

# East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI

## Adolescents and Gender Equality in Education

*Focusing on adolescents as we work towards gender equality in education and education for all...*



## Adolescents and gender equality in education

The adolescent years can be one of the most transformative times in one's life. The UN definition of adolescents is 10-19 years old – it is period in which girls and boys are faced with changes not only to their bodies, but also challenges such as HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, trafficking, abuse or the lack of an opportunity for an education.

A quality education can equip adolescent girls (and boys) with the knowledge to overcome these challenges so that they may build a better future for themselves. As stated by the World Bank in the 1990's, "investing in adolescent girls is precisely the catalyst poor countries need to break intergenerational poverty and to create a better distribution of income. Investing in them is not only fair, it is a smart economic move."

This newsletter is dedicated to highlighting the challenges and solutions – faced by adolescent girls in particular - in the areas of gender equality in education, sex and reproductive health education, and education for those with learning disabilities.

### Highlights

A smart move: Investing in adolescent girls

Better reproductive health outcomes through inter-generational dialogue

Boys and girls becoming equals: School-based programme in Mumbai shows promising results

Building bridges to all: Inclusive education ensures brighter future for all students in Lao PDR

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## A smart move: Investing in adolescent girls

### *The UN accelerates efforts to advance the rights of adolescent girls*

*By: The United Nations Adolescent Girls Task Force*

As part of the global effort to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, the United Nations has been accelerating its efforts to support governments in protecting the rights of adolescent girls. Governments and development partners have agreed with the World Bank's assessment in the early 1990s that "Investing in adolescent girls is precisely the catalyst poor countries need to break intergenerational poverty and to create a better distribution of income. Investing in them is not only fair, it is a smart economic move."

In response to this call participating UN agencies formed the UN Adolescent Girls' Task Force (UNAGTF) to engage the UN system more robustly in promoting the rights of all adolescent girls. The Task Force is co-chaired by UNFPA and UNICEF and counts as members the ILO, UNESCO, UNHCR, UN Women and WHO.

In 2010, the Task Force helped in issuing a UN **Joint Statement - Accelerating Efforts to Advance the Rights of Adolescent Girls**--a major milestone in the UN leadership to achieve gender equality and promote the status of women and girls. The statement affirms the view that improving the lives of adolescent girls is a necessary condition for achieving the MDGs, for fulfilling the international human rights agenda and the government's responsibilities to women and girls in their society. Importantly, the Statement presents a set of concrete actions for girls that could have a transformative effect on their health and development.

The five strategic priorities for adolescent girls programs are education, including post-primary; health, including sexual and reproductive health; protection from violence; building leadership skills; and collecting and analyzing data on situation of adolescent girls. Taken together, these strategies create synergies of positive action for girls.

The field of education, in particular, demonstrates the interconnection of all five areas. Girls with more education grow up to be women who have fewer and healthier babies, make more informed choices about caring for themselves and their families and become more skilled workers. They live healthier lives, are better equipped to take leadership roles and to make their voices heard. In the long term, almost every aspect of development will be profoundly affected by the fact of whether a girl can go and stay in school. Girl-centered programmes promoted by the UNAGTF therefore aspire that adolescent girls have access to quality education and that they complete school. A special focus lies on girls' transition from primary to post-primary education and training, including secondary education and technical and vocational training and pathways between formal and non-formal systems.



Above: Nepal, girl with flower by Weegolo.

### Building on girls' strengths

Within the UN system, the UNAGTF has created capacity for collective advocacy around issues that are critical to the education, health, development and protection of adolescent girls. It is a platform for signatory agencies and others to engage governments and non-governmental partners in dialogue about the challenges and problems facing adolescent girls and our common interest in finding innovative solutions.

The Task Force participates actively in the Commission on the Status of Women and co-hosts informational events for government delegations and NGOs resulting in greater visibility on the global agenda of issues related to adolescent girls, gender equality and empowerment of women.

