

Girls' education: saving lives, promoting development

Education is a fundamental human right – every child is entitled to it. This is recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. But an estimated 75 million children worldwide are not in school. Over half – 41 million – of these are girls.

A lack of education can trap children in poverty and increase vulnerability to disease and exploitation. Girls are particularly at risk as they are also more likely to become victims of sexual violence or maternal mortality – both major causes of death for women aged 15-44.

Educating girls, particularly beyond primary level, not only saves lives but promotes development too. It boosts economies by increasing the numbers of skilled employees in the workforce. Educated girls also make more capable mothers. Studies have shown a striking correlation between mothers' education levels and the number of their children who die before their fifth birthday.

The UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) – a group of UN bodies led by the UN Children's Fund, UNICEF – works to eliminate the inequalities which condemn girls to a life without quality education. These barriers can take many forms, from cultural prejudices to economic constraints, such as school fees. Often, if a family cannot afford to send all children to school, girls are the ones left behind. Girls are also more likely to stay at home to do domestic chores and look after siblings or elderly or sick relatives.

UNGEI works with governments to break down these barriers. By forming partnerships with local and international actors, it mobilises resources for targeted projects and promotes strategies that puts girls' education first in policies and budgets. UNGEI also works to improve education overall through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Goal 2 aims for universal free primary education worldwide by 2012, and Goal 3 calls on governments to eliminate gender disparity in education. Progress has been made. Girls' primary enrolment increased in all developing regions between 2000 and 2006, and the proportion of children in developing countries enrolled in primary education also increased from 83% 88% during that period.

However, there is still much to be done, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Only 71% of children in that region were attending primary school in 2006. This is an increase on the 58% enrolled in 2000, but still a long way from the goal of 100% enrolment by 2015. And girls still out-number boys in the out-of-school population worldwide, with the widest gaps in gender parity being in Oceania, sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia.

The situation for girls in school is improving, but greater efforts need to be made through initiatives such as UNGEI to ensure that girls receive quality and accessible education. Education is their right, and also the cornerstone of sustainable development.