



## What Young People Are Saying About...

### EDUCATION, ROLE MODELS & YOUTH LEADERSHIP

On 27 November 2002, *Voices of Youth* and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) jointly hosted a chat with young people from 10 countries in five different regions: Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Eritrea, Kenya, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Sudan, Switzerland and Zambia.

The chat was the second in a two-part series of chats exploring child and youth rights and the responsibilities that accompany those rights. As with the preparatory chat on 6 November 2002, young people used the chat as an occasion to discuss:

- ❖ The importance of education, and specifically girl's education
- ❖ Barriers to education, and
- ❖ The right to express oneself freely and be heard.

#### Overview

Although the overall topic was the same for both chats, the issues young people chose to address differed significantly by chat. On 6 November, participants focused on religion and low teachers' salaries as two of the greatest barriers to education, and limited the discussion on participation to voting and a lack of communication with, and support by, decision makers.

On 27 November, however, young people broadened the discussion of education to include examples of non-formal education and the integral role of parents in the learning process. In addition, participants from both industrialized and developing countries recognized poverty as a global barrier to education, brainstormed on what makes a "good" teacher, and renounced corporal punishment in the classroom.

Young people also used the second chat as an occasion to explore specific means of overcoming barriers to girls' education. In addition to highlighting how young people themselves can effectuate change, participants defined a "good" role model and spoke of the value of role models for young people in general, and young girls specifically.

Participants devoted the majority of the second hour of the chat to participation. Unlike 6 November, wherein voting dominated the discussion of participation, young people debated the merits and drawbacks of individual and group participatory efforts and called for partnerships with and decision makers.

The chat concluded with young people outlining concrete goals and objectives for themselves and their peers. Participants clearly saw themselves as capable agents of change, leaders, promoters of conflict resolution, and educators.

The following is a brief summary of the chat.

## The Value of Education

All participants agreed on the importance of an education. They discussed the benefits of education to the individual and to society as a whole, stating that access to a basic education:

- ✓ Promotes gender equality
- ✓ Develops knowledge and awareness
- ✓ Provides young people with the skills needed to make a change
- ✓ Empowers both girls and boys

“Education can give us the power and knowledge to do all of the things in all of the topics we have discussed today. That is why it is so important.”

*participant from Canada*

## The School

“No I think treating the children well and making them think that they are responsible is the best way.”  
*participant from Sudan*

“...if we want them to learn we should respect them first and treat them properly.”  
*participant from Oman*

Young people explored various aspects of the school environment, giving particular attention to corporal punishment, what makes a good teacher, and bullying.

**Corporal punishment:** Independent of country of origin, all participants agreed that teachers should not hit their students. Not only did participants address the physical brutality of corporal punishment, but they also acknowledged the psychological and emotional consequences. Young people stated that corporal punishment:

- ❖ “Promotes fear in the school”
- ❖ Creates resentment between students and teachers
- ❖ Prevents students from learning
- ❖ “Makes positive things negative” and
- ❖ Is not an effective means of discipline

- ✓ Young people called on teachers to respect students, create a safe and supportive environment, and encourage learning.
- ✓ They also called for laws to prevent violence in the classroom, and “authorities” to enforce these laws

**What makes a good teacher?:** Participants had definitive ideas about what makes a good teacher. Definitions addressed character traits, teaching styles, rapport with students and the ability to teach life skills.

- ❖ “Someone who is down to earth and considers the problems of each child and has a connection with a child one way or another.” (participant from Canada)
- ❖ “The good teacher who gives pupils confidence in doing things by their own...the teacher who helps his pupils in their problems whatever these problems are also the one who is educational skills and talents is a good teacher.” (participant from Oman)
- ❖ “Someone who wants you to learn and nurtures your leaning, while keeping discipline. Teachers are people who make huge differences in their community.” (participant from Canada)
- ❖ “A good teacher is someone who recognises that they can also learn from their students, and loves what they are teaching.” (participant from Canada)

“The very fact that there are good teachers who teach and are role models for their students will institute changes in the community through either the teacher, or the students who were inspired by them. People do not realize how important teachers are based on the impact they have on those they teach and influencing a person.”