At the country level, the UNAGTF mobilizes UN Country Teams to address the situation of the most marginalized adolescent girls through the UN's collaborative programming process. It provides technical support to countries that are rolling out joint initiatives and advocacy campaigns to advance the rights of adolescent girls under the umbrella of the **Global Adolescent Girls Initiative**. Programmes are already underway in Malawi, Liberia, Ethiopia and Guatemala. In addition, 20 countries have been mobilized to start developing joint initiatives targeting adolescent girls. Four of those countries are in the Asia region. Namely, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Nepal, and Pakistan.

The focus of all of these programmes lies on increasing knowledge, skills and capacities of adolescent girls with a special attention to the marginalized adolescent girls. This will enable them to discover, develop and express their talents, not only for themselves but for their countries' development as well.

For more information on the United Nations Adolescents Task Force, please contact [Danielle Engel](#), Global Coordinator, UNGATF.



Above: Nepal, school girls by Gregor Y.

## Better reproductive health outcomes through inter-generational dialogue

By: Sally Beadle (UNICEF), Justine Sass (UNESCO Bangkok), Josephine Sauvarin (UNFPA), and Margaret Sheehan (UNICEF)

A significant factor affecting the spread of HIV among women and girls in the Asia Pacific region is the social and cultural barriers that make talking about sexuality or insisting on protection from HIV a difficult matter for many women. This traditional reserve has meant that mothers often do not pass on information about sex and protective behaviours to their children. In fact, adult women themselves often do not possess a sufficient level of knowledge about sexuality and reproductive health to be able to teach their children effectively or to ensure that they themselves make healthy sexual choices. This, coupled with the limited availability of comprehensive sexuality education in the region, means that many young people are left vulnerable as a result of ignorance.

The *Connections* programme, originally developed by the Viet Nam Women's Union with support from WHO and UNAIDS, was designed to address this challenge by helping adolescent girls, and mothers of adolescent girls, to create their own conversations about this very personal part of life. The original curriculum for the programme was developed by the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne, with technical inputs from the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health Promotion (CCHIP) in Viet Nam. The programme has since been made available to several other countries in the region for adaptation and implementation. In late 2010, a regional consultation was held in Laos to discuss the adaptability of the programme. Following positive uptake by five countries, a regional training of trainers was held in March 2011.

### Intergenerational dialogue: Why involve parents in sexuality education?

Many young people approach adulthood faced with conflicting and confusing messages about sexuality and gender. This is often exacerbated by embarrassment, silence and disapproval of open discussion of sexual matters by adults, including parents, at the very time when it is most needed (UNESCO, 2009 *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, Paris). In pre-programme research for *Connections* in Laos, one young woman spoke about the difficulty of approaching this topic with her parents:

*'The first move has to come from the mother, they have to show that they are happy to share information... usually this has been a hidden topic [not spoken about], and we will not feel comfortable asking about it'.*

Embarrassment is not the only barrier reported by mothers. Many mothers indicate that – even if they



Above: Cambodia, group discussion and sharing.  
By S. Beadle.

felt comfortable talking to their children – they do not have the correct information to share with them. As one mother in Cambodia reported:

*'We have limited knowledge and understanding of these things, and little confidence talking about these issues. Besides this, we are all very busy with household work and income generating activities.'*

Acknowledging these barriers, and with increasing evidence indicating the importance of engaging parents in improving adolescent health, including sexual health, the *Connections* programme aims to build both girls' and mothers' knowledge of these issues and ability to communicate about them. Sessions are designed to run simultaneously among girls and mothers, with a shared thirteenth session which encourages intergenerational dialogue about the themes raised in the programme and provides opportunities for mothers and daughters to interact and practice talking to each other about gender, sex and reproductive health.

Using highly interactive and participatory approaches allow girls to learn important information and skills about a range of issues. At the same time, mothers practice talking to their children about sensitive issues related to sex. For example, in one session which deals with the question of where babies come from, mothers are first provided with basic biological information about conception and birth. They are then given the task of engaging in a role-play in which children of different ages ask, "where do babies come from?" Games and humour, and role plays and scenarios, enable participants to discuss issues of sexuality and relationships without requiring them to divulge their own personal experience.

