International Day of Persons with Disabilities
East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI Statement
“Keeping the promise: Mainstreaming Disability in the Millennium Development Goals towards 2015 and Beyond”

This year’s International Day for Persons with Disabilities celebrates the resilience of women and men with disabilities and acknowledges the need to mainstream disability in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). An estimated 400 million persons with disabilities live in the Asia Pacific region. Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) concedes that every child has the right to an education, those with disabilities are still often excluded especially girls. Less than five years are left to achieve the Millennium Development Goals – in order for the MDGs to become reality we must ensure that quality education is all inclusive.

Young persons with disabilities are frequently neglected and invisible actors in society due to socio-cultural factors. This harsh reality is often compounded with poverty, illiteracy and gender. Having a solid, quality education can help to empower and equip both men and women with the skills and abilities to overcome these obstacles. It is through education and literacy that girls and young women in particular can become active contributors to their communities.

Although there is currently no mention of persons with disabilities in the MDGs, the East Asia and Pacific Regional United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (EAP UNGEI) continues to urge the renewed commitment of the regional community to uphold education as an inalienable human right for everyone. EAP UNGEI places special emphasis on MDGs 2 and 3 which aims to achieve universal primary education and gender equality by 2015. Achieving gender equality in and through education opens endless doors of opportunities for all people so that they can make a difference. This has special significance for girls and young women with disabilities, whose opportunities and access to education (especially at the secondary education level) continue to be limited and often times scarce.

In particular, investing in the education of girls and young women with disabilities 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, in addition to increased understanding of antecedent conditions and solutions that are available for disabilities. Young educated women also recognize the importance of health care, may be empowered to seek new strategies, and address challenges relating to their disabilities more effectively. 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, including for those with disabilities.

Educating young women and men about human rights and gender equality will empower and enable persons with disabilities to make lasting contributions to achieving the MDGs. Continued access to education and training for all citizens is thus a wise investment for the future, a pre-condition for economic advancement, democracy, social cohesion, and personal growth.

It is estimated that for the majority of countries in the region, less than 10 per cent of children with disabilities are enrolled in school1. 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 young women with disabilities. Such efforts must seek to address the multiplicity of factors and barriers that prevent girls and young women with disabilities from accessing education - cultural, institutional, and economic - in order to ensure equal access to and inclusion in foundational education and lifelong learning opportunities for girls and boys.

The East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI urges countries to ensure the provision of quality education for all regardless of their sex, ethnicity, caste, income level, ability or any other factor which might exclude them from their right to quality education. The MDGs are only achievable if all citizens, including persons with disabilities, are part of the equation for change.

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1 UNESCO website, Inclusive education. Visited 24 November 2010
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.