*participant from Canada*

**Bullying:** Participants from Canada discussed bullying in the school. They gave personal accounts and tried to understand why people bully. They acknowledged that bullying can be both physical and

psychological, and suggested that “bullies mostly start up because in their own lives they are being controlled and want to push that feeling on another individual.” (participant from Canada)

## Non-formal Education

Participants recognized that learning and an education can take place both inside and outside of the school or formal classroom. Young people explored the use of technology as an educational tool. They also discussed the value of non-formal education for young people affected by conflict and war.

*The Internet:* Young people from Canada brought up the value of the Internet as an educational tool. While others agreed on its value, it was acknowledged that access to the “Internet is a privilege...u can’t depend on it for education” (participant from Sudan), and that some “knowledge of how to read and write, so some schooling, would have to be done beforehand.” (participant from Canada)

## Parents

“I think it its important to have the parents start doing some teaching, even if its not formal education...”  
*participant from Canada*

Young people from all countries agreed that parents can contribute significantly to a child’s education by

- ✓ Teaching them life skills
- ✓ Supporting them in school, and
- ✓ Contributing the necessary finances.

However, participants recognized that parents are often limited by their own level of education, and that “if the parents aren’t educated they don’t see the benefit for their children.” (participant from Switzerland).

## Barriers to Education

Participants acknowledged that many different elements can directly and indirectly act as barriers to education. Focusing on three specific “barriers”, young people explored the impacts of

- ❖ Religion & tradition
- ❖ War & conflict
- ❖ Poverty

*Religion & tradition:* Young people were particularly interested in revisiting the impact of religion, and specifically Islam, on education—a topic that was addressed in detail during the 6 November chat. Overall, participants felt that religion was not the barrier, but that local norms and traditions stopped young people, and particularly girls, from going to school.

*media:* Participants also discussed the role of the media and its representations of Islam. Young people from Kenya, Palestine and Sudan all felt that the media misrepresents Islam, is “alarmist and extremist” and does not provide a global and unbiased perspective.

“Religion does not stop girls from going to school, traditions & cultures do...I think that religion & tradition is a barrier to education in most countries in Africa.”

*participants from Kenya*

“...u forget that we are suffering from occupation which is consider as one of the most barriers... occupation with all the check points and closes prevent students from going to schools...in Palestine we highly believe in education and this is y we are trying our best to struggle and to go to school despite the problems.”

*participants from Palestine*

**War & conflict:** Participants from the Occupied Palestinian Territory led a discussion about education in times of war and conflict. They gave examples of young people taking lessons in the streets and in “house schools”, and spoke of the current conflict as one of the greatest barriers to education. A participant from Sudan also spoke of the negative impact of war on education with a specific reference to the difficulties of educating refugees and internally displaced children.

**Poverty:** Young people from both developing and industrialized countries acknowledged poverty as one of the greatest—and global—barriers to education. Participants from Palestine talked about how many young people “have to leave their schools to make money.”

Interestingly, participants from Palestine felt that poverty forced more boys than girls out of school, because boys are seen as better able to work and earn money.

“In our streets you will find so many small boys sell chewing gums and tissues instead of being at schools...in fact boys are more affected by the economic situation than girls.”

*Participant from Palestine*

## Girls' Education

Girls should stand up for their rights, stop being frightened and ask for an education

*Participants from Canada & Kenya*

Although young people discussed the value of education for both boys and girls, they tailored the discussion on overcoming these barriers to girls' education specifically. Participants called for:

- ✓ Determination and strength from the girls themselves
- ✓ Women role models, and
- ✓ Educate parents to know the advantages of girls' education

## Role models

Participants devoted a significant amount of time to the discussion of role models. They felt that “good” role models were able to convince society of the value of girls' education as well as inspire and give hope to the girls themselves.

**What makes a good role model?:** As with a “good” teacher, participants from all countries offered up their definition of a good role model.

- ❖ “people who fight difficult situations and take the best out of their lives and do something for their countries is a good role model” (participant from Sudan)
- ❖ “a good role model is someone who shows you that you can make a difference and become more than you ever thought you could be.” (participant from Canada)
- ❖ “Best role model try to make the best out of themselves and i like it because that is exactly what women are doing these days” (participant from Kenya)
- ❖ “i actually think the best role models don't nessecarily idealize anything, but are just normal people who have accomplished something” (participant from Canada)

“Female role models can convince society that women are capable of helping their country and do more than sit at home.”