In response to several requests, the programme has been adapted to include low-literacy options so that it is accessible to participants from a range of educational backgrounds. Whenever an activity requires reading or writing, the manual provides a 'low literacy' alternative.



Above: Cambodia, participants talk about the female body's reproductive system. By S.Beadle.

What has been found through programme evaluations in Viet Nam and in the application of *Connections* to other settings is that mothers are not only learning to pass on information to their children, they are also learning important information for their own lives and relationships. The programme increased the likelihood that mothers would talk with their daughters and their husbands about important issues relating to sex and gender. For example, following the programme, 90 per cent of mothers reported being comfortable talking about gender-based violence compared to less than 50 per cent prior to the programme. *Connections* also increased the comfort of adolescent girls to communicate with their friends about these issues.

*Connections* continues in Viet Nam where a boys' programme is currently in pilot. Based on the success of the programme in Viet Nam, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNESCO are supporting implementation into four other countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar and Nepal). The UN will continue to work with countries to evaluate and improve the programme.

For more information, please contact [Margaret Sheehan](#), Asia-Pacific Regional Youth & Adolescent Development Specialist, UNICEF.

## Boys and girls becoming equals: School-based programme in Mumbai shows promising results

By: *The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)*

A couple of years ago, 12-year-old Prachi and her 14-year-old brother Dhiraj never would have played together. According to Dhiraj, it wasn't cool to associate with his sister. And they didn't talk much at home. But that and much more has changed since the two participated in the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) program in Mumbai.

Developed by the [International Center for Research on Women \(ICRW\)](#), [Committee of Resource Organizations for Literacy \(CORO\)](#) and [Tata Institute of Social Sciences \(TISS\)](#), GEMS champions equal relationships between girls and boys and dissects social norms that define Indian men's and women's roles. GEMS students, who are between 12 and 14 years, learn how their bodies change during puberty and what makes for healthy relationships. And they discuss different forms of violence, including violence against women and girls and among peers.

These topics are addressed through group activities led by adult facilitators from CORO and TISS. The group activities, which include games, debates, role plays and candid discussions, are held during the school day, each lasting about 45 minutes. GEMS also involves a school-wide campaign – a week-long series of events led by students that address the major themes of the program.

It's an unconventional approach for addressing gender inequality in an underused setting – the school system.

*"In a deeply gender-divided society like India, girls and boys are segregated early on in their lives. Schools validate this by limiting how and where boys and girls interact," says Pranita Achyut, an ICRW specialist in poverty, gender and HIV/AIDS who oversees the implementation of GEMS. "This kind of segregation only stands to limit boys' and girls' understanding of each other. We think it's critical to challenge these practices within the school system, where children learn to socialize."*

Key to this has been facilitators' effort to create an environment of trust and acceptance within the classroom.

"It's highly unusual for discussions with children at school to touch on their life experiences, but GEMS gives them a safe place to raise even the most intimate questions," Pallavi Palay, CORO's project coordinator for GEMS. "And it has been like opening a floodgate. Girls and boys challenge each other and ask questions they've never discussed in the presence of teachers or other authority figures."

### *A family benefits*

For GEMS students such as Prachi, what most resonated with her were discussions about relationships – why it's important to be respectful, understanding and to share feelings. She credits the program with bettering her relationship with her brother – they now talk to each other and play together. Plus Dhiraj now helps Prachi with household chores. And for Prachi, she's found her voice:

*"I used to think that only boys can study, they can grow. They get the respect," Prachi says as she sits on the floor, legs crossed. "There's nothing for girls; they have to be home and take care of household chores."*

But through GEMS, Prachi explains that she realized her outlook was based solely on the relationships between women and men she sees in society. She's discovered that doesn't necessarily have to be her reality.

*"It's a girl's right to get an education. She can do anything boys can do," Prachi says. "She can get an education, get a good job, work outside and take care of her parents. Why should girls be restricted only to household work?"*

### ***What the evidence shows***

Dhiraj's and Prachi's experience with GEMS is not unique. An evaluation of the program found that youth who participated in GEMS transformed their attitudes towards women's and men's roles in society and became less tolerant of gender discrimination.

