

# WORKSHOP REPORT

## IMPLEMENTING UNGEI IN THE MENA REGION

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### Introduction

**T**he Girls' Education Initiative (GEI) is one of the main flagships of UNICEF, and it is fitting that the first publication in the Learning Series on educational innovation in the MENA region – an initiative of the UNICEF Regional Office in Amman – focused on one country's achievements in implementing GEI. The study *The Girls' Education Initiative in Egypt* (see Sultana, 2008) was launched in Cairo on 26 February 2008 in the presence of several local dignitaries and educators, girls who had benefited from the initiative, as well as guests from UNICEF country offices from several states and territories in the region. While paying homage to Egypt's exemplary efforts, UNICEF's Regional director, Ms Sigrid Kaag, acknowledged that much is being done by the region to close the gender gap in access to schooling. Statistics suggest, however, that the battle to ensure gender parity is far from over, and that countries in the region have much to learn from each other in their attempt to understand and combat gender-based inequality.

It is with this in mind that UNICEF education officers and representatives from Ministries of Education from eight states and territories in the region met on the day following the launch to present an update of the progress they are achieving in addressing the gender gap in their own countries. Media representatives from the region were also present in order to become better acquainted with the gender challenge for education systems, and to relay some of the main conclusions to a wider audience.

There are, of course, significant differences in contexts that make the struggle for gender equity particularly challenging for some. Four of the countries/territories represented at the meeting (Algeria, Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and South Sudan) are marked by recent or continuing conflict, which has made access to schooling for girls more challenging. Other countries, such as Lebanon and Tunisia, have made giant strides in ensuring equality of access and in some cases of outcomes, largely due to an early history of legislative measures that ensured women's rights. This is in contrast to Iraq and Yemen, for instance, where progress has been halting and slow, and where some of the achievements have been eaten away as promising initiatives lost their momentum and support.

Despite these significant differences, it is nevertheless useful to focus on all eight countries and territories in order to tease out approaches and strategies that help us understand and tackle the gender gap. This comparative exercise should help in providing inspiration and insight to the region and beyond.

## **Barriers to enrolment**

The barriers to the enrolment of girls in schools are similar across all the contexts represented at the workshop. It is also clear that they are multifaceted and often intertwined. Some of these barriers are based on material circumstances, while others are more cultural in nature, though in reality both material and cultural issues come together in ways that reinforce each other to keep girls out of school.

Poverty is a leading cause, pushing parents to choose sons over daughters when they cannot afford to send all their offspring to school due to the direct (tuition and fees) or indirect costs (i.e., cost of clothing, shoes, stationery, personal expenses allowances and other requirements, as well as ‘opportunity costs’ that represent loss of potential family revenue). This is the case with Egypt, for instance, which, under economic pressure to exercise fiscal restraint, introduced a fee for public schooling in an attempt at cost-recovery. While small, the fee has acted as a deterrent for poor families, especially since these tend to have several school-age children.

Closely linked to the issue of poverty is the lack of employment opportunities for women in several of the countries in the region. This reinforces the notion that rates-of-return for investment in education are low for the individual and their families alike. In Egypt, for instance, basic education is seen by many poor families to be not only costly, but also as yielding weak, if not negative, labour market returns. Similarly, in Algeria young female university graduates are expected to return to their rural origins, but here they find it difficult if not impossible to gain employment, leading to questions about the value of education. Across the region – including in Tunisia, for instance – high graduate unemployment is challenging hitherto accepted notions that education leads to social and economic mobility, eroding community confidence in schooling which, in some cases, is in danger of being seen as a costly investment with few returns, particularly for girls.

Decreasing national wealth can have its toll on educational services, with cuts in school-building programmes, for instance, resulting in girls having to walk unsafe distances to get to a classroom. This is especially true in those cases where distances between villages and hamlets are significant, such as in Egypt

and Yemen, for instance. Families tend to be especially protective toward daughters, restricting their movement in order to avoid unsupervised contact with men, especially when the community they belong to is in conflict with others. This is the case with Algeria and Iraq, though some of the remote hamlets in Egypt, where blood feuds between communities are not uncommon, have also refused to send girls to distant schools, fearing for their safety. It is well known that girls tend to bear the heavier brunt when their communities are embroiled in conflict or other forms of emergencies. Gender inequality is exacerbated, social norms break down, domestic violence surges, and girls and women often have to carry the heaviest burden of day-to-day family life during crises. In South Sudan, the gender gap not surprisingly rose to an all-time high during the war and its immediate aftermath.

Culturally sanctioned gender roles are another leading cause of gender inequities in access to schooling. These often entrap girls in roles that exclude them from school, such as when they are obliged to help out in household chores, or to enter the child labour force. Several countries in the region noted that such culturally embedded attitudes are strongest in the rural areas, where girls are expected to avoid contact with men, especially when they reach puberty. This is even true of countries such as Lebanon, where girls in urban centres not only have guaranteed access to schooling at all levels, but have in fact overtaken their male counterparts when it comes to successful outcomes in examinations. The situation for the girls in some of the more remote, rural areas is quite different.

