

**“Gender and Early Childhood Care and Education”**  
**Sunday, 12 November 2006**  
**UNGEI Technical Meeting**  
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*Statement by*  
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Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here today to this historic city of Cairo, the cradle of civilization and inspiration to world knowledge and science. It is also here where El-Azhar University produced Child Care in Islam, which is very relevant to this important meeting today that acknowledges the importance of the critical links between Early Childhood Development and Gender. It is also very pertinent for a partnership like the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) to emphasize Early Childhood Development (ECD) as a vital area that needs to be addressed for it to achieve its goals. I am also pleased to see that the movement of the UNIGEI partnership is going strong with visible impacts in the gender parity ratio in primary schools, which is up to 94 girls to every 100 boys, as per the recently launched GMR 2007.

It is apt that this meeting is taking place in Egypt, where, in 2000 under the leadership of the First Lady, H. E. Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, the Girls' Education Initiative was unveiled within months of the global version launched by UN Secretary General Kofi

Annan in Dakar, Senegal. We hope to hear and learn from Egypt's progress in addressing the sensitive issue of girls' education, especially in this region.

So, why is this link between gender and ECD so important, especially for girls' education?

Firstly, we all know, through recent research in children's brain development, that how people turn out in life hinges on an "intricate dance" between nature and nurture in the earliest years. Hence, the environment that children grow up in is critical in forming their personalities and realizing their potentials. The environment determines, to a large extent, the gender roles that children, be it a boy or a girl, take on very early on in life. The negative gender stereo-type of what roles girls play in society, be it as a mother, a sister, or a student starts taking shape even as early as they are born. This leads to, in many countries, the notion of the unimportance of girls needing an education. The sad part is that this notion is not only held by the society around the girl child, but also by the girl herself. If we are to achieve the Education For All (EFA) goals, and further on to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), it is vital that this phase of early gender socialization is addressed so that both boys and girls are looked upon as equals, entitled to not only equality in the homes and communities, but also in the schools and to education.

Secondly, there is enough evidence to show that ECD programmes are most beneficial for the most disadvantaged, especially the poor, who are least likely to receive any ECD interventions. Girls in poverty are doubly disadvantaged, first for just being a girl

and the second due to poverty. ECD is key in closing this double disparity gap and giving the girl child a fair start in life.

Finally, in relation to the MDGs, ECD directly supports MDG2 of universal primary education by getting all children, both boys and girls, into school on-time and making them ready for school so that they not only perform better in school but also not drop out of school. ECD, through positive early gender socialization, enhances tremendously the efforts of achieving MDG3 of promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Quality ECD programmes engrain the notion of equality among boys and girls right from the early years, leading to societies perceiving and treating them equally. This is most effective when the girls start identifying themselves as equals. Improving the status of the girl child will inevitably lead to more girls coming into and staying in schools. Also, through its preventive efforts and providing the best start in life, ECD is also directly linked to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, which is MDG1. It also addresses, indirectly, all the other MDGs as well.

The Education For All Global Monitoring Report (EFA GMR) 2007, which has the theme of Early Childhood Care and Education, and hence has led to this UNGEI meeting also taking up the same theme and how Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) affects girls' education specifically and gender equality as a whole. Although the GMR addresses the importance of gender equality, it focuses more on gender parity in pre-schools. A more comprehensive approach of addressing the need for early gender socialization and moving beyond parity to equality is necessary. The UNGEI partnership will continue advocating for family focused and community based quality

ECD programs that aim at improving the knowledge and skills of parents, caregivers and other family members to provide quality care and equal opportunities for their girls as they do for their boys.

I trust that the UNGEI partnership will continue to promote quality Parenting Education and Community Based Child Care programmes. Such quality ECD programmes leading to well trained teachers, well informed mothers, child-centered community child care, etc. will inevitably address the issue of gender disparity.

We will continue advocating for policy development for equality for the millions of boys and girls caught up in current or forgotten conflicts, those trapped in poverty, or simply living in far flung villages, townships, districts and provinces, these children that many of us may not visit, but to whom we are nonetheless accountable. It is for these children, whose future will determine our destiny, we are meeting here today.

Thank You.