

**International Women's Day
Asia and Pacific UNGEI Statement
8 March 2010**

**Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities: Progress for All
"Women Speak Up: Voices from the Informal Sector"**

Although the informal economy accounts for nearly 60 percent of the Asia Pacific region's workforce and serves as a means of job creation and income generation, many people in this sector - particularly women – are denied equal rights and equal opportunities. The lack of decent working conditions and social protection is due in part to the sector's nature, limited amount of data available, and very few platforms in which workers can speak up and out. Education can thus become a key tool to empower women and girls in the informal sector to realize and demand their rights – moving the region a step closer towards progress for all.

International Women's Day celebrates the economic, social and political achievements of women across the world. To mark this occasion, the Asia and Pacific United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) urges the renewed commitment to uphold education as an inalienable human right. This has special significance for girls and women – particularly those working in the informal sector - where opportunities and access to education is limited and often times scarce.

Investing in the education of girls and women delivers high returns on many levels, not only for female educational attainment and lifelong learning opportunities, but also for maternal and children's health, women's empowerment, employment opportunities, democracy, income growth and productivity. Educated women also recognize the importance of health care and access it for their entire family. This is vital to harness the productive capacity of young women, in addition to that of young men, towards long-term and sustainable dynamism and progress of the region. Countries throughout Asia and the Pacific face the risk of perpetuating the cycle of poverty and disempowerment if we fail in our collective efforts to achieve Education for All.

Continued access to education and training for all citizens is an investment in the future, a pre-condition for economic advance, democracy, social cohesion, and personal growth. However, millions of children remain out of school across the region. South Asia alone has 35 million children who are not in school, over half of whom are girls. Millions more remain in the classroom but run the risk of not learning even the basic competencies.

Therefore, concerted action on the part of Governments must be taken to ensure that education policies are inclusive and to make strides towards equal rights and equal opportunities for girls and women. Such efforts must seek to address the multiplicity of factors and barriers that prevent women and girls from accessing education - cultural, institutional, economic - in order to ensure equal access and inclusion to foundational education and life long learning opportunities for girls and boys.

The Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI urges countries to ensure the provision of quality education for all regardless of their sex, ethnicity, caste, income level, disability or any other factor which might exclude them from their right to quality education.

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.

The Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI partners are: Asia Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE), Baha'i International Community, BRAC, Commonwealth Secretariat, CARE, Education Development Center (EDC), Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi (ITA), International Labour Organization (ILO) Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, International Planned Parenthood Foundation South Asia Region (IPPF SAR), Oxfam Great Britain, Plan Asia Regional Office, Room to Read, Save the Children, Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Secretariat, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Regional Support Team, Asia Pacific United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) East Asia and Pacific Regional Office and Regional Office for South Asia, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) East and South-East Asia Regional Office, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and World Vision Foundation of Thailand.