WHAT IS UNGEI
The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a partnership of organizations dedicated to promoting girls’ education. It was launched in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to respond to a troubling reality: Of the millions of children worldwide who were not in school, more than half were girls. That reality continues today, seven years later: the right to an education is still denied to scores of millions of boys and girls living in countries in every region of the world. And the majority of children denied this right continue to be girls.

UNGEI’s work is driven by Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2: Achieve universal primary education with the target to ensure that by 2015 all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling and MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women with the target to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015. Understanding that achieving these goals and ensuring a special focus on girls, who are frequently the most disadvantaged in schooling in developing countries, would require a concerted effort by all partners, UNGEI became the Education for All (EFA) flagship for girls’ education.

The rationale for the UNGEI partnership acknowledges that in addition to the fundamental issue of education as a human right, educating girls is one of the most cost-effective ways to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutritional status and health, reduce poverty and halt the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

The partnership embraces the United Nations system, governments, donors, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, communities and families. It provides stakeholders with a platform for action and galvanizes their efforts to get all girls into school, to ensure that they receive a quality education that prepares them to be full and active participants in their societies. The Initiative works at global, regional and country levels. Its Global Advisory Committee (GAC) consists of key partners who share planning, decision-making, guidance and accountability for the entire partnership. Two partners co-chair the GAC on a rotating basis, with UNICEF serving as the lead agency and secretariat.

Perhaps the greatest achievements and the greatest challenges in girls’ education partnerships are found at the country level. UNGEI supports country-led development and seeks to influence decision-making and investments in ways that ensure gender equity and equality in national education policies, plans and programmes. Partners mobilize resources for targeted project interventions, country programmes and large-scale systemic interventions designed to affect the whole education system. UNGEI streamlines its efforts by strategic use of existing mechanisms such as poverty reduction strategies, sector-wide approaches and UN Development Assistance Frameworks. UNGEI focal points in different regions facilitate the coordination of girls’ education strategies and interventions at the country level.

WHAT UNGEI STANDS FOR
UNGEI is committed to accelerating action on girls’ education and revitalizing the broad social mobilization and high-level political action needed to ensure that every girl, as well as every boy, receives a quality education.

UNGEI’s vision is of a world where all girls and boys have equal access to free, quality education. The partnership works to remove barriers to learning, such as school fees and other education costs, and to provide access to education in emergency situations. It promotes strategies that put the needs of the most disadvantaged, including girls and women, first in education policies, plans and budgets. The Initiative also advocates a cross-sectoral, holistic approach, with balanced investment in education across the life cycle, addressing early childhood education and development for children of poor families, and literacy and empowerment of women and young people. Beyond access to education, UNGEI works for gender equality in a broader sense.

Gender parity in school enrolment is an essential first step on the road to empowerment and equality, but it is nonetheless just that—a first step. Increasingly crucial to UNGEI’s vision is the process called gender ‘mainstreaming’, that is, embracing the full gender perspective, making certain that every aspect of educational policies and programmes is reviewed for its impact on girls and boys. So attention is given to the physical needs of girls as well as boys in the design, construction and upkeep of schools as physical plants; the particular educational needs and experiences of girls as well as boys are considered in the curriculum (in part by promoting sensitivity); and an ongoing effort is made to provide for the psychosocial needs of girls as well as boys in the services delivered at school, especially where conflict and culture consign girls to discrimination, abuse, exploitation and gender-based violence.

Helping policymakers understand that a focus on girls also contributes to boys’ education is critically important. And because of the crucial role that educated mothers play in their children’s education, connecting to adult literacy efforts for women is also essential.

PROGRESS
Substantial progress has been made globally. Girls’ education has been expanding all over the world, but not fast enough and not consistently enough to ensure a basic education for millions of girls still out of school or to ensure the economic and social progress of countries.

The UNGEI partnership is making an impact. Of the 31 countries with education sector plans endorsed by the EFA Fast-Track Initiative (FTI), 20 have UNGEI partners — including DANIDA, DFID, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank — serving as lead agency.
East Asia and the Pacific is home to about one quarter of the world’s children. Overall, the region is close to the goal of universal primary education by 2015. For the period from 2000 to 2005, the primary school net enrolment rate (NER) was 97 per cent for both girls and boys. But behind these positive indicators hide the complexities of the region. The economic crisis of the mid-1990s had a strong impact on enrolment rates, particularly in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. There are wide disparities within and among countries. According to UNESCO, while the majority of countries in the region had primary NERs of 93 per cent or more in 2004, some countries were struggling to get children into school. But education is a priority in the region and many countries have expanded basic education to include not only primary but also lower secondary school.

