

## 'Education for women and girls' for Inner Wheel Club Monthly Meeting in conjunction with International Inner Wheel Day

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**SPEECH BY**

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**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

### **Education and gender parity<sup>1</sup>**

Worldwide, at least 77 million children are not enrolled in school. However, there are 115 million children **out of school**: the difference represents the millions of children who are enrolled in, but not attending school, for various reasons due to their socioeconomic circumstances.

**62 million – more than half – of these out-of-school children are girls.**

Children from the poorest household are three times less likely to be in school than children from the richest households.

For every 100 boys in primary school, there are 94 girls – up from 92 in 1999. In the developing world, one girl in every four never completes primary school.

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<sup>1</sup> UNGEI Fact Sheet 2006 & EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008

The world has missed the 2005 target for gender parity for Millennium Development Goal 2. Only about one-third of all countries reported parity in both primary and secondary education in 2005. Only 18 out of 113 countries that missed the gender parity goal at primary and secondary level in 2005 stand a chance of achieving it by 2015.

Gender equality remains elusive because sexual violence, insecure school environments and inadequate sanitation disproportionately affect girls' self-esteem, participation and retention. Textbooks, curricula and teacher attitudes continue to reinforce stereotypes on gender roles in society.

In impoverished families, girls are often forced to stay at home or withdraw from school because they need to help earn a living, because their parents cannot afford the school materials and transportation, or because their parents simply do not recognise the long-term benefits of education for girls.

## Education in Malaysia <sup>2</sup>

96% of primary-aged children were enrolled in school in 2005 – this means an estimated 4% of Malaysian children aged 6-12 are not going to school.

Fortunately, there are no significant gender disparities in the primary enrolment rate in Malaysia. However, the gender disparity in secondary school is reversed: Only 77% of secondary-aged boys were enrolled in school in 2005, compared to 81% of secondary-aged girls.

However, enrolment rates and achievements are lower in rural areas, especially among indigenous communities (including Sabah and Sarawak). The literacy rate among indigenous communities, measured in 2001, was 51%.

Education underlines each of the 9 strategic challenges that Malaysia has to overcome to achieve Vision 2020. The importance of education is highlighted in the

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<sup>2</sup> EFA Mid-Decade Assessment Report 2008 & 9MP

Ninth Malaysia Plan – with the education sector given the biggest allocation of development expenditure – and reiterated in the Mid-term Review: under the framework of the Education Development Master Plan, 2006-2010, the government will further improve the quality and accessibility to education by focusing on nation building, developing human capital, strengthening national schools, bridging the education gap, enhancing the teaching profession and strengthening educational institutions.

### Why girls and women need education

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to receive free primary education, and not be discriminated on the basis of gender.

Girls who do not receive education are exposed to:

- **Life on the streets:** They may be forced out on the streets at a much younger age to earn a living and may be lured into petty criminal activities such as pick-pocketing.
- **Exploitation:** Girls on the streets are at greater risk of suffering violence and abuse. They are at risk of being exploited by adults for sex work and drug peddling.
- **Health risks:** Sex work and drug abuse are the two biggest risk factors for HIV infection. Uneducated children who are HIV-positive are even more vulnerable, as they do not know how to manage their infection, are unable to demand for medical care, are unable to support themselves, and, most chillingly, do not know how to prevent spreading the virus.
- **Generational problems:** Children whose mothers have no education are more than twice as likely to be out of school as children whose mothers have some education.

Education is a uniquely positive force with a wide-ranging impact on society and human development. Educated girls can better protect themselves against HIV,

trafficking and abuse, and are more likely to grow up to have healthier families and send their children to school.

Higher education levels for girls are associated with a reduced risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. If all children received a complete primary education, around 700,000 cases of HIV in young adults could be prevented each year. One additional year of schooling for 1,000 women helps prevent two maternal deaths.

### Goals to be achieved for women and girls' education

Millennium Development Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. The target is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.

Education For All goals:

- Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- Achieving 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- Achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.

### UNICEF initiatives to support women and girls' education

- **UNGEI – United Nations Girl's Education Initiative**

UNGEI is a partnership of organisations from the UN, governments, donors, NGOs, civil society, the private sector, communities and families, dedicated to promoting girls' education. UNICEF is the lead agency and Secretariat for UNGEI.

UNGEI is committed to accelerating action on girls' education at the global, regional and country levels – by supporting strategies for girls' education, provides the

technical capacity to assist countries, by mobilising resources for targeted project interventions, country programmes and large scale systemic interventions.

An example of a project supported by UNGEI is in Yemen, where poverty and high population growth rates have contributed to high rates of illiteracy and gender inequality in education. UNGEI partnered with the Yemeni Ministry of Education and the private sector to create an advocacy campaign aimed at parents, called 'Let me Learn'. This initiative aims to raise awareness about the importance of girls' education and increase girls' enrollment through motivational billboards, posters and text messages in both urban and rural areas.

- **Supplementary Reading Programme in Malaysia**

The Supplementary Reading Programme was initiated by UNICEF and Ministry of Education to reach vulnerable communities in remote areas of Sabah and Sarawak, to ensure that the children in these communities, particularly girls, have the learning resources required for quality education.

SRP provides reading materials of different levels and genre to cater for students of different learning needs, stages and abilities. In the last 1-2 years, 13,000 students from 90 schools in Sabah and Sarawak have benefited from the enrichment materials and remedial activities carried out under the SRP.

- **Learning Activities that incorporate Orang Asli Folklores**

This programme was initiated by UNICEF and Ministry of Education to improve literacy skills among Orang Asli children, particularly girls.

The project involves incorporating Orang Asli folklore into learning materials and activities, while promoting local heritage and cultural knowledge. The project also aims to motivate Orang Asli children to attend school through interesting learning activities, and reduce dropout rates.

## The role of civil society and service organisations

I am heartened to note that the International Inner Wheel Social Project for 2006/2009 is the UNICEF education program for girls.

Civil society organisations like Inner Wheel Club can effect change by advocating for broad social mobilisation to ensure that girls' education, particularly early childhood education is always on the agenda, more so in times of crisis and emergencies; investing resources in service delivery, especially for children from poor and marginalised families; and by working with women in the communities and empowering them with basic literacy skills so that they can encourage education among their children.

Thank you.

END.