ICRW researchers collected data before and after the program from students in grades six and seven at 45 schools: 15 schools conducted the group activities and campaign; 15 only the campaign and another 15 served as the control group.

As part of the evaluation, the researchers developed a scale to measure students' attitudes toward gender equality. For instance, youth were asked whether they agreed, disagreed or weren't sure about statements such as: "only men should work outside the home" and "girls cannot do well in math and science" and "there are times when a woman deserves to be beaten."

After six months of participating in the program (whether in the combined intervention or just the campaign), the proportion of boys and girls who had the highest gender equality scores more than

doubled – a significantly greater increase than in the control group. For girls, the combined intervention was more effective than the campaign alone.

Generally, boys and girls showed the greatest change in their attitude about the roles expected of women and men in society. For instance, a higher percentage of students disagreed with traditional notions that say only mothers can bathe or feed children, and that men need more care because they work harder than women.

Participating students also grew more supportive of girls pursuing higher education and marrying later in life, and of boys and men contributing to household work.

For many of the students, their improved attitudes translated into positive changes. Most commonly, boys reported that they did more household chores and stopped teasing girls. Girls said they better understood boys and spoke out against gender discrimination.

### ***Key lessons and next steps***

GEMS resonated with students because the issues were relevant to their lives and facilitators made the process of reflection fun through the program's participatory methodology. They also encouraged students to challenge stereotypical ideas about men and women, which moved students to look at their world differently.

The program is now being scaled up to 250 schools in Mumbai, reaching some 80,000 students. In this next phase the teachers are being trained to impart GEMS as part of the school curriculum, thus institutionalizing the program. Plans also are being made by the Viet Nam Department of Education to adopt GEMS as part of its standard curriculum for young adolescents.

For more information, please contact [Ellen Weiss](#), Senior Advisor, Research Utilization and Development, ICRW.

## Building bridges to all: Inclusive education ensures brighter future for all students in Lao PDR

By *Rojana Manowalailao, UNESCO*

Khamhuu\* shook her head when I asked her if she wanted to accompany me.

The 13 year-old pupil at Huaykhun Primary School in Bolikhan District, Lao PDR, had only just met me and was wary of a stranger.

“Do you want to come with the teacher then, Khamhuu?” her teacher, Thongphun Khanthaneego, then said.

Khamhuu gave her hand to her teacher, faced her classmates, waved, and sent a kiss with an innocent smile. The class waved, sent a kiss, and smiled back.

“I want to show you that Khamhuu understands us,” said Ms. Khanthaneego.

Khamhuu lives with a mental disability. She nods, or shakes her head, and makes facial expressions and sounds when she communicates.

When the teacher asked the students to read out loud, Khamhuu read too. She formed her lips and moved her mouth as if she was reading along with her classmates.

When the teacher asked the class to do written assignments, Khamhuu wrote too with lines and circles.

“Khamhuu smiles a lot,” said Thanavan Phanthavong, a nine-year-old who was sat next to Khamhuu. “And she would laugh when I made a funny face.

“The teacher said we should be nice to everyone. And I want Khamhuu to have knowledge so I teach

Khamhuu the Laos language and mathematics. And I take her hand to help her write,” said the boy.

Khamhuu’s mother does not want her daughter to attend school over fears that she will be a burden. But Khamhuu sees her sister going to school every day and gets dressed and follows her to school. Sometimes she walks to school on her own.

Now Khamhuu sits in the Primary 3 class.



Above: Lao PDR, primary school. By *Rojana Manowalailao*.

Until recently, Huaykhun Primary School in Bolikhan District, Lao PDR had never enrolled a child with a disability. That changed shortly after headmaster Khamphong Bothong attended a UNESCO workshop late on Inclusive Education in 2009.

