

PRESS RELEASE

Second Arab Regional Media Forum on child rights kicks off in Dubai

Arab media to discuss their role in supporting girls' education

Dubai, May 2, 2006 – Arab media professionals, human rights organizations, academia and UN agencies today initiated an in-depth dialogue on the issue of girls' education in the Arab world with expectations to leverage enhanced commitment from governments, civil society and communities to support sustained access of girls to quality education.

A three-day review of policy innovations, country-specific strategies, success stories and challenges ahead in the area of girls' education, the **Second Arab Regional Media Forum** is an initiative spearheaded by UNICEF, in partnership with the World Food Programme, UNESCO, the Dubai Humanitarian City, the Dubai Press Club, Al Bayan Newspaper, the Arab Institute for Human Rights and the Center for Arab Women for Training & Research (CAWTAR).

Participants in the forum will review global and regional initiatives in the area of girls' education with testimonials from the field, illustrating a rich variety of initiatives that have proven to successfully absorb and retain girls in schools in several Arab countries.

Thomas McDermott, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa called on media to become a credible advocate for children and urged them to strengthen their role as monitors of the **UN Millennium Development Goals** and other promises agreed upon by countries to boost national support to girls' enrolment in school. "*Media also need to make all of us –the policymakers accountable for results*", he added.

Egyptian film star and UNICEF Regional Goodwill Ambassador, Mahmoud Kabil spoke of his visit to Darfur, where he witnessed the determination of girls to attend school. He called on countries in the region to push harder for achieving the goal of equality between girls and boys in education and asked each participant to commit to one activity to further this goal.

A regional panorama

Girls' access to education has improved dramatically over the past few decades, and primary school enrolment is high or universal in most countries in the region.

In the vast majority of countries in the region, girls have a lower repetition rate than boys and Arab women today are also more likely to enroll in universities than they were in the past.

But great challenges remain. Many children— especially girls — are still excluded from education, and many more are enrolled in school but learning too little. Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen are still faced with a major challenge, as more than half of their girls are deprived of primary education. Presently, there are 70 million illiterates in the Arab world, of which an estimated two thirds are women and girls.

In some cases where access does not constitute a problem, the quality of the education provided is often too low. Yet, even with quality education remaining a privilege for a few and teacher's qualifications needing significant improvement, the gender gap represents the greatest single element in the spread of illiteracy

in the region. In general, there is insufficient recognition of women and girls as worthy contributors to the social, political and economic development of their countries.

On the other hand, countries and territories that have experienced decades of internal conflict and displacement (Iraq, Sudan, Palestine) need to recreate strategies for school reintegration with focus on areas where resettling occurs.

Girls' Education and the rationale of global commitments

UNICEF is consolidating six decades of experience and the expertise of other UN partners, the academic community and non-governmental organizations to identify out-of-school girls and get them into the classroom.

The UN Millennium Development Goals set a framework of action that expects countries around the world to eliminate gender disparity at all levels by 2015.

To do so, signatories of the global commitment will need to outline strategies to effectively reach the most disadvantaged communities, eliminating gender bias and ensuring effective learning in safe, gender-sensitive and child-friendly environments. Accelerating efforts in girls' education also exerts a strong force for social transformation, addressing issues of exclusion and discrimination while promoting the values of tolerance, equality and mutual respect.

From a multi-sectoral perspective, the elimination of gender disparity in education systems should ideally envisage action at national and community levels, with the following strategies in mind:

- **Making the classroom more child-friendly and gender-sensitive**, and rooted in the life and environment of the community.
- **Training teachers** who are sensitive to gender and child rights and **identifying women teachers who can become model roles** and inspire girls to enroll and stay in school
- Developing curricula and learning environments that are sensitive to **health and nutrition issues, with a gender-neutral life-skills approach.**
- **Providing girls with access to sport** can also contribute to achieving gender parity in education. Through sports, girls are given the chance to be leaders and improve their confidence and self-esteem. As girls participate in sports, they acquire new interpersonal skills and through additional social networks gain access to different opportunities, allowing them to become more engaged in school and community life.
- **Making sure girls and boys are safe within the school grounds.** This involves making schools secure not only from without but also from within. In some countries, perimeter walls have been found to increase girls' sense of safety. When schools are associated with sexual or physical gender violence, girls' access to education gets negatively affected.
- **Supplying safe water and latrines.** Many girls drop out of school partly because schools lack separate toilet facilities. The provision of potable water is also crucial to retaining girls and boys in school.

For further information, please contact:

- M. Anis Salem, Regional Communication Adviser, UNICEF MENA-RO
E-mail : asalem@unicef.org Mobile: 962-79-557-9991
- Wolfgang Friedl, Communication Officer UNICEF MENA-RO,
E-mail: wfriedl@unicef.org Mobile: 962-79-573-2745