Gender parity at the primary level has been achieved in most countries in the region. But disparities that favour boys remain in some countries. In East Asia in particular, gender disparities are often greater at higher levels of education. UNESCO estimates that in 2004 in Cambodia and the Lao PDR, for example, there were only 69 and 76 girls respectively per 100 boys enrolled in secondary school. At the same time, more girls than boys were enrolled in secondary school in Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

**BARRIERS TO GIRLS’ EDUCATION**

Poverty, direct and indirect costs of education, and long distances to school are some of the key barriers to getting both girls and boys to school in the region. Further problems include the social exclusion of children from ethnic minorities, who further face a language barrier, migrant groups and those who have been displaced by conflict or other emergencies.

Expansion of the education system has often occurred at the expense of quality. Lack of qualified teachers is a barrier to quality education in such countries as the Lao PDR, Myanmar and the Philippines. Relevance of education remains a concern, and in some countries, completion of primary school and transition to lower secondary school are still challenges.

**UNGEI IN ACTION**

The regional UNGEI partnership for East Asia and the Pacific was launched in May 2002. At country level, UNGEI is active in Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Thailand and Viet Nam. The key objectives of the partnership are: advocating and building strong networks to place girls’ education on the agenda at meetings and events; developing girls’ education advocacy tools; sharing information, data and good practices on girls’ education; and establishing new links and strengthening existing ones with...
other groups and networks working for education and gender issues.

The regional UNGEI partners held a Regional UNGEI Gender in Education Roundtable in July 2007 in Bangkok. A panel of experts debated pressing gender issues at this event, which was attended by representatives from government, humanitarian and social fields and girls’ education activists. The report ‘Towards Equal Opportunities for All: Empowering girls through partnerships in education’ was launched at the event. Jointly published by the regional and country UNGEI partners, the document examines seven case studies: programmes from Cambodia, China, Indonesia and the Philippines addressing the educational needs of girls, particularly those who are marginalized for economic, cultural, social or other reasons.

By embracing bold policy measures backed by strong political will, parts of Eastern and Southern Africa have made significant progress in getting children into school and closing the gender gap. For the period between 2000 and 2005, the region’s primary school net enrolment rate (NER) was 77 per cent – the second lowest in the world. Some countries in the region are a long way from achieving universal primary education, such as Burundi, Ethiopia and the United Republic of Tanzania. On a positive note, these same countries have made tremendous improvement over the years, and a number of others – such as Botswana, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe – are likely to achieve universal primary education by 2015.

UNGEI PARTNERS IN EAPRO
Baha’i International Community, Education Development Center (EDC), ILO, Plan International, Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), UNAIDS, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), UNICEF (co-chair), UNESCO (co-chair), World Vision.
However, secondary school enrolment rates in the region are much lower than for primary, with a NER of 33 per cent for boys and 29 per cent for girls.

While the overall primary net attendance rate indicates that equal percentages of girls and boys attend school, figures for gender parity in education vary greatly from country to country. By 2001, as many as 12 countries – Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe – had reached gender parity in primary education. In fact, according to UNESCO, in 2004, more girls than boys were in primary school in Namibia, South Africa and the United Republic of Tanzania. But girls are still missing out on education, especially in countries where enrolment and literacy rates are lower, such as Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Mozambique. Within poor, marginalized and vulnerable communities, girls face a double disadvantage, particularly in rural areas and among nomadic groups.

BARRIERS TO GIRLS’ EDUCATION
Poverty, low educational quality, weak institutional capacity, poor school conditions and location, and lack of educational relevance and trained teachers are key barriers to education in the region. Gender socialization, literature and text books that promote gender stereotypes, and violence in and around schools are barriers that affect girls’ education in particular.

Poor quality continues to threaten children’s education, particularly in countries with recent dramatic increases in enrolment rates. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, including water and sanitation facilities for girls, and lack of qualified teachers and textbooks may result in students dropping out. Other reasons for dropping out include pregnancy, early marriage, hostile learning environments and societal attitudes towards girl’s education. The AIDS pandemic, conflict and its aftermath are also major barriers to education in the region. As a result of all these barriers, primary school completion and transition to secondary school are still major challenges.

