



What Young People Are Saying About...

EDUCATION, RELIGION AND PARTICIPATION

On 6 November 2002, young people from Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Eritrea, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Sudan and Zambia came together to take part in a 90 minute preparatory chat hosted by *Voices of Youth* and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. This chat preceded a two-hour chat on 27 November, wherein young people will explore child and youth rights and the responsibilities that come with those rights; with a specific focus on girls' education and learning, and the right to express oneself freely and be heard.

The purpose of a preparatory chat was two fold:

1. Introduce participants to the chat software, and
2. Clarify questions about issues to be explored in the actual chat.

As the majority of participants appeared comfortable with the software, and were anxious to begin addressing the issues, the prep chat evolved into an impromptu chat focusing on:

- barriers to education
- religion, and
- participation, with an emphasis on voting

Following is a summary of the chat.

Overview:

Participants repeatedly expressed the importance of an education for all. Education was characterized as an opportunity, a privilege and a deserved right.

During the chat, young people demonstrated a clear and complete understanding of the many barriers to education, exploring barriers such as low teachers' salaries, cultural norms, religion, conflict, early marriage, poverty and discrimination.

Participants took advantage of the wide range of countries participating to learn how the situation and norms in countries were both the same and different. Low teachers' salaries and discrimination against women in the work place emerged as the most prominent similarities. While the conflicts in Palestine and Eritrea, and the impact of Islam on education and freedom of religion, dominated discussions of how countries differed.¹

Solutions to the barriers were also explored. However, much of the responsibility for change was placed on governments. During their brief discussion of participation, young people cited negative images of young people, adults' reluctance to listen, and a lack of unification among young people as reasons why youth are not able to be effective change makers.

¹ Unfortunately, due to Ramadan, the participants in Palestine had to leave within the first 45 minutes of the chat and could not continue the discussion.

Participants did suggest promoting and supporting young leaders and role models, joining committees, writing to government officials, and getting the media involved as ways for young people to make themselves heard and to make a difference.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Young people recognized the strong link between cultural norms and access to an education. A distinction was made between “traditions” (family practices, local norms and stereotypes) and “economics” and “laws”. Mostly participants from Eritrea, Palestine, Sudan, and Zambia responded to questions from Canadian participants about the “traditions” in their countries.

Gender discrimination in the home

Palestine, Sudan and Zambia all mentioned that families in their countries tend to prioritize the education of boys over that of girls. They attributed this tendency to local perceptions of girls as “born to serve their husbands and houses and raise their children” (Sudan). They also felt that girls “might relax in education because they know that they will get married.” (Zambia)

“...but when you grow up believing that girls should be mothers and wives only and boys should go to work its hard to change it it needs time.”

participant from Sudan

Rural vs Urban

Participants explored how discrimination against girls differed between rural and urban areas. A young participant from Zambia stated that “in rural areas girls are told to stay home and do the household while boys go to school” and that this was also the case in urban areas. A Sudanese participant, however, felt that in urban areas the concerns were mostly economic: “in the cities its more about if they could afford sending their children to school or not.”

Religion

Religion, and specifically Islam, was a prominent topic of discussion.

“Unfortunately, the person does not choose his religion or beliefs in the middle east.”

participant from Palestine

“but we should try to”

participant from Oman

Freedom of religion: Participants from Oman, Palestine and Sudan all reflected on the lack of freedom of religion in their countries. Participants from Palestine and the Czech Republic agreed that changing your religion is difficult because “it is hard to be accepted in your community again” and “traditions are much more difficult to break.”

Education & media: Participants also explored the impact of Islam on education. Canadian youth asked if Islam placed young people at a “disadvantage educationally”. While some participants agreed, others identified this statement as a testament to global misperceptions about Islam. Participants from both Islamic and non-Islamic countries agreed that the media is partly to blame for this misperception.

“unfortunately, whoever gets their info from the news only sees and hears the worst. I have many Islamic friends and they love their beliefs.”

participant from Canada

Conflict

“here many children have lost their parents because of war, or their parents are poor, or they have to travel to fetch water. They have many problems.”

participant from Eritrea

Eritrean and Palestinian participants repeatedly discussed how the conflicts in their countries impacted their lives and a young person’s right to education. Eritrean youth focused on the recently ended war, and Palestinian youth on the current occupation.

