Thank you, Aase

Two years ago, I met a girl named Maha, from a village in Yemen.

In her world, few girls ever receive an education. But Maha dreamed of going to school... learning to read and write... making friends... maybe even going to university.

Her father loved her, but he was a traditional man. Girls didn’t go to school. If she went, the village wouldn’t understand; they would condemn and ostracize his family. Even her brothers were against it. Only her mother fought for her daughter, even though she had never gone to school herself.

Together, they begged and pleaded. Eventually, her father gave in.
The road to school was hard and long, but mostly it was lonely. And intimidating. People jeered as she walked, “How can you do this to your family? You bring dishonor on us all.” She became an outcast.

But school was worth it. Shy at first, she soon started making friends…putting her hand up in class… helping her teacher. She got top marks in her homework.

At night she was exhausted; her eyes were dry, her back ached, yet still she stayed up late sewing crafts so she could sell them to buy schoolbooks.

Her persistence paid off. She graduated from high school. And today, she’s flourishing at university… hoping for a Masters… and grateful to those who believed in her. Her education, she says, has given her a voice.

Maha is tall and thin… just a wisp of a young woman… but she has the inner strength of a warrior. She’s fought so hard… and endured so much… for something that should be her birthright.
Imagine how many other Mahas are out there, just aching to show the world what they can do?

Bright girls. Creative girls. Capable girls… who are trapped in stunted lives… forced to watch their horizons diminish instead of being encouraged to explore them.

It is with these millions of girls in mind that I’m so glad to be in Oslo today – not only to highlight the importance of education… but the imperative of educating girls.

Thank you to my friend, Prime Minister Stoltenberg, for your unfailing leadership… financially and morally, on behalf of millions of girls around the world.

And thank you Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, and Sweden, as well, for championing the right of girls to go to school.

You all know that when we invest in educating girls, we reap a double dividend.

An educated girl will become a woman who spends more on schools and medicine for her children.
An educated girl will become a woman who earns more money and respect to pass on to her family.

An educated girl will become a woman who works harder for better schools, cleaner hospitals, and safer streets.

An educated girl will become a woman who tips the balance from poverty to progress.

It isn’t often that the logic behind a policy is so clear. But when it comes to the value of educating girls, the evidence speaks for itself.

Eight years ago, we reached a verdict… we pledged to get girls into school at the World Education Forum and through the Millennium Development Goals. Yet, justice still eludes 41 million girls, nearly nine times the population of Norway.

How can we possibly justify throwing so much human potential away? Why are the daughters of poor men and women less deserving than our own? How can we allow an accident of birth to determine their fate?
I’m proud that Jordan is on track to achieve the gender parity target on time.

But in the Arab world, we still have much more to do. There are 5.7 million Arab children out of school. Two-thirds of them live in the region’s least developed countries, including Yemen, Djibouti, Sudan, and Mauritania. And within those countries, almost three-in-four children not in classrooms are girls.

Girls in other parts of the world share these hardships.

They lose out to poverty and cultural biases because families invest in sons over daughters when they struggle to survive.

They leave education early because many schools fail to provide sanitation facilities that give girls the privacy and dignity they deserve.

They lack female role models to emulate… to inspire them …to help them imagine what they can become.

All of these challenges are difficult… but not one is insurmountable.
We found the solutions long ago. But in too many places, we lost the will to use them.

So, I am happy that throughout my region, new projects are underway to empower a generation of young girls.

Girls in Egypt… walking to girl-friendly schools… safer because their classrooms are closer to home and their lessons are taught by women.

Girls in Yemen… saved by a national strategy to engage parents, build schools faster, and make primary education free.

Girls in Morocco… rescued by a National Plan of Action so they can spend their mornings in a school playground and not on a factory floor.

Every dollar in every project gives a girl the chance to discover her potential. Imagine how many lives could be lifted if these dollars and projects reached every child.

That’s why this charge isn’t just for my part of the world, but for every part of the world.
And why our task isn’t just gender parity, but the EFA goals as a whole.

And there isn’t a moment to waste. Because frankly, we’ve all taken much too long to get where we are today.

It may seem impossible at times, but my resolve is strengthened whenever I hear children say that their one wish is to go to school.

Children like Amina from Somalia… ten years old…born into a camp for displaced people…she’s never seen the inside of a classroom… yet she longs to go to school and become a teacher… because, she says, “Teachers are important people.”

Children like Fatima from Afghanistan…eleven years old…she dropped out of school because her family was starving. She collects metal, plastic, and bones to sell, eating the discarded scraps of food she finds. She would love to return to school, if only she had enough to eat.
Children like Majid from Kenya…ten years old…he left school to beg….abandoned by his family because they couldn’t afford to keep him. He sleeps on the streets and dreams of returning to school. He asks God to help him.

He asks God to help him.

Children shouldn’t have to pray for an education. It’s their right. And it’s our job to provide it.

It’s not unreasonable for children to wish to go to school.

What’s unreasonable is that we haven’t kept our promises to them.

Too many national governments are still imposing prohibitive school fees… failing to serve disadvantaged children… and underfunding educational budgets… while donors mobilize mountains of money to shore up banks… subsidize farmers… and strengthen powerful militaries… but can’t find $11 billion to send poor children to school.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that it’s more than unreasonable.
It’s unconscionable.

But standing with you today, I know our performance doesn’t have to be unalterable.

We’ve promised enough. Now, where is our will? What is it finally going to take for us to act? Or will we meet in another city, another eight years from now, telling the same stories and citing the same figures, lamenting that nothing has changed?

Amina in Somalia deserves an answer. So does Fatima in Afghanistan. And Majid in Kenya. So does Maha. And so do the millions of girls and boys around the world just like them.

What will each of us do to turn their right to education from fiction into fact?

I will keep working to push my country to meet our EFA goals – at all levels.

I will do all I can to keep education for all on the global agenda… to ensure that children do not become casualties of the global economic downturn.
I will support UNICEF... the Girls Education Initiative... the Global Campaign for Education... and other critical efforts to get more girls into school.

I will speak out for an increase in global programs to teach illiterate women to read, so the price they were forced to pay as girls does not burden them all their lives.

I will stand with Norway and the other members of the Class of 2015 to keep pressure on the public and private sectors – in donor and developing countries alike.

And as a member of the World Economic Forum board, I am delighted that Davos 2009 has put girls high up the agenda so that their voices...their stories... will be heard.

We need to start listening.

We need to start caring.

Because children shouldn’t have to pray for an education.

Thank you very much.