UNGEI IN ESARO
Partnerships for girls’ education have been launched in Botswana, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Promising UNGEI initiatives include the five-year investment programme for girls’ education within the Kenya Education Sector Strategic Plan (KESSP) and the South Africa Girls’ Education Movement, which works through public-private partnerships.

At the regional level, UNGEI is involved in documenting best practices in girls’ education across the region, with examples from Burundi, Lesotho, Uganda and Zambia. Mainstreaming gender into sector-wide approaches (SWAps), sector improvement programs (SIPs) and gender budgeting has also been a priority. To achieve this, UNGEI developed a resource pack and training of key personnel on gender mainstreaming as well as a Gender Audit tool, which has been used in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda.

Since early socialization is the foundation of gender inequalities, gender sensitization is a key factor in all the early childhood development activities in the region, including parenting programs. Another key priority is to support the transition to post-primary education, which remains a big challenge in many countries in the region. National initiatives on transition to post-primary education are being supported in
Government policies and concerted efforts by international and local donors and NGOs have helped to sustain progress towards universal primary education and gender parity in South Asia. Enrolment rates at the primary level have increased in recent years, particularly for girls. For the period between 2000 and 2005, overall net enrolment at the primary level was 87 per cent, but with drastic variation between the region’s countries. Despite increases in enrolment overall, South Asia remains the region with more than one third of the world’s out-of-school children, the majority of whom are girls. In parts of South Asia, only one girl in four attends primary school.

But there is room for optimism. Girls are benefiting from the regional trend towards increased access to education. Significant progress at the primary level was observed between 1999 and 2004 in Afghanistan, India and Nepal. Although gender disparities remain, in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, primary school enrolments are high and rising, progress is occurring in secondary school girls’ enrolment, and gender gaps are falling or disappearing.

Huge challenges remain on quality issues, school retention and completion. There is also the challenge of increasing the enrolment of girls from the poorest

**SOUTH ASIA**

Uganda, Kenya, Madagascar, Zambia and Malawi.

The Girls’ Education Movement (GEM), launched in Kampala, Uganda in August 2001, is a young peoples’ network in Africa established to promote access to quality education for girls and empower them through education. The network is active in Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, South Africa and Uganda. The underlying principle of GEM is involvement of girls themselves, and often boys, as key players in ensuring that they receive a good education. Since its establishment, GEM has engaged in building its members’ capacity for leadership, mathematics, science and technology, promoting safety and security of girls in and around schools, preventing HIV and offering life skills education and school and community mapping, among others.

**UNGEI PARTNERS IN ESARO**

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) is a key partner, offering a Regional Secretariat and 32 country chapters, which enables effective coordination of activities. Collaboration with FAWE gives UNGEI the opportunity to expand its activities by building synergies for the promotion of girls’ education. GEM complements UNGEI activities at the grassroots level through its young peoples’ participation model.
families, the most remote areas or the most culturally conservative settings. But South Asia’s own experience shows that where there’s a will, there’s a way to educate girls.

BARRIERS TO GIRLS’ EDUCATION
Poverty, which makes direct and indirect school fees harder to bear, weak government capacity, poor infrastructure and long distances to school are key barriers to education in South Asia. Education in the region has also been affected by civil unrest, armed conflicts and natural disasters that have destroyed schools, taken the lives of teachers and students and destroyed the stability essential to learning.

Socio-economic inequality is a major challenge in the region, and girls within excluded groups face double discrimination. Indeed, the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society can often be identified simply by asking which children are not in school. Even when schools are physically within reach, the poorest families are faced with stark choices between education and activities related to economic survival. For girls, this often means domestic work.

Training of Young Champions for Education’ is one key activity where young people from six countries in the region are taught about issues such as social inclusion, girls’ education, advocacy for behaviour change, leadership and personality development. In Afghanistan, the Ogata Initiative is a regional comprehensive development assistance programme established by the Government of Japan and supported by Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education and UNICEF that supports community-based schools.

