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UN forum tackles enduring disparities in education faced by girls



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With evidence showing that disparities in education widen as girls grow, the United Nations today kicked off a two-day meeting in Paris devoted to gender inequality in classroom achievement and on women's leadership role in education.

The forum on gender equality in education brings together experts, government officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to examine the root causes of inequality between girls' and boys' school performances.

While gender equality in education remains a crucial issue for many countries, women still account for two thirds of the world's illiterate population and the majority of out-of-school children are girls, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), which organized the forum.

“Equality is not a numbers game,” UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said in her [address](#) to the meeting.

“Equality implies the same chances of learning, of benefiting from equitable treatment within the school, and the same opportunities in terms of employment, wages and civic participation,” she added.

Ms. Bokova noted that UNESCO's 2011 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* paints a “worrying” picture of enduring disparities and challenges to equality.

The Education for All goals were agreed to by more than 160 countries at the World Education Forum in 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, with the aim of achieving 100 per cent child enrolment in primary schools by 2015. Improving access to education is also one of the eight Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)) world leaders have pledged to achieve by 2015.

“Trends show that enrolment ratios have increased worldwide in primary and lower secondary levels – but that gender differences remain,” said Ms. Bokova.

Arab and sub-Saharan African States face “serious” gender disparities at the lower secondary level, and the problem gets worse at the upper secondary level in South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Also, research from 15 countries in East and Southern Africa between 2000 and 2007 show that learning achievements in mathematics and reading, and gender equality in leadership and teaching staff progressed very slowly or not at all.

“Clear evidence is mounting from all sides,” Ms. Bokova stated. “Disparities in education grow as girls grow. These disparities start early across the world, and they run deep.

“All of this shows that girls are getting lost along the way, falling out of education. It shows they are not getting everywhere an education of quality and equality.

Participants at the forum will also consider the progress achieved in reducing the gender gap, and the obstacles that stand in the way of women's ability to achieve senior leadership positions in the public sector and more specifically in education.

The outcome of the meeting will be presented at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 5 October, on the occasion of World Teachers' Day.

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