The workshop, part of a three-year project sponsored by UNESCO and the British Foreign School Society, made Mr. Bothong realise that children with disabilities can be integrated into

mainstream classrooms. The project introduced UNESCO toolkits and training for inclusive and learning-friendly environments to 12 pilot primary schools in Lao PDR to enable them to better understand Inclusive Education and apply new knowledge in the classroom.

But the Inclusive Education project does not focus only on the needs of children with disabilities. Instead, it aims to improve access to education for all children excluded or marginalised from school, by factors including poverty, ethnicity, religion, HIV/AIDS, gender or membership of a minority group.

Johan Lindeberg, the former programme specialist in Inclusive Education at UNESCO Bangkok explains: “The Inclusive Education project is about giving children currently out-of-school opportunities to learn. To learn in a school free from discrimination and bias towards those who might be a little bit different, in an environment where diversity is welcomed and is seen as something positive rather than a problem.”

The development of the project has been closely connected to the overall development of the education sector in Lao PDR. In 2008, the government declared education as a national priority. According to UNESCO statistics, the country spends 12 per cent of its public expenditure on education. Though still low by regional standards, this has grown significantly.

Minister of Education of Lao PDR Phanhkham Viphavanh said: “In five years we plan that education opportunities will be accessed to every single child of our citizens to be able to study in schools. The quality of education must be lifted in order to build the personnel to develop the country and bring the country out of poverty.

“Education is a human right. It’s the right for all citizens and every person must have access to education. With education, life will be improved

and the society will be improved.”

However, providing every last child with a great education will be a significant feat. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics figures, the net primary enrolment rate in 2008 was 82 per cent. And although that has improved since the 1990s, when net primary enrolment was around 65 per cent, improving attendance rates still further remains a challenge.

Mr Lindeberg explains: “Reaching the last percentage of children still out-of-school is sometimes exponentially more difficult. This is because they are the most marginalized and hard to reach children that require more of an effort by the education system. Remote locations, insufficient school structures, and lack of appropriately trained teachers, for example, are still major barriers to providing quality education for all in Lao PDR.”

“I’m very aware that it’s the school’s duty to provide education for all children and it’s the teacher’s job to make sure that all children have knowledge. But I admit that we didn’t know how to deal with children with disabilities,” said headmaster Mr Bothong. “But after the [Inclusive Education] workshops, we gradually learnt.”

\* Khamhuu’s family name is not provided to protect her identity.

For more information, please contact [Rojana Manowalailao](#), UNESCO.

## Events

### World Teachers' Day 2011: UNGEI joint statement and e-postcards

October 5<sup>th</sup> marks World Teachers' Day - a global observance to acknowledge all teachers for their contributions to society. The joint East Asia and Pacific and South Asia Regional United Nations Girls' Education Initiatives joined the international community in celebrating the important role that teachers play in realizing this year's theme of 'Teachers for Gender Equality' and released a joint statement that can be found [here](#).

UNESCO Bangkok and UNGEI have also created e-postcards using some of the submissions from the 2011 UNGEI Drawing Contest. We invite you to send a postcard to your teachers to thank them, not only on World Teachers' Day, but any day! Find out more [here](#).



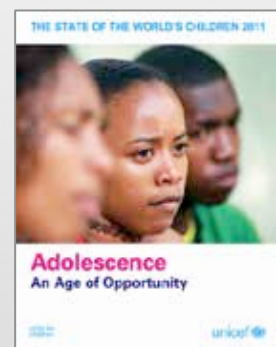
### Regional Conference on Women and Literacy

17-19 October 2011 / Chiang Mai, Thailand

Organized by the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), this conference aims to build capacity of non-state actors towards influencing policies and budgets related to female literacy. For more information, please contact [Cecilia Soriano](#).

## Resources

[Regional Consultation on Sexuality Education and Gender with a Focus on Reaching Adolescent Girls \(July 2011\) Meeting Report](#)



[The State of the World's Children 2011: Adolescence - An Age of Opportunity](#)  
By: UNICEF



[Once upon a girl / Once upon a boy \(Animation\)](#)  
Ref: [www.teenpath.net](http://www.teenpath.net)

## EAP UNGEI Editorial Board

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