The Girl Stars project has led the UNGEI movement in India. UNICEF, NGOs and other bilateral agencies have partnered government efforts to improve literacy levels in those states that have the largest numbers of out-of-school children or dropouts, with a focus on girls of marginalized and minority communities, which have the highest levels of illiteracy. In Nepal, a column in a local educational paper with nation-wide distribution has been dedicated to UNGEI, and young champions are being selected by their peers through a local radio station.

UNGEI IN ACTION
UNGEI has either been formally launched or has ongoing activities in the eight countries that make up this region. Some of the partnership’s priorities include constructing new schools and providing community-based schools; providing incentives for female teachers; promoting girls’ education and empowerment in national policies; promoting multidimensional and cross-sectoral approaches; including boys; monitoring progress, assessment and mapping; improving the content and quality of teacher training; and strengthening capacity of the Ministry of Education.

UNGEI PARTNERS IN ROSA
Of around 357 million people in West and Central Africa’s 24 nations in 2005, more than half were children under 18 years old and 17 per cent were under 5. High fertility rates in the region and rapid population growth, together with scant national resources, frequent and recurring conflicts and lack of political stability or capabilities, prevent many governments from being able to provide their children with a good quality education.

And for their part, many families in some of the region’s countries favour traditional cultural practices that keep children out of school. Also, even when educational facilities and services are available, in some instances parents choose not to send their children to school, as they judge the quality too poor and the content irrelevant to their cultural context and need. As a result, only about 60 per cent of children of official primary school age were enrolled in school for the period between 2000 and 2005. By the time children reach secondary school age, they are even less likely to go to school, with just 26 per cent of boys and 20 per cent of girls enrolled. The sadly predictable result is that West and Central Africa is home to the smallest proportion of literate adults of any region on the globe: only 60 of every 100 men, and a crushingly low 38 of every 100 women, can read.

**BARRIERS TO GIRLS’ EDUCATION**

West and Central Africa faces three severe obstacles in efforts to promote education for all and gender equality, each related to and reinforcing the other. Poverty is the greatest single challenge, for education in general and for girls in particular. National poverty hampers governments’ ability to provide school spaces, teachers and curricular materials and limits school construction, teacher training and infrastructure upkeep. Meanwhile, poverty in families limits parents’ ability and willingness to enrol children in school, with girls and disabled children at a particular disadvantage when parents decide which child to send to school.

Cultural beliefs and traditions throughout the region contribute to the low status of women and exacerbate gender discrimination against girls. A traditional view of girls as economic agents tends to burden girls with heavy domestic workloads and income responsibilities, keeping girls from enrolling and causing early drop-out. Furthermore, early marriage and pregnancy drive many girls away from school before they complete a full course of education. Conflict, war and political instability come in recurring waves that wrack the region, frequently displacing people, causing social and emotional stress to children and long interruptions in education, and destroying educational infrastructure.
UNGEI IN ACTION

At the regional level, UNGEI was established and launched in April 2006. It comprises almost 30 regional partners represented by international agencies, organizations, NGOs and institutions. Its role is to provide concerted support to national networks of partners. It also facilitates synergy among activities to aggregate results, strengthen capacities at regional and national levels and engage with decision-makers to take action for girls’ education.

The partnership is active in more than half of the region’s 24 countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. UNGEI’s work at the country level includes advocacy, social mobilization, building alliances for partnerships, providing essential learning materials and equipment, renovating and equipping classrooms, training and recruiting teachers, and raising public awareness of the benefits of girls’ education through targeted campaigns.

The partnership has been instrumental in reducing or abolishing school fees in several countries, including Ghana and Liberia. UNGEI also is part of national and international frameworks such as SWAps and PRSPs, where partners constantly push to include gender issues and girls’ education. In addition, UNGEI completed gender reviews for both Liberia and Sierra Leone as part of their successful submissions to the EFA Fast-Track Initiative.

UNGEI PARTNERS IN WCARO

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE/COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

Although gender parity at the primary level has been achieved in nearly all countries, some gender disparities remain. UNESCO estimates indicate disparities against girls in Tajikistan and Turkey, while in Armenia disparities against boys prevail. There are few gender disparities in secondary education, and at the tertiary level girls and women are more likely to be in school and perform better in primary or secondary school than their male counterparts, with the notable exceptions of Turkey and Tajikistan.

