Girls' education: oral report
Background note

I. Issues

1. Completion of quality basic education is a right for every child, and is pivotal to the sustainable achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and related development priorities, including national economic growth with equitable distribution of the benefits of development. Yet 115 million¹ primary-school-aged children in the world are denied this right. Sub-Saharan Africa (39 per cent) and South Asia (37 per cent) account for 76 per cent of all out-of-school children, and girls make up 53 per cent of this total. In West and Central Africa, 49 per cent of school-aged girls are out of school while Eastern and Southern Africa and South Asia respectively have 39 per cent and 30 per cent of school-aged girls out of school. In the Middle East and North Africa, girls represent 58 per cent of all children out of school.

2. UNICEF supports nationally led efforts in girls' education to support education for all children (EFA) as a right, in synergy with efforts to achieve other Millennium Development Goals, e.g., those for maternal health and reduction of maternal mortality, prevention of HIV/AIDS and reduction of under-five mortality.

3. Even with overall good progress in girls' education, key issues include the need for more rapid progress in mainstreaming of gender in major education initiatives (sector-wide approaches; the Fast Track Initiative) and the reduction and prevention of civil conflict. UNICEF and its partners have to work together more effectively with national authorities and other interested parties to accelerate and strengthen the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), and to more effectively address girls' education within the Common Country Assessment (CCA) and United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF).

II. Action

4. UNICEF cooperation with national leadership increasingly focuses on key interventions to enhance national capacities in policy, planning, programme

* E/ICEF/2005/1.

¹ Latest estimates (for 2002) based on joint work by UNICEF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, analyzing administrative and household survey data to arrive at the best estimates for out-of-school children.

implementation, monitoring and evaluation in which country-led partnerships are a key strategy. UNICEF actions are increasingly being tailored to fit better with country-led strategies.

5. Programme activities and interventions are designed as part of national strategies and can be small- or large-scale, sectoral or cross-sectoral, targeted or systemic, and single- or multi-dimensional, depending on national needs and standards for programme effectiveness, efficiency and economy. Examples include:

- (a) Expertise and experience developed on what works for girls' education, through wide variety of small-scale interventions targeted at disadvantaged groups/communities²;
- (b) Safe learning spaces in emergencies and back-to-school campaigns in post-conflict countries used to protect, restore and/or renew education opportunities for children;
- (c) Access increased and quality improved by interventions that help with provision of learning opportunities in an appropriate physical and pedagogical environment. (school facilities, water and environmental sanitation, teacher training, life skills, learning materials, services, and other types of support);
- (d) Access increased and quality improved by interventions that address constraints at the home/community levels (subsidies, early child development centres, school meals, transport, etc.);
- (e) Quality and learning achievement by children improved by interventions that strengthen good teaching/learning in a gender-sensitive environment (curriculum/textbook content, teacher training, life skills – including HIV/AIDS, sectoral and cross-sectoral policy dialogue);
- (f) Large-scale change achieved through interventions that mainstream successful models (Complementary Basic Education (COBET) in the United Republic of Tanzania, the Programme for the Advancement of Girl Child Education (PAGE) in Zambia, the Essential Learning Package in West and Central Africa).

6. Strategies are based on lessons learned, analysis of options for improvements in policy and implications of partnerships and respective agency roles, level of resources and human capacity. They are to:

- (a) Link with targeted interventions associated with poverty reduction to solve problems and learn lessons about what works in girls' education, e.g., UNGEI in 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa provided a fertile learning laboratory while solving problems;

² Many of these are outlined in the UNICEF advocacy booklet, *Strategies for Girls' Education*.

- (b) Cluster single dimension interventions into packaged interventions for greater impact and a more holistic approach to problem solving, e.g., “child-friendly” schools;
- (c) Shift progressively from small-scale targeted interventions that solve problems for specific groups to large-scale systemic interventions, e.g., the elimination of school fees;
- (d) Accelerate progress in 25 countries that are most at risk of failing to achieve the 2005 gender parity goal (“25 by 2005”), so as to have maximum impact globally;
- (e) Engage with key initiatives that can help to mainstream and scale up successful models of good practice in girls’ education e.g., the Fast Track Initiative.

7. Using experiences gained and lessons learned requires building knowledge links between girls’ education and other aspects of child rights, e.g., prevention of HIV/AIDS and child protection problems, to inform programme strategies, particular for programme partnerships, in order to meet expectations from various sectors and deliver for and with children. *State of the World’s Children 2004* was developed to highlight and stimulate national action and international cooperation on “doable” interventions for girls’ education. Various advocacy and communications materials, e.g., on girls’ education and HIV/AIDS or gender-based violence in schools, also illustrate this dimension.

8. As the lead agency for UNGEI, UNICEF is taking action to revitalize and strengthen the UNGEI partnership. A UNGEI Global Advisory Committee has been formed, with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the United Kingdom Department for International Development as the first co-chairs. Operational Guidance has been developed to guide UNGEI in countries and regions. And the UNICEF acceleration strategy has been adapted for use by all UNGEI partners. In addition, UNICEF has established focal points for UNGEI in all Regional Offices.

III. Impact

9. Progress has been made with getting more children into school, narrowing the gender gap and improving the quality of education. There are also positive developments in education for both girls and boys in emergencies and post-conflict situations. There is now a niche for girls’ education in emergencies and post-conflict situations through “child-friendly” spaces. The number of countries with systemic interventions and programming has increased and partnership synergy is growing. Evaluations show gains in access and quality improvement in UNICEF zones of operation in many countries, especially in Africa and South Asia.

10. Awareness has been raised and innovative actions for girls’ education changed through the African Girls’ Education Initiative and “25 by 2005”. The gender gap has been reduced in 10 of the 25 acceleration countries, and 4 of the 25 (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Malawi and Turkey) will achieve gender parity by the end of 2005. Joint work in the areas of education and water and environmental sanitation has produced gains for 22 of

the 25 acceleration countries. There is collaboration through SWAps in 40 countries (14 of them acceleration countries), and the Fast Track Initiative in 12 countries. UNICEF is cooperating with the World Food Programme in 14 of the 25 acceleration countries. There has been successful fund-raising for thematic funding from key donor Governments. Finally, UNGEI is emerging as the main partnership vehicle for girls' education in EFA, the CCA/UNDAF and Fast Track Initiative.