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Question: As we approach the Millennium Development Goal deadline of 2005 for gender parity in primary and secondary education, what successes can you point to?

Cream Wright: *The first is that gender as an issue in education is now uppermost in many agendas at the country level. It has become a key issue; there is a greater awareness of it, which certainly 10 years ago - but even five years ago - was controversial as an issue. There is hardly a minister of education in government now where people do not know what the issues in gender are and why it's important.*

Secondly, levels of investments by many donors have increased, highlighting the need for gender parity and gender issues to be taken seriously; almost, in some cases, as one of the conditions of supporting countries. That trend is on the rise as well.

In terms of actual achievements on the ground, there has been growth in enrolment, real expansion in enrolment; and all the data show that girls' enrolment has risen faster than boys' enrolment in most countries. It's simply that we started from such a low base that we still have some ways to go, but in general the gap is closing. So countries have made progress, in terms of overall increase in enrolment, as well as in closing the gender gap. There are countries where there is some degree of stagnation, but there are very, very few countries in which you can talk about declining enrolment and reversal of gender parity.

Even more promising is the fact that on the basis of these kinds of achievements, we can see clearly, that with a little bit more effort, with some more guidance, with better investments – this goal is quite achievable. Certainly for some countries – not in 2005 – but certainly not too long thereafter. But that brings us to another hurdle, which we should talk about later – that is, that gender parity is just the first base of the issue of gender. And gender equality, which is also part of the MDGs, is a much tougher nut to crack. And that is a real concern at the moment.

Q: The primary factors behind these victories?

CW: *The power of advocacy. I don't think, programmatically, we were able to make such a big difference – either the developing countries themselves or donors or development partners and developing agencies. You really have to factor in advocacy and communications to explain these gains. They're very powerful tools through which all these different groups were able to see that gender disparity is a major flaw in development that needs to be addressed.*

And so advocacy went a long way. When decision makers start hearing the same thing from external partners, from the local population, from civil society and from all corners, they start listening seriously, and thinking 'there must be something to this'. As a result of advocacy there has been a perception and clear understanding that when you focus on girls' education, you're

not just dealing with schools and education per se, but you're beginning to address all those other things within communities that impact on girls and their ability to get an education.

Q: Some say that advocacy was too successful in that there is a demand for education, but not necessarily the ability to fill that demand.

CW: *There's certainly something to that. Advocacy can get ahead of the game and, if it's not well managed, can be a dangerous thing. It can raise unrealistic expectations. But on the other hand, what is positive is that it's like letting the genie out of the bottle. Once people know their rights, they aspire to these things, and there's no way you can get them to back down from that. And so the governments have to do something. For instance, when people know that you have overcrowded classrooms they do not withdraw children from school; instead they agitate for more schools. That problem is not going to go away and you have to deal with it. In a way, that's what development is about. It's about having aspirations and securing the means to fulfill them. And that's what advocacy does. It gives people aspirations. It gives them things to aspire to. It shows how things can be, not just what they are.*

Even if at the time it seems the resources are not there, advocacy gives that essential ingredient for development that is hope, the sense that we can do this, especially when advocacy is backed by evidence that this is doable. The only downside is if advocacy creates unrealistic expectations. So that's where programming and advocacy have to work hand in hand to deliver on promises. If there's no reason to go easy, then I would say let advocacy work and let people aspire to that.

Q: Why do you think that the development goal of gender parity wasn't met?

CW: *Development is about change. Two of the most important dimensions of change are the scale of change and the pace of change. I think in this case it took a while for the full realization to come through that this is important, this is a key area to address. After that it took a while for people to fully understand what this means in practice. Initially the idea was just to increase the numbers of girls in school – and then people began to realize that there's a lot more to getting girls in school than simply opening the school doors. There are lots of issues to be addressed both in the homes and in the communities. In general, we have not moved fast enough on these issues, in order to get more girls into school, but we have learned a lot in the process.*

On the issue of scale, it's unfair to ask governments to invest massively in unproven things. And so, many partners have done little projects here and there that have made a difference in girls' education. Cumulatively that has helped us move towards the goal, but in terms of large-scale change, it hasn't happened because, rightly, we have been cautious in scaling up without good evidence. However, we have also learned a lot from small scale interventions, so we are now poised for bold initiatives that involve scaling up for national development.

Importantly also, when we've been forced to move fast – for example in emergencies – we have learned about what is doable in terms of radically changing the pace at which progress is made. And I think if we bring those two things together – the pace of change and the scale of change – that's where the answer lies.

We should remember that the challenges countries face are extraordinary. In fact, there are always threats that may reverse the progress you're making. When a country experiences massive HIV/AIDS infection rates, or sudden emergencies, or economic decline, or civil unrest, these things complicate matters – so you're not working in a static situation. The obstacles have been more complex and more intense in many cases, than people anticipated. This is not to give an excuse, but to say that in having to work against those obstacles, we have also learned some valuable lessons.

Q: What are some of the lessons that you've learned?