Although the education MDGs appear to be achievable across countries, it is important to look beyond national averages as they hide disparities that leave many children out of school, especially children from minority groups, such as the Roma. Cultural patterns related to early marriage and pregnancy amongst the Roma population make progress difficult in some countries. A decline in quality of education continues to be a critical issue in the region, where schooling is often marked by outdated, irrelevant curricula, and people perceive insufficient benefits from education. And while economic recovery, increased public expenditure on education and reform efforts have taken place in many countries in the region, increasing inequalities in access and especially completion of basic education remain a challenge.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

The Middle East and North Africa region has made tremendous progress towards universal primary education over the past 25 years. Primary school participation between 1980 and 2001 increased at an average annual rate of 1.4 percentage points, the fastest pace of any region. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia are all moving closer to universal primary education, with net enrolment ratios of 90 per cent or more in 2004. These countries have either achieved parity or are approaching gender parity in primary education. Despite the huge advances in girls’ education in the region, disparities that are detrimental to girls remain pervasive. Countries such as Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen have some of the lowest enrolment rates in the region. Overall, countries with low enrolment and literacy rates face wider gender disparities in education and literacy. Obstacles to girls’ school participation in the region include poverty – and the related issue of direct and indirect costs, distance to school, social exclusion and insecure school environments. Access is a challenge in some countries because of conflict and humanitarian crises. Quality of education remains a concern, with high grade repetition and a lack of qualified teachers in some countries.
**LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

The Latin America and Caribbean region has made steady progress towards education for all and gender parity, and it is generally on track to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Yet, limited disaggregate data continue to disguise disparities and inequalities in education. Disparities within the region and within countries themselves remain wide, with children in rural, poor, indigenous and African-descended communities less likely to attend school, and in general, the quality of education is low. Gender parity at the primary school level has been achieved overall. However, gender parity in primary education is a relatively new phenomenon and is far from universal among the most marginalized communities, where many girls remain excluded from education. In fact, disparities against girls persist in countries with large indigenous populations such as Bolivia and Guatemala. At the secondary and tertiary levels, there is an inverse gender disparity in the region, with more girls than boys in school in most countries with data. But overall, school participation falls dramatically at the secondary level. Obstacles to school participation in this region include violence, poverty, social exclusion, distance to school and language and ethnicity. The poor quality and limited relevance of education are also of major concern for many countries, with a negative effect on completion rates and on the transition to post-primary and secondary education.

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**GLOSSARY**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AED</td>
<td>Academy for Educational Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASPBAE</td>
<td>Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education</td>
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<td>CAMFED</td>
<td>Campaign for Female Education</td>
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<td>CIDA</td>
<td>Canadian International Development Agency</td>
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<td>DANIDA</td>
<td>Danish International Development Agency</td>
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<td>DFID</td>
<td>United Kingdom Department for International Development</td>
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<td>EFA</td>
<td>Education for All</td>
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<td>FAWE</td>
<td>Forum for African Women Educationalists</td>
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<td>FTI</td>
<td>Fast-Track Initiative</td>
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<td>GAC</td>
<td>Global Advisory Committee</td>
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<td>GCE</td>
<td>Global Campaign for Education</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
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<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>Norad</td>
<td>Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRS</td>
<td>Poverty reduction strategy</td>
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<td>Sida</td>
<td>Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation</td>
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<td>SWAps</td>
<td>Sector-wide approaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNAIDS</td>
<td>Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UNFPA</td>
<td>United Nations Population Fund</td>
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<td>UNGEI</td>
<td>United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>U.S. Agency for International Development</td>
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<td>WFP</td>
<td>United Nations World Food Programme</td>
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Note: Background information on the regions has been extracted from the Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education wiki <http://girlsed.pbwiki.com/FrontPage>. Figures in this publication are as of September 2007. Updated figures from UNESCO and UNICEF are forthcoming in October and December 2007 respectively.

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**GIRLSED-NET**

*GirlsEd-Net* is an online knowledge network about girls’ education hosted in UNGEI’s dynamic website. It aims to facilitate dialogue and information-sharing among UNGEI partners and a broad range of constituencies at the global, regional and national levels. Some of this network’s main activities include a monthly electronic newsletter, *Girls Tool*, information-sharing announcements and eDiscussions. To sign up, visit us at <http://www.ungei.org/listserv/index.html>. The UNGEI website also offers a wealth of online resources on girls’ education, links to partner organizations, country profiles, multimedia features and more.

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**UNGEI’s Global Advisory Committee members:**
