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Question: Girls and women endure numerous violations of their human rights, from social and economic discrimination to physical, psychological and sexual violence, to exclusion from positions of power within and outside the family. Among all the issues facing girls and women, why has education taken centre stage?

Rima Salah: *Let me start by quoting a girl that I met in Darfur at one of the camps for displaced people. She said, "Education is light. When you don't know how to read and write – ignorance is like darkness. So education is light and ignorance is darkness." And she told me, "Please continue to give us light because we don't want to stay in darkness." So that's how it is really, in all the cultures, and particularly in my Middle Eastern culture. When we talk about education, it is like light. Education is the means to empowerment, empowerment of women, empowerment of girls.*

I think the families in the Middle East, wherever they are, will do everything, every sacrifice, so that the children will go to school, and also girls. Of course, there are some counties where girls' education is still maybe lower than others, but girls' education has been very important. Why? It starts with the Hadis. The Prophet said that "Education is a duty for all of you; educate everyone, both Muslim and Muslima." Which means women and men, the feminine and the masculine. He also said, "Give education to children, even if for your education you have to go bring it from China." Because China was considered the very far point of the world. He insisted on education. So this is part of the culture.

And also the Arabic culture continued the importance of education. Because you know if you want to be a Muslim, every Muslim, you need to read because you cannot be a Muslim if you don't read the Koran. The first word of Islam starts ikra – "Read." So it is embodied in the culture and the religion.

I lived in a refugee camp for one year [as a cultural anthropologist] and my study was on the changing status of Palestinian women. I looked at education and economic empowerment and I looked at their political participation also. But the most important finding was education. Just to give you an example: When I said to a grandfather who was of 90 years old, "Why are all your granddaughters in school?" He said, "Because education is something that you cannot remove from them. We lost our land in 1948, we lost again our land in 1967, and our land was perfection to our daughters and granddaughters. But now we don't have land, we are living in a refugee camp. All what we have is education." So education is also a way of protecting girls in that culture.

When I was in Africa, seeing how much my parents also sacrificed that I go to school and that schooling for them was so, so important, I tried to pass this message. It was a little bit difficult, the value of education, but of course I tried.

And I tried in Pakistan, for example when I was in Kakar, which was one of the tribal societies, and only 10 per cent of girls went to school, although it is a Muslim society. But sometimes Islam is misinterpreted. Islam is thought about as a hindrance, blocking women's and girls' lives, which is not the case. In fact, if you want to follow it, it's not the case. My knowledge of the Koran, of the Hadis and my knowledge of the Arabic language has helped me to advocate. This is what Hadis, this is what the Prophet is saying about education.

So my mission was to open more and more schools for girls. And we did this. Because there you have separate boys' schools and girls' schools, so it was more difficult because you have to find teachers and particularly women teachers. So we trained teachers. And before I left, we opened maybe 100 schools.

So education has always been valued for girls. First, it's important because in the Arab and Middle Eastern culture, they value the role of the mother. A mother cannot really be a mother if she is not educated and doesn't have the knowledge. The second thing is protection. So that's why it's important. An educated woman, starting with a girl, has more power at home. She can discuss, she can negotiate with her husband and with her family.

Q: Education has both intrinsic value (the ability to reach one's potential) and instrumental value (economic contributions to both the family and society). Why are both values compelling reasons for investing in girls' education?

RS: *I see it for the girl. You know it is very important for her development. And this will improve her status. It improves her in society, in the community, her village and her family. And I've seen examples of women when they're educated, when they know how to read and write, they are given a role. She doesn't have to fight for it, it's given to her automatically. As this little girl said "For us it is light." It really enlightens the life of a girl and a woman.*

Q. Do you think donors recognize the importance intrinsically or are they just focused on society?

RS: *Well, donors sometimes don't see it. They look at the results, the outcome – economically. They do all the calculations, but they don't look at the psychological, the social aspects of socialization. As a cultural anthropologist, even when I did my study in the refugee camp, I saw how important the role of the mother is, the role of the grandmother in passing values and traditions. And, of course, when a woman is educated, she's more enlightened. So she will pass the values and traditions, but in an enlightened way. Donors don't always look at this. They look at the quick wins and quick results.*

Q. And they're missing something important?

RS: *This is it. This is the personality of the whole human being, it is built on education. Education helps her translate or socialize her children in a different way – in an enlightened way. Not to just pass the traditions as they are. Let's take the example of female genital mutilation. She can think about it in a different way. And early marriage – a woman or a girl who's educated would never give her child at 12 or 14 to marriage.*

Education is not just putting girls and women into literacy classes. All that goes with it is very important. Also what goes on at home. Because even in Arabic when we say education – taaleem – even the ministries in the Arab world are not called Education Ministries. They're called wizaraat tarbiya, which is upbringing, upbringing of the soul, upbringing of the person, which is more important than to sit and read and write.

