Everyone has the right to education — and this right begins at birth. During this year’s Global Action Week (GAW), the East Asia and Pacific and South Asia Regional UNGEI take the opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) and the significant impact it has on creating solid foundations and futures for girls and boys.

In 2000, the international community came together at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal to reaffirm the commitment to achieve the Education for All Goals by 2015 with the adoption of the Dakar Framework for Action. Six measurable goals were endorsed; all of which encompass the learning needs of all children, youth and adults. The theme for this year’s GAW is closely aligned with Goal 1 of the Framework, which focuses on the need to expand early childhood care and education.

Early childhood is recognized as the period in a child’s lifespan when they experience the most rapid period of growth and change. Experts recognize this period between birth and 8 years as the period of early childhood in development. Significant and critical brain development occurs before age 7, especially during the first three years of life, when important neural connections must take place (or do not take place). What happens in the early years sets the stage for health, learning and behaviour that will last throughout life.

Despite the worldwide trend toward greater equality, gender remains a key factor in the environments that children inhabit from the moment of their birth. By early childhood, children have already learned what it means to be a girl or a boy in their cultural context. In several societies in Asia, even if the physical setting of the child’s life may be within a nuclear family, the social setting may be one where multiple caregivers in a larger extended family (other than parents) interact and influence the process of gender socialization. Similarly, the ways in which parents think about their sons and daughters may indeed be changing, but may also still show adherence to particular social and cultural norms and may result in “blended” or renegotiated identities for children.

Furthermore, in some communities in the region, girls are often denied the opportunity to attend school because they have to stay home and care for their younger siblings. Not only does this reemphasize the gender stereotype of women and girls in domestic roles, but evidence also indicates that this burden often leads girls to fall behind in school and eventually drop out. High-quality ECCE programmes can help to ease the burden of girls from sibling care responsibilities and allow them to regularly attend and be engaged in school activities.

Education can become a key tool to change deep-seated negative stereotypes and beliefs about women and girls’ rights and roles. Investing in early childhood care and education can assist in addressing the needs of several vulnerable populations. ECCE policy and programs should emphasize gender responsiveness right from birth. In such a context, it is critical to ensure that a powerful entry point such as early childhood development (including programs, frameworks and practices) remains gender responsive.

To mark this occasion, the East Asia and Pacific and South Asia Regional United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) urges the renewed commitment to uphold education as an inalienable human right. Countries are urged to ensure the provision of quality education for all, including gender-responsive, high-quality early childhood care and development, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, caste, income level, disability or any other factor which might exclude them from their right to quality education. Ensuring equal access to inclusive quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for girls, women, boys and men can be strengthened by creating strong foundations starting at birth.

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.