*Participant from Sudan*

“Girls see another strong female leader and it gives them inspiration to succeed like they have.”

*Participant from Canada*

*Young people as role models:* Participants also gave examples of young people as role models, citing a 14 year old girl in Canada who started a library in her community, a 12 year old pastor of a church, and Girl Guides around the world.

## Participation

The majority of the second hour was devoted to youth participation. Young people debated whether or not an individual can make a difference or if there is only strength in numbers, spoke of the value of youth-adult partnership, and gave examples of successful youth participation.

“Sometimes you can only reach as far as other people will let you. If they don’t want to listen to you, no change will happen... But if people believe in what you say, there’s no telling how much of an impact you will have.”

*Participant from Canada*

One of the most involved debates of the chat revolved around whether or not an individual can be an agent of change, or if only groups can make a difference.

*Strength in numbers:* Most participants felt that it is easier to be heard and make a difference when you are many people working together collectively. Large groups attract the attention of the media, “allowing the world to see what you’re doing” and broadening your support base.

*The individual:* Still, participants stated that “movements need an individual to lead them and be a symbol”: Without an effective leader and individual commitment on the part of every member of the movement, no change can be made, even if many people are walking together.

## Youth-Adult Partnership

Participants stated that working with adults was the only way to show “the older generation that the younger generation is mature and capable.”

“Synergy is the only way we can ever get anything done.”

*Participant from Kenya*

- ✓ Young people called for adults to listen to their voices, invest more faith in them, and learn from them.

*Successful youth participation:* Young people spoke of youth parliaments, youth forums and taking part in policy making decisions as examples of successful instances of youth participation.



Sudan: “here in Sudan, we have a council for child welfare which has started a parliament for youth every state has one, youth gather together to find out what their problems are and address the people whom they think can help them.”



Kenya: “we drafted a new constitution children were given a voice with the help of adults... well we were allowed to participate and we now have an entire section of it just about youth but it has not been implemented yet.”



Czech Republic: “In summer we have a terrible floods in our country and during it adults and youth worked well together.”

## Young people in the community

Participants gave specific examples of how they are making a difference in their communities.

- ✓ Being girl guides (Canada)
- ✓ Community sanitation (Kenya)
- ✓ Teaching younger children (Canada)
- ✓ Helping older people with their (Zambia)
- ✓ Promoting AIDS awareness (Canada)
- ✓ Working with the National Council for Child Welfare (Sudan)

## What can young people do?

In addition to what they are already doing, participants outlined specific goals and objectives for themselves and other young people around the world<sup>1</sup>.

- ✓ “I think the first and most effective way is in working together [with young people with the same opinions]. It makes a more powerful voice. (participant from Czech Republic)
- ✓ “My suggestion is to become a doer instead of just a hearer, and things can be done. a doer: hears and accepts the need for action, resulting in working towards the common goal of the people and their concerns.” (participant from Canada)
- ✓ “They have to take action and start take a responsability.” (participant from Denmark)
- ✓ “We can convince all the youth around us that we have to be heard so new ideas can come out...and we have to show the children what their rights are so if any violations happen we can know” (participant from Sudan)
- ✓ “My suggestion is that you should not be afraid to try your best for something you believe in...You should try to teach people who don't know any better so that they can understand and possibly help you in your cause. (participant from Canada)
- ✓ “Lead by example. Things like this chat are excellent - if we gain a greater understanding of what we face, we can face it better. 'know your enemy' and all that!” (participant from Canada)
- ✓ “The basic thing that the right atmosphere which should be provided to young learners will guide them to be more creative in thier learning and that will encourage teachers to go with this.” (participant from Oman)

## Future chats

In conclusion, young people put forth suggestions for future chats:

- ❖ Protection of children under occupation or war
- ❖ Female Genital Mutilation
- ❖ Adolescent pregnancy

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**Voices of Youth**

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<sup>1</sup> Due to Ramadan and other commitments, a certain number of participants had to leave the chat before this exercise.