Entrenched cultural traditions can also serve to channel girls into early motherhood, leading to early school-leaving and to the reproduction of illiteracy: in a self-feeding vicious circle, uneducated girls are less likely to have the power to negotiate relationships, and therefore to delay sex, and to have safe sex. Children whose mothers have no education are more than twice as likely to be out of school as children whose mothers have some education. Adult female illiteracy is in fact a major problem even in those countries that have attained gender parity, so that efforts such as those exercised by Lebanon in order to provide literacy classes for women in rural areas can be greatly beneficial to the cause of girls' education. In some of the countries in the region, such as in Yemen, for instance, and in remote and rural hamlets in Egypt and Algeria, girls may be forced by their families into early marriage for cultural and economic reasons – as early as at age 12 and sometimes before – thereby losing out on formal education, on their income-generating potential, and their ability to make informed decisions about their lives. Tunisia stands out in the region as having promulgated legislation that does not permit marriage before the age of 18.

A further set of reasons to explain why girls fail to have access to formal education, or why they drop out soon after they start attending class, revolves

around the notion of ‘girl-friendly’ schooling. In many cases, the curricula in use often fail to connect with girls’ experiences or ways of knowing, with textbooks representing urban lifestyles that do not reflect rural realities. Teachers use dull and dreary pedagogies that lead to disaffected learners who lose all motivation to attend. Schools are often girl-repulsive in other ways too, such as when they do not have separate sanitation facilities, for instance, or when male teachers and classmates harass, bully or even abuse female pupils.

The case of Lebanon highlights the fact that even when gender parity in participation rates is formally attained, the struggle for equity is not over. Even if girls are doing better than boys at school at all levels, with 51% of university students being female, there is still a big gap when it comes to gender representation in social, political and economic affairs. Women are practically absent from parliament, and there are still discriminatory civil and religious laws and precepts in force that work against the interests of women, in some cases severely curtailing citizenship rights. While an increasing number of women can be found in faculties of science, mathematics, medicine, law and business, the majority are still enrolled in the social sciences and courses leading to the nurturing professions, which tend to be seen as predominantly feminine occupations and which offer lower economic returns. The main input of Lebanese women remains in the informal economy, a sector that affords little if any protection against exploitative working conditions. Such trends are also visible in other countries in the region.

## **Strategies to overcome the gender gap**

The participants at the workshop also gave an account of some of the strategies they are using in order to address and overcome the gender gap. There are similarities here that suggest a convergence around policies that can be usefully applied in – and adapted to – different contexts in the region, and in some cases beyond. The potential of these strategies depends on a number of factors, including, for instance, the strength of civil society, the support of local and international donors to kick start initiatives, and the availability of seed bed models that provide legitimacy and credibility to alternative schooling practices, such as one-classroom or community schools.

Egypt stands out in the region as the country that has woven together a range of interrelated initiatives in ways that facilitate access to schooling for girls, particularly for those living in remote and rural areas in some of its poorest governorates. Faced with a gender gap of over 15% in some cases, a joint NCCM (National Council for Childhood and Motherhood) and UNICEF initiative

embarked on a project that drew on Ministry of Education and national and international donor support in order to build one-classroom schools in seven governorates, providing quality education to primary age girls that have hitherto, due to poverty, ignorance, prejudice, early marriage, fear or some other reason, been kept away from formal learning.

These schools are built in villages and hamlets, as close as possible to the girls' residences, thus overcoming many of the reasons that deprive girls of education. The schools are built after intense community mobilisation and participation, in order to ensure that they are not seen as an alien implant, but rather as an expression of the community's own resolve to provide education to their daughters. The schedule of these girl-friendly schools allows girls to carry out their morning chores at home before going to class, in this way addressing some other concerns of those who tie girls too closely and too narrowly to the household economy.

The schools are also special in that, unlike government schools, they are completely free – parents do not have to pay a tuition fee, nor do they have to subsidise the costs for stationery or other educational resources. In addition, the initiative creates employment opportunities for young women: girls are taught by female facilitators, who hail from the same hamlet or from the mother village. The classrooms have only girls, and when they do accept boys, girls have to enjoy at least 75% majority. This too goes a long way in persuading parents to let their girls go. The fact that girls are fed at school, and take home with them rations for the whole family can break down any remaining resistance. Most importantly, these schools do not compromise on quality when it comes to the educational experiences they offer: GEI schools in Egypt privilege active and joyful learning in the context of multi-grade classrooms, where children are encouraged to express themselves through all sorts of ways, and to be creative and self-directed in their approach to learning.