CW: *We have learned for instance, that when it comes to investing in education, you have to take seriously the business of equitable distribution. Supporting vulnerable groups can determine whether an education system survives or collapses in the face of adversity. It's no good looking at what a country spends on education in general. How it spends that money and how much of it benefits different population groups is very important. There are many countries that spend an inordinate amount of their budgets on education. Unfortunately, they do not spend it in an equitable manner. They invest it in 40 percent of the school-age population, who may get a reasonably good education, and they think they're doing well.*

A second lesson we have learned is that major gains in education can be made by investing in other sectors. So we know issues of nutrition and health of children, the environment in the schools, sanitation, child labor issues, are all important for progress in education. How do you compensate households that are poor? This is also critical. And so, you can't just sit within the Ministry of Education and say you're trying to achieve increased enrolment and gender parity in education. You have to win allies from these other sectors as it were; you have to invest in other sectors. We don't have to portray education simply as a self-serving process or entity. Education depends on, and contributes to, other sectors, to other goals, and to other challenges.

That's a very different way of working from just 10 years ago, when people concentrated on the education sector alone. Do we have enough teachers? Do we have enough books? Do we have classrooms? Why are children absent from school? And those were the narrow issues we looked at. But we've started to see that if we are to win investments in education, we have to show that education contributes to addressing other issues and other problems. I refer to this generally as the reciprocity principle – the principle of reciprocity. This says that education has to draw in investments and services from other sectors to make things work well in the sector and to achieve gains. And in return, education has to contribute to solving the problems that other sectors face.

Another lesson is the significance of commitment by national leaders. The whole idea of political will has been emphasized by so many people. Some of the things that countries have achieved, they were told just on basic technical analysis that this is not doable. And because the political leadership in some of these countries was determined to achieve something, they took the plunge anyway. We've learned that once you take the plunge, there are problems that come up. These problems can be addressed. Is it better to have millions of children in overcrowded classrooms with poor resources that you can fix, that we know how to fix? Or to have millions of children at home, because we're still waiting to have enough classrooms and enough teachers and enough textbooks? In the meantime, these children are growing into adolescence and adults without an

education. And I think the lesson we have learned is that we've got to take the challenge – it is about making bold moves that may create chaos in the short term, knowing that we can solve the ensuing problems in the medium to long term. Quality, of course, is extremely important, but it must not be used as a barrier – as an excuse – for denying access to the disadvantaged.

Q: You said that people need to publicly acknowledge the fact that they have failed to meet the 2005 goal. What is the significance of the missed target and why should people be held accountable?

CW: *If you look at development over the decades, what is different in this decade – significantly different – is international goal setting, the Education For All goals (EFA); the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It was unprecedented the way the world community came together to look at development and to set goals and targets. It galvanizes efforts. It mobilizes resources. Countries that are weak have been pulled up and told, “ you have to do better.” Countries that have the experiences to share are sharing those experiences. There's a new kind of international solidarity in working towards these goals. Even those rich donor countries that are not doing well with development assistance are being challenged. This is unprecedented.*

I think the world community as a whole will not fault countries and development partners for failing to meet the goals if they understand why and what has been done about it. They will fault the deafening silence. They will fault a lack of effort. So we have to examine ourselves and say, “How much effort did we really make? What went right? What could we have done better? What lessons have we learned?” And that is what international solidarity is about. That's the compact.

Q: Describe what a child-friendly school is and talk about your process of going from a skeptic to an advocate.

CW: *When you first hear people talk about child-friendly schools, it comes across mainly as a prescription from somebody – from somewhere. And technically, professionally, one learns to be skeptical about prescriptions. What are they based on? And just because you do something under condition A and it works doesn't mean it should or could be applied everywhere else. The way this prescription has been explained – there are 10 characteristics or there are 12 or however many characteristics for a child-friendly school – makes it read like some utopia. Initial skepticism can also come from understanding the reality of education. Learning can be a hard business. There are the frustrations of trying to learn against great odds. There are the difficult conditions that people suffer. There are the shortcomings of not having enough teachers. And yet sometimes we see people get a good education in spite of these conditions rather than because of them. And I think, “Why are we just prescribing this thing called child friendly? Let's not forget that at the centre of this whole business of education is the difficult and sometimes unfriendly enterprise of learning. Some of our critics have said, “Yeah, the child-friendly classrooms look nice, and the children look happy, but are they learning anything?” It is a challenging question.*

Yet, when you examine it more closely, what is attractive about the child-friendly school is that as a model, it's almost a one-stop shop for everything that has to do with quality. The most remarkable contribution of UNICEF is the extended definition of 'quality', which is not just about the pedagogy in the classroom process, but about the whole school environment and about the links between schools and communities. It's about the way schools are managed, the way the

classroom process takes place, the way children are treated. In other words, I think if we begin to define child-friendly schools in terms of key principles that can be tested, people can make sense of that. The main principle is this: within the constraints of resources that you have, all decisions must be guided by a single consideration – what is in the best interest of the child?