Q: Do you think that development agencies should stress the importance of the intrinsic value of education?

RS: *Yes, yes, of course. I've said bringing up of the soul, bringing up of womanhood is very important. And this is recognized in many books, even religious books, even in Islam. We come back to Islam because the perception is that Islam is against girls' education and that is not true. It continues about education, and even the relations between a daughter and her parents, a daughter and her brothers and a daughter and her sisters. Even when it comes to engagement and marriage. So it is not just about going to school, but the whole upbringing of the person is very important. And the woman passes the traditions and values and is very important in the upbringing of children, particularly boys. You take this argument that boys are very important and they are the men of the future. But who does all this upbringing? The women. And they depend on the woman, on the mother. Even in the poorest families, the woman plays a very important role. All this is linked to the status of women in the family.*

Q: How would you say that a girl's education affects her relationship to her family, to her community and her country?

RS: *When a girl is educated, all the status at home changes. If a girl goes to school, she comes back home, even if her parents are not literate, they listen to her because she says this is what I've learned in school. Because there is a respect for education. Education has a value. So they value their daughters who go to school. Her relations with her parents change because they listen to her, and also her relations with her brothers. In my culture, the relation of the daughter and her brother is very important. It is a very special relationship and the respect that both have for each other. This is in my dissertation on Palestinian women, I looked at those relations. How those relations change between parents, between brothers and sisters, between sisters, and of course, the family as a whole, the extended family and also the community. As I started by saying, the educated woman is valued and she's given a voice. This is what is important. She's given a voice in decision-making at home and in the community.*

Q: There are parts of the world where, in spite of the fact that girls are getting educated, their stature in the culture itself has not improved that much. Would you comment on that?

RS: *Yes. This is because of tradition and cultural values. And that is why we need to work on both. We cannot just work on education. The whole environment should also change. Education is a factor; it's one factor. But you have other factors that also make up society. So the norms and the values will change little by little. Education is a factor that computes to change. But there are other things. There is poverty, which is very important, and economic participation, which is also very important.*

Q: In some Latin American countries, girls are in school in greater numbers than boys, yet there are some areas where domestic violence is a problem. Is there a way to translate gender parity into equality?

RS: *Of course. It has to start from education. But there are so many other factors now that are affecting violence. In the study that we are doing on violence against children, there are so many factors: bad parenting, the environment, the environment of violence, what they see on the television. There are so many factors that are affecting violence at home and in the community. But education is very important and will improve equality in the long run.*

Q: You have spoken about the importance of reaching out to the indigenous population, not only for the indigenous population to keep their culture but to translate that to the rest of the mainstream population. Could you speak about that?

RS: *One important role of the woman is to translate and to pass traditions. It's so important that she keeps the culture and the traditions. But at the same time, education will help how she will translate, how would she really socialize her children so they adapt to the larger culture? Because it's important. I was in Viet Nam, for example, where children from the indigenous or minority groups want to keep their culture, want to keep their traditions. But at the same time they have to adapt to the wider culture. So it is so important for the indigenous mother, the indigenous girl, to go to school. But when we design curricula and programmes, we have to take into consideration also the traditions and the values of the society. That is why we have girls apart from school, because they don't feel any ownership. When I was in Burkina Faso in old West Africa, it's French education. We started a programme where we have bilingual education: the first grade, second and third grade with their language, and then we added French. When we did an assessment, we found those girls did better, all those children, than others. This attracted them more to school and also attracted retention of girls in school.*

Q: What do you say to parents who are fearful that if their children get education that the traditions of their culture will be lost?

RS: *The mobilization of parents is very important. You cannot just send daughters to school and not work on the parents, discuss with them and tell them that education never,*

never loses traditions. Of course ,it loses some traditions that are negative. The participation of parents is very important and it has helped us in Burkina Faso and others where you have committees for schools, managed by the parents themselves, so that they feel the ownership of it. They know that it's not some people coming from outside, that they are doing it, that they are part of it. And I think they need to understand the value of education. Because also these parents in Burkina and others mostly are poor. How important that education is going to help them maybe fight this poverty.

Q: Girls' education helps the family?