Other participants were very curious about the situations in Eritrea and Palestine, and asked what would happen to girls if they “went against the occupation to attend school” (Canada), and what other dangers youth in their countries faced.

Teachers’ Salaries

All participants agreed that a strong connection exists between teachers’ salaries and quality of education. Young people stated that teachers lose interest in teaching, transfer to private schools, go on strike, or are forced out of the profession because their salaries are so low.

“the levels of education are low because teachers are not paid well so they loose the interest of teaching.”

participant from Zambia

What can young people do? When asked what could be done, young people felt that students were powerless, but that governments “should take the teachers to better colleges for training and they should also pay them higher wages.” (Zambia)

Education & employment

Discussions about girls’ education led to women in the work place. Young people talked about job opportunities for women, stating that in many countries women receive lower salaries, or are only hired because of their physical appearance. Participants from Sudan, however, discussed how women have access to a lot of high ranking jobs in their country.

What young people can do?

Participants felt that governments were primarily responsible for improving the educational opportunities of young people. However young people did put forth some action points for themselves:

- ✓ *“I think that we should help other who would like to learn for improving their life even if we support them which words it can help them”* participant from Oman
- ✓ *“one thing that we as students can do though is to start small...find a solution and work from there so that a change will develop and things can be different so youth can get their rights”* participant from Canada

PARTICIPATION

The discussion about participation focused mostly on why young people do not have a voice and what can be done to encourage adults to listen. Young people felt they could contribute significantly and be effective change makers if given the opportunity to participate.

Why adults don’t listen

Variable reasons were given for why adults do not listen to young people, including:

- People still think youth are not mature enough (Sudan)
- Young people are not unified (Canada)
- Adults do not recognize young people’s potential (Canada, Czech republic)
- Cultural norms prevent intergenerational dialogue (Czech republic)
- Youth and children are stereotyped as unable to understand (Canada)

“we have to educate the adults to make them realise that we have so much more to say than they think”

participant from Canada

Voting

“I think it would definitely be a good thing if younger people could vote. It would be a clearer way of getting a point across. We have no guarantee that our letters and petitions are read. A vote is something which must be counted.”

participant from Canada

Canadian participants engaged in a lively debate about voting, including a discussion of its benefits, why young people are prevented from voting, and who should be allowed to vote.

Participants felt that young people are barred from voting because they are thought of as “ignorant to politics” and unable to make good choices. One participant stated that she “...would argue that some adults who do vote are also uninformed.” (Canada)

Participants also debated who should be allowed to vote, questioning whether or not people who do not exercise their right should still have the privilege. Or whether or not public offenders should be allowed to vote.

Media

The media was characterized both as a powerful tool and as an obstacle to youth participation. Participants recognized that getting the media involved was an effective way to make their voices heard. However, participants also felt that the media often negatively represented young people,

“the media coverage we got [at the peaceful protest] made us look like we had no idea what we were doing.”
Participant from Canada

What young people can do

Young people focused on three ways in which they could make a difference:

- ✓ Youth leaders: *“I think we have to find leaders in our communities (i.e. girl guides) and they need to start by helping out with younger kids, teaching them and helping them, because in the end its our youth that can be changed, not our parents or grandparents.”*
- ✓ Committees: *“By my own experience, I have seen my voice into action through comities. I have insisted that at least one youth sit on every committee in the community. It has a little bit of impact, better than nothing.”*
- ✓ Write to governments: *“Well, the options they taught us in elementary school was to write to your representative in the government or tell your parents about the different politicians running so they can make a more informed voting choice.”*

Suggestions for 27 November chat

- How to improve the barriers to education and participation (Canada)
- Religion (Sudan)
- Why girls’ education is considered more important than boy’s education (Eritrea)
- What sort of youth participation does actually make some difference? (Czech Republic)
- What do you think about what your country is doing for education?
- How can young people make a difference?