A Promise Is a Promise: Time for Action to End Violence against Women

Violence against women and girls continues to persist globally and throughout East Asia and the Pacific. According to World Bank data, women aged 15-44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria. In the Pacific region, as many as 7 out of 10 women and 8 out of 10 children experience violence and/or abuse at some point in their lives. Gender based violence also occurs in education contexts. In Papua New Guinea, female students were found to be fearful of sexual assault and violence both in and on their way to school.

This International Women’s Day East Asia and Pacific UNGEI would like to highlight the need for action and education to end violence against women and girls. The United Nations defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.’

Within education, gender-based violence can include physical violence such as corporal punishment and sexual harassment, emotional violence such as bullying, and economic violence where access to education or resources is refused to girls. The USAID estimates almost half of all female students and many male students worldwide experience some form of sexual violence in an education context. Such violent acts can be perpetrated by both teachers and pupils and, although girls are often more vulnerable to gender-based violence, boys too are at risk.

Violence against women and girls mirrors and compounds other inequalities. Marginalized groups such as women and girls with disabilities, sex workers, and indigenous or ethnic minority women and girls are particularly vulnerable to violence. In Papua New Guinea, which has one of the highest rates of violence and abuse anywhere in the world, around 67% of women report experiencing violence, and in some remote highland communities this figure rises to 90%.

Gender-based violence in education contexts can have severe health, social and educational consequences. Violence discourages girls and boys from going to and staying at school. It may cause parents to keep daughters out of school for fear that they will be victimized. Violence against women and girls also presents countries with a huge economic cost. The Reserve Bank of Fiji estimates the cost of violence against women and girls to be 7% of GDP.

Violence against women and girls is one consequence of harmful stereotypes, norms and attitudes based on gender inequality. One study in Lao People’s Democratic Republic showed 92% of men and 94% of women in Lao agreed it is important for a man to exert power over his wife and to demonstrate that he is head of the family. Similarly, a study in Cambodia revealed that most men and women did not view domestic violence as a crime.

Education plays a key role in challenging and changing such attitudes and norms and can help to prevent gender-based violence. Education also empowers women and girls and has additional benefits in health, employment and productivity; strong evidence from the World Bank shows a one-year increase in the schooling of all adult females in a country is associated with an increase in GDP per capita of around $700.

The 2006 UN World Report on Violence against Children states the “recognition that all children have equal rights to education in settings that are free of violence, and that one of the functions of education is to produce adults imbued with the non-violent values and practices” is essential to countering violence in schools. The East Asia and Pacific UNGEI urges governments to uphold education as an inalienable human right and to ensure the provision of quality, child-friendly and gender-sensitive education for all children, both boys and girls.
The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) is the Education For All flagship for girls’ education and the principal movement to narrow the gender gap in primary and secondary education, and to ensure that by 2015, all children everywhere will be able to complete primary schooling, and that by then, girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education. UNGEI works through partnerships with organizations committed to these goals at global, regional, and country levels. To learn more about UNGEI, visit www.ungei.org.