RS: *They lift the family. Sometimes people think that when parents are not educated they cannot understand. But parents, particularly, they know intrinsically. They know; they feel. So we need to talk to them and explain to them. We cannot go and tell them, "Give us your daughter, we have to put her in school." The discussion is also important.*

People think that school feeding also attracts girls to school. That is one factor. It's not the only factor. Of course, school feeding is an incentive for parents that are poor to send their daughters to school. Donors also think this, that things that are concrete [will bring them to school]. But poor people also have their own pride and have their own values. So explaining to them and discussing with them is also very important.

Q: Angélique Kidjo said that sometimes parents perceive as Western education.

RS: *Right. That's why I've said categorically that programmes are very important. Who said that education is Western? Education started in other cultures long before. So they have to know that education is not Western. That is why it is easier to explain it in Middle Eastern and Islamic countries because they know that education started a long time ago. Education is part of their religion, part of their culture; that education did not come from the West. But the fear now is that education is westernized. But they know that education is part of their culture and is part of the tradition. Some parents don't know how to read or write, but they are involved even in the programme development of the school. Education doesn't have a nationality.*

They need to have role models in communities; she went to school but, if she's from Benin, she's still Beninois and she still follows the cultures and the traditions.

Role models are very important for parents to see. Also the discussions that you have with the parents are important. That's why at UNICEF, we do a lot of mobilization before opening a school. It has to come from themselves. Let me tell you, for example, for FGM, female genital mutilation, in villages where in Senegal, this tradition, along with others, are discussed. It was discussed and discussed again. Then it becomes part of their own, what they believe in and then one day they do a declaration and they say, "We're not going to do it, that's it." And I saw men, after being convinced, going from one village to the other, trying to preach and advocate against it. So that is why cultural anthropology is very important. You cannot do education just with educationists, with

people that are specialists of education. You need other people who will also try to change society.

Q: Do you think that it's important to have the mainstream population learn indigenous traditions and histories?

RS: *It is. Sometimes the problem is that minorities are isolated and other majority people don't want to or don't understand. That is why, in a nation, the understanding between the majority and the minority is very important. They should try to understand. For example, if you live in a very big Muslim community and there's a minority of Christians, Muslims have always tried – in some cultures they did, in others they did not – to understand what is this Christian religion. The same thing with indigenous populations, it's important to understand the cultures of others. For example, again in Viet Nam, when I was visiting the schools for indigenous people, I saw the teachers and others, who come from the majority but loved the language of others, understand better. But it doesn't happen very much. Politicians could help in this, politicians and leaders. I once heard a politician in one of the countries say, "The minorities are a jewel in our country and we should take care of them." This politician understood.*

Q: How has your training as a cultural anthropologist and your work in development influenced your belief in the importance of girls' education?

RS: *Well, it is my training as a cultural anthropologist and also my upbringing and that my parents became refugees. As a person who comes from the Third World, how much education has helped me to advance – to advance in society, in my community, in my family. And also what I saw in refugee camps, in the Palestinian refugee camps, I saw how education was a portal, a vehicle for girls to really achieve something in their lives.*

Of course, if I was not a cultural anthropologist, I wouldn't go to the refugee camps and sit with people. So I feel that as a cultural anthropologist, it opened my mind and made me go to villages and stay with them. And when I did my field work in the refugee camp, I stayed with a family there and I lived with them and I slept on the floor with them.

Training as a cultural anthropologist makes you more tolerant, makes you more open to understand other cultures. So it has helped me not only to value education, but to value everything I saw when I was in my different missions from Pakistan, to Africa, to Viet Nam, to West Africa. My training as a cultural anthropologist helped me to have a different view of things, a different perception of development, and valuing more people. Valuing every person I saw. It has helped also to feel comfortable with a leader, like a president or a woman in the village.

The programmes that I have developed in different countries have been influenced by my training. I feel that culturally, we need to have more and more people - sociologists, cultural anthropologists and others – in the system, the UN system. The World Bank and other agencies at a certain point used to employ cultural anthropologists. But I don't

know how much really it has affected development because I think we have failed in many ways in development.

Q: Can you say more about that?

RS: *Yes. It is because we did not have enough analysis, social analysis, understanding people. For example, education – more than a 100 million are out of school, which means we have failed. In this time and age, when we have the technology, when you have all the resources, and we didn't do it, I think we have failed. And because we have failed in this, we have failed in other aspects of development. It is because we didn't go deep within society's values, traditions. What are the causes, what are really the causes of all this, the deep causes? Did we go? I don't think we went in development in general. We tried. We say it, we employed anthropologists here and there, but I don't think we really succeeded at this. We need more of it. Because for me, poverty is not poverty in having lack of money, it is not economic poverty. Poverty for me is isolation. It is isolation of communities, of families, by the mainstream of development. One of the factors why we have failed: because we didn't involve really the people. In fact, we isolated them, and they are not mainstreamed in development. So we need to have more, maybe, social economists that will understand the economy and also society.*

Q: Do you feel like you can be heard that your point of view can be taken on?

