11 October 2012

International Day of the Girl Child
East Asia and Pacific Regional and South Asia Regional UNGEI Joint Statement
End Child Marriage

October 11th is a particularly significant day for the East Asia and Pacific Regional and South Asia Regional UN Girls’ Education Initiative (EAP/SA UNGEI). The inauguration of International Day of the Girl Child solidifies our global commitment to ensuring equality for girls, not only in education, but in all aspects of life. The ‘girl child’ specifically refers to those under the age of 18, who often face unique challenges compared to boys and compared to women. On this day, we are reminded that all girls are entitled to human rights, equal treatment and equal opportunities including the right to complete a full cycle of basic education. However, to realize equitable conditions for girls in society, obstacles, such as gender-based violence, child labour, deep-seated prejudices, discrimination and child marriage must be faced. This year’s theme for International Day of the Girl Child focuses on the detrimental effects of child marriage and the need to put an end to this practice.

Child marriage is defined by UNICEF as, “the formal marriage or informal union of a child, defined as under age 18, either with an adult or another child.”1 Although this issue is the reality for girls as well as boys, it is girls who are often disproportionately affected. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right to free and full consent to a marriage, stating that consent cannot be ‘free and full’ when one of the parties has not reached a sufficient level of maturity to make an informed decision about a life partner. Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides for the prohibition of child marriage, stating that ‘the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect’. While the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) does not specifically refer to child marriage, child marriage is directly connected to other rights, such as the right of children to freely express their views, to be protected from all forms of abuse, and to be protected from harmful traditional practices. However, in many communities, child marriage is encouraged or coerced by families as a matter of economic necessity; as a way to protect girls from promiscuity, sexual abuse and social exclusion; and as a means to avoid pregnancy outside of marriage. However, empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that child marriage exposes children to harm, such as violence, divorce, abandonment, and poverty, and frequently violates a range of children’s rights.

Reliable statistics on child marriage are negligible due to the undocumented and unofficial nature of the practice; however reports that do exist indicate that half of the world’s child brides live in South Asia, which accounts for more child/early marriages than any other region in the world. Around 46 per cent or 32.6 million females in South Asia aged 20-24 were married or in union by age 18.2,3 Bangladesh and Nepal are among the countries with the highest incidence of females being married before the legal age of 18.4,5 In the East Asia and Pacific region, this issue is more common than many believe and almost one in five females is married before the age of 18. Child marriage is highest among Pacific Island countries (i.e. Vanuatu, Nauru, and Marshall Islands) where the practice is not legally recognized but traditionally accepted.6 Globally, in countries where it is practiced, child marriage is most common among the poorest 20 per cent of the population suggesting economic pressures can serve as a factor in child marriage.7

Child marriage is a violation of human rights and deprives girls of a future where they can be empowered to make their own choices about issues that affect their lives. Research indicates that females who marry early often leave formal education and are more likely to become pregnant. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some communities, schooling is not seen as an appropriate gender role for married girls and mothers; this is mainly due to social norms and expectations. Adolescent girls, whose bodies are not yet ready to bear children, face an increased risk of maternal mortality. An infant’s risk of dying is 60 per cent greater for those born to a mother under the age of 18 compared to a mother who is 19 years or older.8 Furthermore, child brides are at greater risk of domestic violence, abuse, exploitation, contracting HIV and other STDs, as well as social marginalization.

Due to the multiple disadvantages and discrimination they often face, child brides are less likely to attend secondary school, especially if they become pregnant. In addition, girls who show persistence in attending school are also frequently victims of discrimination, bullying and social exclusion.9 Efforts to end child marriage must go hand in hand with efforts to increase girls’ education and improve social understandings of the disadvantages of child marriage. Girls’ education is one of the best
investments a country can make; resulting in both higher economic and social returns. Educated girls are more likely to have a better income as adults, marry later, have fewer and healthier children, have stronger decision-making powers within the household, and have more self-esteem. Eradicating child marriage among girls- and boys - and promoting their right to quality education is an essential element of broader strategies to promote human rights and socially just development.

**EAP/SA UNGEI’s call to action on International Day of the Girl Child:**

In order to end child marriage and accelerate progress towards gender parity and equality in education by 2015, the East Asia and Pacific and South Asia UNGEI call on countries to:

- Ensure equal access to compulsory education for all girls and boys. Research indicates that the more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to marry as a child. Compulsory education may serve as a deterrent to child marriage and a means of prolonging the period of time when a girl is unavailable for marriage. One method could be to offering school scholarships for boys and girls who postpone marriage and support life skills training that focuses on the issue of early pregnancies and the impact this has on young women.

- Create more opportunities for second chance education through formal and non-formal systems for girls who are out of school due to child marriage and motherhood so that they can complete a full cycle of basic education. Ensure that pregnant girls continue to remain in school and receive psychosocial support.

- Address child marriage among both girls and boys through a multi-sectoral approach, including education, health, labour and other relevant sectors. Provide community sensitization, raise awareness, and educate parents and community members about the importance of education and the negative impact of early marriage.

- Make provisions for increased and better quality data analysis on child marriage. Collect and disseminate accurate sex-disaggregated, sub-national data on child marriage and education (particularly the disparities between rural versus urban incidences and disparities among wealth quintiles, which leads to more effective programme planning and implementation.

In so doing, UNGEI recognizes that the rights of all children are inseparable and interconnected and all efforts to end child marriage should promote a child’s right to survival, development, protection and participation. The East Asia and Pacific Regional and South Asia Regional United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (EAP/SA UNGEI) take the opportunity of the inauguration of ‘International Day of the Girl Child’ to emphasize their continued commitment to uphold education as an inalienable human right.

Countries are urged to ensure the provision of quality education for all children, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, caste, income level, disability or any other factor which might impede them from enjoying their right to quality education. This statement is a call to all countries to take action to ensure that every girl’s and boy’s human right to education is respected, protected and fulfilled, and to prevent, combat and end the practice of child marriage.