

**Speech by Ms. Frances Turner, UNICEF Deputy Regional Director for South Asia**

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Opening Ceremony, 11 June, 2008

On behalf of UNICEF ROSA, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this meeting, which is important for several reasons.

First, it addresses girls' education. The global monitoring report 2008 tells us, although the number of out of school children is declining in the Asia-Pacific region, the trend shows that the number of out of school girls is actually on the rise.

Second, the three inter-related themes of the meeting, which are: equity, gender and quality, underpin a human rights based approach to girls' education

Equity is about fairness. It is also about inclusion of all children, girls and boys, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender, class or caste.

Gender is about all children – girls and boys – having access to, use of, and benefit from existing resources and opportunities.

Quality is about relevance and results – an education that prepares children to be responsible and productive citizens of the future, and helps them to achieve the potential that Reshmi has just talked about.

The theme for the meeting thus speaks of equity, gender and quality in education in the Asia Pacific region. It is particularly appropriate that the meeting is taking place in the newly declared federal democratic republic of Nepal, which, as a country, has similar aspirations.

Third, the meeting recognises the growing number of young people in the Asia-Pacific region. There are variations across countries, of course, and in China and Thailand, the number of young people is actually declining. Elsewhere, however, the number of young people (12 to 24 years) will continue to grow from 1.3 billion now to about 1.5 billion in 2035, a "youth bulge" as it is referred to.

There is a financial burden associated with this "youth bulge." Primary and secondary education, HIV and AIDs and other non-communicable diseases, as well as employment, are costs that governments will have to tackle.

With the right policies and systems, however, the youth bulge is an opportunity for greater economic growth. We know, for example, that there is a shortage of a skilled human resource base in developing countries.

The challenge, therefore, is to use this forum and our partnership, not just to understand better where we are right now, and where we are headed, but also to challenge ourselves by looking beyond the numbers. For example:

- If there are more girls in a classroom, where are the boys? Are they earning a living in the labour market? Are they in private schools which parents pay for in return for what is perceived as better quality education?
- If there are more boys in a classroom, where are the girls? Are they at home helping with household chores and sibling care? Are they not in school because families don't see girls' education as a worthwhile investment? Or because schooling is not a desired option due to security, lack of female teachers or other cultural reasons?
- What about gender in the bigger picture?

And it is about moving beyond numbers and asking:

- How can we better support young people in the Asia-Pacific region? How can we achieve quality basic education, provide relevant skills which address the needs of the labor market, facilitate the transition from primary to secondary schools, and from school to work, so that the growing number of young people can become responsible and productive citizens?

UNICEF looks forward to strengthening the UNGEI partnership, so that we can all work together and help make schooling a safer, enjoyable and more meaningful experience for both girls and boys.

I hope you will find the meeting stimulating and that it will further reinforce our partnership and efforts to achieve the UNGEI goal to narrow the gender gap in primary and secondary education and to ensure that by 2015, all children complete primary schooling, with girls and boys having equal access to all levels of education.

Thank you.