

The 2010 edition of UNICEF's *Progress for Children* shows that despite advancement towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), many of the poorest and most disadvantaged children are still missing out. UNICEF invited several experts to offer their insights on what can be done to realize the MDGs for all.

7 September 2010

Geeta Rao Gupta is the former president of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). She spoke with UNICEF on the importance of empowering and educating girls in order to achieve all of the Millennium Development Goals.

Tell us about the thinking behind MDG 3, the Millennium Development Goal that relates to promoting gender equality and empowering women. Why was that an important goal?

We at the International Center for Research on Women were very excited when that goal was included, because gender equality underlies the success of each of the other goals. Without women having equal access to productive resources and to economic opportunities, to health, to rights, it will be impossible to meet the goals of poverty [reduction], child health, maternal health, education and all of the other goals. So I think that it was an acknowledgement by the global community that meeting that goal of gender equality and empowerment of women was central to meeting all of the MDGs.

About a decade later, can you give us a quick summary of the current situation and which girls are missing out on primary and secondary education?

A decade after MDG 3 was introduced, the girls who are most left behind are the ones who are most in need, and that is poor girls, girls who belong to minority populations within their countries and those who live in rural areas. Unfortunately, they are the ones who still have not received the benefits of the various investments in most countries around the world. And in terms of countries, it is countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia who still lag behind.

Why are they missing out?

The reasons that they have been left out is it's easier to reach the ones who are non-poor, who are in urban areas, and reaching those populations has helped to advance us towards the targets set by the MDG. But I think that we will not have done our job if we do not meet those who are the poorest and who are most in need of those investments.

Can you give us a very specific example of a programme, intervention, or even a larger strategy that has worked to get equal numbers of boys and girls in school to receive a quality education?

All projects that have used subsidies for school fees or conditional cash transfers to incentivize families to send their girls to school have worked really well. The ending of school fees in Kenya worked to increase, in large numbers, the girls and boys attending schools. So I think cost is one significant area which can be addressed and has been successfully addressed through various programmes.

What are some of the messages we can take away from this latest report from UNICEF, the Progress for Children report?

I really liked the report because its key message is that we have left the most in need behind, and that if we don't pay attention to those who have been left behind, we will not achieve the MDGs; and in fact that we can achieve the MDGs more efficiently and effectively if we now pay attention to the poorest, those who belong to minority populations and those who are geographically disadvantaged because they live in rural areas.

There is an Internet video that's been in circulation called 'the girl effect' – it's an animated video that describes the spillover benefits of empowering girls and women. What are your thoughts on the statement at the end of the video: "Invest in a girl and she will do the rest"?

That is a powerful message. There is data that proves it is true that the return from an investment in girls and women is high. Over the last five years I would say that the focus on adolescent girls and the possibilities that they hold in their hands has certainly been more evocatively established and more compellingly established than ever before. The fact that they are held behind and that if we could invest in their futures, we would actually be transforming the futures for all is a case that has been made more powerfully in the last five years.

Recorded on 16 August 2010
For more information, please visit www.unicef.org

Progress for Children: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals with Equity, underscores growing evidence that progress toward achieving many of the goals has been accompanied by persistent and in some cases widening disparities. The report examines the latest available data through an equity lens, focusing on three factors – poverty, gender and geographic location of residence – that greatly affect a child's chances of survival.