

GCE statement on Gender and Education: GAW 2011 and beyond

2011 marks the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day, a milestone in the struggle for the realization of women's rights worldwide. The Global Campaign for Education (GCE) is proud to be part of social movements that fight for gender equity and to support women's emancipation and empowerment. We believe that education is key to overcoming gender inequity and promoting transformation of societies. Thus, GCE's 2011 Global Action Week for Education For All (EFA) issues a clarion call for urgent political action to achieve true gender equality in *and* through public education:

'It's a Right, Make It Right!'

Over the last 50 years, a number of international agreements have set out state obligations and enshrined political commitments intended to eliminate gender inequalities in education, including all forms of gender stereotypes and discrimination, which have far reaching consequences in the experiences lived within schools and moreover, in society. The two most important international legal instruments are the 1998 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by all but two countries in the world, and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified by 174 countries. These treaties oblige signatories to progressively realise the right to education, and to achieve gender equality within education and through education. CEDAW recognises explicitly that the realisation of specific rights depends on a profound shift in social and power relations between men and women, stating that **'member states will adopt the necessary measures to change socio cultural behavior of men and women so as to eliminate discrimination and the perception of hierarchy between men and women (male superiority) as well as all gender stereotypes'**. The 1995 Beijing Declaration from the Fourth World Conference on Women also situated equal rights to education within the wider framework of rights fulfillment for women. More recently, education advocates have rallied round campaigns and lobbying to achieve the 2000 Education For All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Although not legally binding, these important agreements signified shared political commitment of States to improve education provision, with specific provisions on gender.

In recent years, the target expressed in the MDG framework, of achieving gender *parity* in school enrolments, has gained significant traction in the international community. This has led to a dangerous complacency about apparent progress made over the last 10 years, since the share of girls in the total number of children out of primary school has shrunk from 60% to 53% during this period. This progress, while welcome, is far from the complete picture. We know that girls are far more likely to drop out before completing primary education, have markedly worse experience in school and scant chance of progressing to secondary school and tertiary education. Gender stereotypes still prevail in schools as do unequal power relations, perpetuating gender inequalities within the education system and society as a whole. It is hardly surprising then, that nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are women. GCE remains resolute in its commitment to the more expansive EFA vision of gender *equality* in education, which would seek to see a profound re-orientation of education policies towards ensuring equality of experience for both sexes. **Redressing this injustice requires a deliberate and conscientious effort, led by governments and permeating every level of education.** GCE's role as the leading advocacy coalition in education is clear: to demand that states fulfill their obligations under international law and live up to their political commitments.

In a forthcoming report on girls' education, GCE will examine the reality behind the rhetoric of progress on girls' enrolment, revealing how and why girls' right to a comprehensive and empowering education is being denied through the education cycle. The report will use the so-called "4 A framework" to analyse the effects and underlying causes of this violation, showing that for girls there are significant – and gender-specific – constraints on enjoying an education that is Available, Accessible, Acceptable and Adaptable to their needs and circumstances.

The obstacles for the realization of the right to education for girls and women are manifold:

- The practice of charging official school fees or the levying of other charges, for example for uniforms, books or boarding, remains pervasive. Poor families are not able to afford to send all their children to school, and girls often lose out.
- Household poverty also leads to child labour; girls are kept out of school to contribute to bringing in income, or fulfilling domestic duties.
- In some parts of the world, early marriage is still practiced, resulting in girls being withdrawn from school. Moreover, in many countries it is common for girls to be expelled if they fall pregnant, sometimes with no option to return after their baby is born.
- Girls are more vulnerable than boys to physical and sexual abuse in and en route to school. This outrageous violation of rights leads to increased dropouts especially if school is far from home. Bad experiences also lead to girls withdrawing from school or underperforming academically. These factors become acute in situations of violent conflict, where education establishments are especially at risk and armed groups specifically target girls for sexual violence, intimidation and recruitment into combat or domestic and sexual slavery.
- Another important issue is the social and cultural discrimination that take places within schools from the early years, through gender stereotyping, which manifests itself in many forms such as: differentiated teacher behavior towards girls and boys; school curriculum and materials, power structures within schools, relationship between peers; the differentiated occupation of time and space (more time and space occupied by boys); differentiated expectations as to the future of boys and girls.
- The role of teachers is complex. If one hand having more women teachers can help girls feel safer in schools, in a context where violence prevails, and can provide inspiration for girls who may come from cultures where women's roles are confined to the domestic sphere, on the other the predominance of women in the teaching profession is a reflection of it being undervalued and demeaned. This is particularly true in early childhood education, unfortunately still the least valued phase of education.
- Gender discrimination is often associated with other discriminations, generating multiple discriminations (gender discrimination is often aggravated by income and racial discrimination, among others). The resistance to acknowledge the existence of such discrimination only aggravates and perpetuates it. This can be seen, for example, when analyzing adult literacy, considering most illiterate people are poor women and girls, indigenous, coming from the rural area.

An alternative vision, preferred by GCE, sees schools as spaces and places for potential "re-education of gender relations", fostering changes in the relation between men and women, girls and boys, the deconstruction of stereotypes and a repositioning of masculinities, which must be more sensitive and responsible. It views education as a key tool for redressing gender imbalance in wider society and an

opportunity for overcoming social and cultural norms that discriminate against girls and women. GCE's forthcoming report will outline key changes needed in the global discourse on gender and education, discuss the need for more sensitive global targets, and will recommend specific changes in policies, processes and practices by national governments and important international actors to ensure true gender equality in education.

While GCE is first and foremost concerned with the achievement of equal rights in and through education for women and men, boys and girls, we are also fully conscious of the indivisibility of human rights, all of which interrelate. This means that overcoming gender discrimination and inequalities fosters and promotes many other human rights.

The right to education promotes awareness and critical thinking, enabling women to claim all other human rights and make more informed decisions. This articulates to advancing their capacity to demand that the State delivers on their right to health and healthy lives, to putting in place employment legal and policy frameworks that are in tune with gender equity, as well as advancing other policies that promote the fulfilment of all their other rights. It also articulates with increased awareness in terms of knowledge to access legal and judicial mechanisms that can protect women from rights violations, including exploitation and domestic violence. It furthermore fosters women participation in countries democratic life, increasing their participation in decision making arenas and in formal power structures.

The Global Campaign for Education understands it is urgent and indispensable that there be full recognition that gender discrimination and gender inequalities still prevail in our world. Recognising the problem to its full extent, its causes and its consequences, is crucial for its overcoming. The Global Campaign for Education also understands that the school is a privileged space to foster an education based on human rights, which promotes the overcoming of all forms of discrimination within the education system and in society as a whole.

This Global Action Week will mobilize GCE members in over 100 countries all over the world to come together and call for politicians to **'Make it Right'** for gender equality in education. In schools we will discuss the inspiring stories of how the lives of women are changed through education and consult the views of boys and girls on the problem of gender discrimination. We will present Parliamentarians, Ministers and Heads of State with our demands in the form of manifestoes and petitions. Our coalitions will join forces with national women's groups and enlist the support of high-profile women to amplify our demands. Messages about the value of education for all and the programmes of action needed to reach gender equality will be broadcast through radio and television and in print media. We will use creative methods – street drama, story-reading and art projects – to convey our points. And throughout 2011 the GCE Board and Secretariat, accompanied by all its membership, will be campaigning and lobbying on the global, regional and national stage to ensure gender justice prevails within and beyond schools.