

**UNGEI TECHNICAL CONSULTATION
(Linked to the EFA High Level Group Meeting)
BEIJING; People's Republic of China
26-27 November 2005**

Background Note

The focus of this UNGEI technical consultation is on exploring the links between girls' education and female adult literacy, particularly to the extent that this link could serve both as a challenge and as an opportunity. As a challenge, the link is a vicious cycle that thwarts progress in education and development. As an opportunity it is a virtuous cycle through which education contributes to empowerment of women and the development of nations. Participants at this technical consultation will explore the challenge and opportunity of the link between girls' education and female adult literacy by taking stock of progress in both of these fields, sharing experiences on advocacy and programming work, and reviewing options for the way forward. These options will concentrate on bold initiatives and quick impact strategies that will accelerate progress and get countries "on track" for achieving the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) goals related to gender, education and literacy.

The latest literacy data indicates that almost 800 million adults world wide are illiterate, and over two-thirds of these are women. This is clearly the legacy of our failure to invest in girls' education over the years, thereby condemning the girls of yesterday to become the illiterate women of today. In view of this, the fact that almost 100 million school-aged children currently do not have access to education should be a matter of concern, not only because it represents a threat to achieving the MDGs and EFA goals on primary education, but also because it signals a continuing flow of unschooled children into the pool of illiterate adults. If we do not stem this flow, many developing countries will be faced with a never-ending challenge of investing in adult literacy efforts while the flow into illiteracy continues from lack of schooling opportunities for children. This will continue to thwart their development efforts in various ways into the long term future.

This threat is particularly important in the case of girls and women. Girls' education is inextricably linked with female adult literacy in quite significant ways that have strong implications for overall development. Research evidence suggests that the children of illiterate mothers are far less likely to attend school than those of literate mothers. For much the same reasons, the quality of care and support provided for children with illiterate mothers is likely to be poorer than that provided for children with educated mothers. In the recent famine in Niger for instance, it was argued that lack of education on the part of mothers (and hence lack of information/knowledge on nutrition) was a more important causal factor than food shortage per se. The consequences of failure in girls' education go well beyond simply missing the gender parity goal. It reaches into the realm of swelling the ranks of illiterate women and all the negative implications of that for current development efforts. It also affects the survival chances, quality of life and successful development of the next generation of children.

Against this background, failure to provide girls with access to quality schooling is in fact the starting point in a vicious cycle through which girls who are denied education go on to become illiterate mothers whose children in their turn will more likely than not, also fail to gain access to quality schooling, and will also receive poor quality care and support as a result of the mothers' illiteracy (and lack of empowerment). In order to stem this flow of uneducated girls into the pool of illiterate women, we need a two pronged approach that would break the vicious cycle of waste. It is important to invest in female adult literacy, but even more critical to invest urgently in girls' education at the same time. The sooner all girls have access to quality learning the easier it will be to tackle the problem of adult female literacy in a definitive manner. We would otherwise be pouring resources into trying to empty a pool of illiteracy that is being constantly refilled by the flow of girls who did not get access to school. We need to cut off the flow without delay!

Although this threat of a vicious cycle is known and well understood, there has not been a clear and intensive programming link between girls' education and adult female literacy. The ways of working in both fields need to be more organically linked, in order to further highlight the sense of urgency in achieving the 2005 gender parity goal in education, which so many countries have now sadly missed. The cost of failing to provide access to education for all girls needs to be estimated not only in current terms, but also in terms of projected costs of continued female adult illiteracy in the future, and its implications for lower household income, deepening poverty and poorer quality of child care and support.

There are at least three key issues that participants need to address at this technical consultation, in view of the brief analysis outlined above. First, it is important to take stock of where we are in terms of progress with girls' education and female adult literacy. Available data should be analysed to highlight the compounding effect that failure in girls' education has on stagnation of progress with female adult literacy. Clear analysis of appropriately disaggregated data should help to indicate the magnitude and complexity of this compound problem in various countries and amongst different population groups. At the same time it would be critical to show the virtuous cycle through which success in girls' education has led to lower female illiteracy rates, increased empowerment of women and improved life-chances or quality of life for current and future generations.

Second, we need to have a better sense amongst partners of how we have been programming and advocating for girls' education and female adult literacy; especially with a view to understanding the implications of our apparent failure to link the two areas more closely in our programming work, or deal with them jointly in our advocacy efforts. Sharing experiences on patterns of programming and ways of doing advocacy would help to build a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses that have characterised work by countries and their development partners in this important area. Through this we can begin to understand better, how to transform the vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle for the benefit of countries striving to achieve the MDGs and EFA goals.

Third, we need to explore possible options for addressing this problem with the urgency it deserves, especially as we have failed to achieve the 2005 goal of gender parity in

primary and secondary education. There is no doubt that despite this failure, we do have achievements to report and prospects to look forward to in the near future. We have also learned important lessons on how to work smarter and make things work more efficiently in promoting rapid expansion of quality basic education for girls as well as boys. This has put us in a better position to advocate for “bold initiatives” through which countries can rapidly advance in terms of progress towards the MDGs and EFA goals. Fortuitously, this is also happening in a climate that is increasingly positive as regards the willingness and ability of developing countries to lead and champion such bold initiatives, as well as a strong commitment by donor countries to increase the flow of development assistance and improve the overall effectiveness of aid for education and other sectors. The key challenge for participants will be to agree on a set of recommended “bold initiatives” that have been derived from the experiences of countries and their development partners, in order for donors to support further technical work in shaping these and supporting their implementation through existing financing mechanisms such as the Fast Track Initiative.

Content and materials for informing and addressing these three main concerns will be drawn mainly from the EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) and from the Gender Achievements and Prospects (GAP) review conducted by UNICEF as a contribution to the work of UNGEI. These sources will be used to highlight what has been achieved by a wide range of countries, the characteristics of the advocacy and communications drive for girls’ education in different countries, the policy changes and investment patterns that are likely to have an impact on girls’ education and female adult literacy. In addition to these two main sources, information, data and analytical insights will be drawn from country reports and relevant documents from development partners (bi-laterals, NGOs, etc) on the subject. In this regard, it would be particularly relevant to learn more about how partners have been working to address programming and advocacy concerns, as well as to make use of lessons learned from evolving partnerships, inter-sartorial approaches and sector support approaches. Such rich diversity of sources would help us better analyse and appreciate how much needs to be done in promoting girls’ education and eliminating adult female illiteracy as a major step in the development process.

The main outcome of this Technical consultation is expected to be a statement on the way forward, which will outline concrete steps and commitments to design, implement and support a number of bold initiatives for accelerating progress on girls’ education and for transforming the vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle that links girls’ education with female adult literacy. This statement will be addressed to the main EFA High Level Group meeting and is expected to be discussed with a view of including it in the Communiqué and action points for countries and their development partners. On this basis, UNGEI partners will prepare an Action Plan for implementation at country and regional levels.