Q: Would you say that child-friendly and quality are one and the same or is there a difference?

CW: *Quality is intrinsic to the ‘child-friendly’ concept. Quality has maybe three key elements to it. One is relevance. Since education really is about helping people fulfill their potential; it has to be relevant. But relevance is problematic. Because relevant for whom? In terms of what the child wants to become or what the parents want for the child or what society wants?*

This is precisely the mistake I think people make in prescribing for education – “You know, this is a fishing community, we’ll give them a school curriculum that deals a lot with fishing.” Well, maybe initially they need to understand their own world. But if that’s all you’re going to do for them, you’re condemning them to stay in that world. People should aspire to other worlds. They should be able to dream of things beyond their world. Relevance encapsulates all of that.

The other two concepts of quality – one is efficiency and one is effectiveness. The latter simply means that schools should deliver on what they promise. The children should attain a certain amount of literacy, numeracy and other knowledge, skills and attitudes and values promised in the curriculum; schools must deliver on these things.

And the third dimension of quality is efficiency. If you take one child and one teacher and give them enough time and enough resources, learning will take place. Unfortunately, we don’t have those resources. Efficiency is the best way of using the resources we do have to achieve learning and other goals we set. Even where teachers are so key to the process, when you spend 95 per cent of your budget on the teachers’ salaries, something is seriously wrong with your efficiency.

There’s internal efficiency; do kids progress from one grade to the next, having learned all they should learn in that grade? Are they simply being pushed through? Each child that drops out is a lost resource invested. Each time a child repeats, it’s a lost resource. That’s why early childhood is so important to prepare children better for school; otherwise, you’re forever playing catch-up. You invest more and more just to get children to do what they’re supposed to do at that level

Increasingly, I am persuaded that there is a fourth dimension – I don’t know what to call it, but we can call it ‘equity’. How do you invest public resources in providing an education for some people and not for others who are also part of your population? How can you justify quality in the face of inequity?

For instance, the outcomes may not say much for equity or even for quality. Yet in every country we have claims for quality based on outcomes: “I will show you our best quality schools, our top schools, with the best results.” Typically these, in many communities, are schools that take in the best pupils from the best backgrounds. They are able to recruit the best trained teachers. They are able to afford the best teaching equipment, resources and learning aids. They have the best

buildings. What do you then expect? You don't crow about it and say this is a good quality school.

What about those schools who take in the most difficult kids from troubled backgrounds? What about teachers who are really not well paid, but stick to the job? And they make a difference in the lives of those children. Are these good quality schools? They may not score the A grades in results, but they can take children who have probably not had anything and getting them to Cs or Bs: that has to do with the equality notion and signifies quality based on value added. To me, it is also about the way we spread public resources for education. The way we don't deal with a level playing field; the way you tackle the difficulties that are out there. Equality doesn't mean being the same, it means a fair distribution of the means of achieving these things. There are people who do things against the odds. For me that's also part of quality.

Q: Should regions be concerned about girls' education when girls are in school and boys are dropping out?

CW: *They should be concerned in a number of senses. Like Bolivia and a few other Latin American countries, initially the idea was, "We'll have more girls in school than boys." First of all, you have to see whether this is just an overall picture, a national average, because when they started examining the issue in Bolivia and thought, "Oh the real problem is with the indigenous population. They are really disadvantaged." But then within that indigenous population, we find the issue is about girls being disadvantaged. It's a smaller part of the population, but girls are so disadvantaged. It's true for some countries where the problem is with rural children, not girls, as such.*

But the concern about girls' education is not just about girls. It's about conditions that normally allow girls to be in school, and which then translates into getting all the children into school. In other words, when you create a better school environment, when you deal with bullying and all those aspects in schools because you are interested in girls' education, is it just about the number of girls in the school? Or is it about creating a better condition for learning for all children, boys and girls alike?

I think this fixation with numbers can be a distraction. Once people just look at the numbers, they think, "Oh, problem solved. We've got more girls in school – we don't have an issue here." We hear that from the Middle East and North Africa all the time and it's ironic that in most of those societies, the greatest issue is about gender inequalities. And yet, because there are so many girls in school – more than boys, people in education will say, "Oh we don't have a problem with girls' education."

Parts of the Caribbean, there ought to be a genuine concern about boys as distinct from girls. I would say the issues may be different, but the issues have to do with macho culture, with various kinds of things, greater attraction of work and earning power and so on.

There are those factors to be addressed, no doubt, and that's why we talk about gender parity, not girls' parity and boys' parity. Where there are imbalances against boys, because of some peculiar reasons, those reasons need to be addressed.

Our argument is that in most situations, the issues affect girls more than boys. I would say sometimes even where there are greater numbers of girls than boys in school, it doesn't mean there are not issues that affect girls. For instance, in parts of Latin America now, the strongest issue is violence in schools. And that violence is perpetuated largely against girls. Should that be a concern with girls' education? Of course it should be. It's not just about numbers of girls in school. That's why the numbers thing is a distraction.