

New UN report urges push to end gender disparities in education



Girls learn to read in Bubel village in Orissa, India

17 September 2010 – Girls and boys in only 85 countries will have equal access to primary and secondary education by 2015 if present trends continue, according to a new United Nations report, which calls for greater efforts to reduce gender disparities in education.

The annual edition of the Global Education Digest, published by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**), adds that 72 countries are not likely to reach the goal of gender parity in education by 2015 – one of six education goals set by world leaders gathered at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000.

“This new data tells us that we need to reaffirm our commitment to education and gender equality,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova.

“The advances made in improving girls’ and women’s access to education and training over the past decades risk being undermined by reductions in international aid and national investments as the world struggles to cope with inter-locking crises. Yet, we all know that compromising the education of girls and women will only lead to more vulnerability and reinforce the vicious cycle of poverty.”

The report comes on the eve of the UN summit that begins on Monday in New York, where world leaders, civil society groups, foundations and the private sector will meet to discuss how to advance the ambitious anti-poverty targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**), which also have a target date of 2015.

Among its other findings, the report says that worldwide, girls are more likely to never enter primary school than boys. In South and West Asia, only about 87 girls start primary school for every 100 boys, according to data compiled by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (**UIS**).

Meanwhile, in sub-Saharan Africa, about 93 girls begin their primary education for every 100 boys.

At the national level, the chances of starting primary school for boys are at least 10 per cent greater than those for girls in Afghanistan, Benin, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, the Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Yemen.

“Girls in these countries are often excluded entirely from education,” noted UNESCO, adding that UIS data reveals that households are more likely to send a boy who is past the official entry age to school than a girl.

At the same time, once girls do gain entry to school, they are more likely than boys to successfully complete primary education. In many countries boys tend to drop out of school more than girls.

The report says that disparities against girls in secondary education are more severe than those against boys, with boys having greater access than girls in 38 per cent of countries.

For every 100 boys enrolled in secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, there were about 79 girls in 2008 compared to 82 girls in 1999.

According to UNESCO, gender disparities are equally marked in tertiary education in all regions of the world. The only countries to achieve parity at this level are Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, Mexico, Swaziland and Switzerland.

In low-income countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guinea and Niger, there are fewer than 35 female tertiary students for every 100 male students.

Female students in wealthy countries, meanwhile, outnumber men at the tertiary level. In Iceland, there are almost twice as many women enrolled in tertiary education as men. In the United States and the Russia, there are about 129 and 126 female students for every 100 male students, respectively.

The report adds that at the bachelor's degree level, most countries reporting data have achieved gender parity in terms of graduates. Women are more likely to pursue the next level of education, accounting for 56 per cent of graduates with master's degrees.

However, men surpass women in virtually all countries at the highest levels of education, accounting for 56 per cent of all PhD graduates and 71 per cent of researchers.

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