

EDUCATING GIRLS, ERADICATING POVERTY

International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 17 October 2009 Joint NGO Statement

On United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and in the twentieth anniversary year of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, we reiterate the call to ensure that girls have access to adequate and effective education as an essential prerequisite for the eradication of poverty across the world and the realisation of the rights of the girl-child.

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, 189 member states of the United Nations unanimously adopted the Millennium Declaration, which included a set of eight goals - the MDGs - designed to focus national and international development efforts on the major challenges facing developing countries up until the year 2015. The third MDG seeks to promote gender equality and empower women. As its target, it seeks to "eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education not later than 2015." Implicit within this target is the conviction that poverty cannot be effectively addressed unless this goal is achieved. Further, it underscores the importance of women's education in ensuring the success of the Millennium agenda.

The target of eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 has already been missed. The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009 found,

Unequal opportunities resulting from biases based on gender, ethnicity, income, language or disabilities are common and represent a major obstacle to universal education. Children from poor communities and girls are the most likely to lose out.

In 2007, girls accounted for 54 per cent of the world's out-of-school population but in some countries the gender gap was far higher.

The MDGs built on the goals set in the Beijing Platform for Action, unanimously adopted by 189 countries at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women, and due for its 15 year review in 2010. The Platform put the girl child in the forefront of the global agenda. Section 71 of the Platform states:

Discrimination in girls' access to education persists in many areas, owing to customary attitudes, early marriages and pregnancies, inadequate and gender-biased teaching and educational materials, sexual harassment and lack of adequate and physically and otherwise accessible schooling facilities. Girls undertake heavy domestic work at a very early age. Girls and young women are expected to manage both educational and domestic responsibilities, often resulting in poor scholastic performance and early drop-out from the educational system. This has long-lasting consequences for all aspects of women's lives.

More than just increasing the figures and percentages, the Platform aims for gender parity in accessing education by calling on governments and other relevant sectors to:

1. Create an educational and social environment, in which women and men, girls and boys, are treated equally and encouraged to achieve their full potential, respecting their freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, and where educational resources promote non-stereotyped images of women and men;
2. Provide access for and retention of girls and women at all levels of education;
3. Create a gender-sensitive educational system in order to ensure equal educational and training opportunities and full and equal participation of women in educational administration and policy- and decision-making;
4. Develop training programmes and materials for teachers and educators that raise awareness about the status, role and contribution of women and men in the family, as defined [by the Platform], and society;
5. Provide funding for special programmes, such as programmes in mathematics, science and computer technology, to advance opportunities for all girls and women; and
6. Provide non-formal education, especially for rural women, in order to realise their potential with regard to health, micro-enterprise, agriculture and legal rights.

For over 35 years, the span of a generation, the data have been available to document the correlation between a variety of crucial development indicators and the education of girls. Educating girls contributes to increased economic productivity and improved family nutrition. From reductions in infant mortality, fertility, and the incidence of AIDS to improvements in the environment, it has been amply demonstrated that it is the mother's education that makes the difference and that the positive effects increase with every additional year a girl stays in school. For every year beyond fourth grade that girls go to school, family size drops 20% and wages rise 20%. Female literacy, alone, has been shown to play a much more important role in promoting social well-being than other variables related to the general level of wealth in a society. When all the benefits are taken into account, educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment that can be made in the developing world. So important is the

education of girls, that if a lack of resources forces a choice, parents may well be advised to consider giving first priority to the education of their daughters

Girl children as well as boy children must be valued by their families and by society. Unless we act to ensure girls' rights during childhood; that girls have access to quality education and that girls acquire the knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to realize their full potential, we cannot achieve gender equality and the real empowerment of women. Without education for all girls, we cannot eradicate poverty.

Endorsed by:

Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement Inc
Australian Bahá'í Community
Australian Federation of Medical Women
Australian Federation of University Women
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French Association of University Women
Human Rights Council of Australia
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UNIFEM Australia
Unity of Ethiopians in WA Inc
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Note:

International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is observed annually on 17 October. Its purpose is to acknowledge the effort and struggle of people living in poverty, to allow the poor to make their concerns heard and to promote awareness of the need to eradicate poverty and destitution in all countries. In Australia, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is included in "Anti-Poverty Week", a collaborative endeavour to strengthen public understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and hardship around the world and in Australia and to encourage research, discussion and action to address these problems. As 2009 is the twentieth anniversary of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the focus of International Day for the Eradication of Poverty this year is on realising the rights of children living in poverty.