RS: *I think so. And I've been discussing this with many of my colleagues. But some people, we're afraid to say that we have failed. Why do we have violence? Violence is linked to poverty; violence is linked to lack of, let's say, happiness in what you're doing. So, I think that development is linked to peace. We don't have peace in the world now because we did not really succeed in development.*

Q: Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

RS: *I am optimistic because, as I said, there are voices that are raised now more and more. Working with non-governmental organizations, working with civil society, it is important, and they will help us raise the voice of the voiceless, people we don't hear.*

Let me give you an example. I was in Niger and I was discussing with the president, "Why don't you come to this meeting?" And he said, "Why do you want me at this meeting? Why don't you take a rural woman who will come and talk about her concerns in development?"

So there are some political leaders who understand more and more. Of course, there are people in development who believe in this. But we need to do it in a more structured way. And we need to influence, we need to go to universities, we need to go and talk to young people, we need to not be afraid to say what we believe in. We believe in development, of course, we believe in peace. But we cannot bring about this peace if we do not have all the parts of the puzzle together. Even this study on violence against children and education, we were discussing in many regions where I went, how important this linking

is to peace at home, to peace in the community, in the village. If peace does not start at home, then you will have problems.

Q: Does the education system have a part to play in peace?

RS: *I think so. And that's what I've been also preaching that children could be messengers of peace instead of being child soldiers. I always say a child should carry a pen and not a clashing club. So education can bring peace. We have to have it in our curricular presentation. We have talked about it a lot, but we don't do it in a very systematic manner. Because if you don't start with a child, it will be, I think, too late.*

We were talking about minorities and the indigenous people. It has to start in school; it has to start on this bench where two children are sitting together. And you should not have schools that are only for a certain group. That's why indigenous children should also be mainstreamed. It's so important: peace and security and justice. You have to inculcate justice in children, the spirit of justice.

Q: Do you think you can connect that to girls' education?

RS: *I can, because a girl is very important. She will play a very important role in her community, but she will also play a very important role in socializing her children and their upbringing. If she has this sense of justice inculcated in her, she will also inculcate it in her children. What's happening in the world, the violence, is also because we don't have a sense of justice. Because we keep talking about peace, right? Which is very important, but if you don't have justice with this peace, you cannot have it. All these are the values that we can get in school. Of course, boys are important, but more importantly for girls because of the role she plays in socialization.*

I was more aware when I was in the refugee camp, because refugees wherever they are, keep thinking of their homeland. The homeland is the most important thing for them. And the refugee camp is the link between the homeland and them. That's why sometimes they don't like to go and live outside the camp, because the camp is a symbol, linking them to what they've lost. And I realized how they keep this alive in their mind; it is through the mothers. So, all those aspects of socialization are very important.

Q: Do you see yourself as a role model?

RS: *I think so in my community, in my family, not only because I have achieved in my career, but in the way I engage with people; the way I am open to people. And I think I can be a role model.*

Q: Is there anything that you would like to add?

RS: *Girls' education is very important. So how can we invigorate it, how can we revive it? I was more and more convinced of it when I saw a child dying, when a child died in front of me two weeks ago in Niger.*

Niger is suffering a food shortage. So I went to a hospital, which is run by Médecins Sans Frontières – Doctor's Without Borders – with UNICEF's help. This hospital received children that are severely malnourished. And all of a sudden, this bed here, there was a mother sitting here and she started crying. We didn't understand why. And I saw a nurse coming. The child had an IV in his arm, 12 months – 1 year old. She was removing the IV from his arm. And I said "What? What are you doing? Why, what's happening?" And she said "It's too late, it's too late." I said "What do you mean it's too late?" The child died that minute when we were there.

So I was thinking the whole problem there is really, of course, food shortage, but also related to the status of women and illiteracy. Because the woman cannot manage. Of course, she saw her child sick; she walked for miles and miles to bring the child, but it was too late. So when she told me "Too late," this word resonated all the time. I was too late, maybe; UNICEF was too late; the international community too late and the mother was too late. Why are we too late? Of course, there are so many causes. I'm not going to blame the mother. She was crying, and now she was going to carry this dead child and take the child to her village. But, of course, education is very important. The mother cannot manage, if she doesn't know what to give, when to know that her child is very sick and that she has to bring the child to the hospital. In Niger, 10 per cent of women are literate; 90 per cent are illiterate. So that reinforced my mission. My mission is really to put girls in schools.