Other countries present at the workshop reported using similar if less comprehensive strategies, in some cases coming up with pioneering ideas that hold a great deal of promise. We can represent the strategies and initiatives under five main headings:

1. Firstly are those sets of strategies that have **promulgated laws** to ensure that gender rights are respected within a comprehensive legal framework that guarantees citizenship rights. Tunisia's case is particularly instructive in this regard: while not being unique in having such laws, it is exceptional in its success in implementing them. Here the focus is on every citizen's right to education, with three tools being employed to ensure that such rights are respected. These are: (i) free education; (ii) obligation (with fines being

imposed on parents who do not send their children to school); and (iii) equal opportunities for all. Over the years, Tunisia has put its educational ‘infrastructure’ in place in order to ensure that such laws are implemented. Schools have to be built close to communities, and never more than three kilometres away. As noted earlier, marriage is not permitted before age 18, while children cannot be employed before age 15. There is thus a cumulative effect, with legal provisions comprehensively and strategically integrated together in ways that provide a climate conducive to girls’ participation in schooling. Tunisia has also been careful to ensure sufficient budgetary allocations for education, so that policies can be operationalised. Despite the political restrictions and limitations that it is constrained to work under, Palestine too has given a great deal of attention to gender issues in education, and has made important steps forward in formalising its commitments by integrating UNGEI in its five-year sector plan.

2. A second set of strategies that workshop participants reported concerns the increasing attention being given to the collection of **sound empirical data** that help a country understand the extent and nature of the challenge in relation to girls’ access to schooling. Data in many countries in the region are unreliable and rarely timely or transparent, limiting their usefulness to the policy-making community. A case in point is Egypt, where the existence of several hamlets was not even known by the governorates who were, in principle, responsible for them, and who therefore were not aware of the number of girls who were not attending schools. Such a challenge was only overcome due to household surveys carried out by voluntary task forces who were close enough to the communities to be able to collect information about out-of-school girls by knocking at each door in every hamlet. Other countries, such as Yemen, may have basic data, but this is not always gender-disaggregated, thus limiting its usefulness.

Clearly, the issue of comprehensive and disaggregated data is very important in order to gauge the extent of the problem, and to see what some of the underlying causes might be. The topography of the challenge in Yemen is revealed, for instance, when one considers the fact that female literacy rates are 59.5% in urban areas, but plunge to less than half – 24.3% – in rural areas. In South Sudan, any strategy to address girls’ education has to take into account the significant regional differences that the statistics point out to, with some communities having twice the number of out-of-school girls than others. A sound Education Management Information System (EMIS) – such as the one developed in Palestine, for instance (see Sultana, 2002) – can be invaluable in

generating the indicators needed to verify whether gender (and other forms of) equity is being attained and sustained over time. Such an EMIS would provide indicators regarding such crucial issues as enrolment rates, repetition and transition rates, drop-out rates and so on, thus ensuring targeted monitoring and evidence-based policy prioritisation. It is thanks to the ready availability of statistics that Palestine could carry out a study to review existing measures and indicators on gender parity in education and how to translate the key strategies for scaling up girls' education into specific actions that are applicable and relevant to the local context and open to replication and generalisation. A number of countries in the region – such as Iraq, for instance – expressed the need for an information system that could guide efforts in supporting access to schooling for girls. Others – such as Tunisia and Lebanon – have made important strides forward in this regard, and have a great deal of experience to share with neighbouring countries.

3. Thirdly, some countries have developed **advocacy programmes** to ensure that policy-makers and communities become more aware of the importance of girls' education. Yemen, for instance, has adopted a multi-sectoral approach, with the High Council of Motherhood and Childhood, several Ministries, NGOs, and the media joining forces in order to raise awareness. This alliance building has also included an Artists' Forum, while entrepreneurs have launched a Business Partnership for Girls' Education. School social workers have received training in girls' education issues. At governorate level, Girls' Education Co-Ordination Councils ensure that the different initiatives and input come together in ways that enhance their effectiveness. Some innovative but simple and inexpensive consciousness-raising strategies are being implemented, such as the printing of messages supporting girls' education on utility bills. South Sudan has also developed smart and innovative advocacy strategies to encourage girls' enrolment in education. The PAGE campaign (Promotion and Advocacy for Girls' Education) has brought together women's groups, youth groups, and a whole range of opinion leaders to co-ordinate community dialogue in favour of gender-friendly social change. Particularly promising is the GEM strategy (Girls' Education Movement), which uses child-to-child methodology in order for girls to persuade other girls to start attending school. There are GEM clubs in ten states in South Sudan, with the experience showing that children are ready to listen to each other and to act as mentors for each other. The country is also making good use of the media, with children's radio programmes promoting the 'Go to School Initiative', supported by government and UNICEF alike. Gender as an issue has been mainstreamed in teacher training courses, in order to ensure that all teachers

are aware of the challenges that girl-friendly schooling represents. Curricula – and in some cases textbooks – have been modified so that they are more gender-sensitive.

4. Fourthly, countries represented at the regional workshop described efforts to **modify the school offer** in ways that encourage and facilitate girls' attendance. In Yemen, double shift schooling gives girls the opportunity to do their household chores without having to choose between family demands and education. In Egypt, schools are sensitive to the locale's cultures and needs, and operate on a flexible schedule in response to community economic and seasonal rhythms, allowing girls to accompany their mothers on market days, and during harvest time. Many are making efforts to introduce as many girl-friendly school aspects as possible. These range from having girls' only classrooms (as in Egypt and Yemen), or classrooms where girls are in a majority (as in Egypt), to having female teachers and administrators. In Yemen, special incentives have been put into place to attract female contract teachers, and to develop school administrative styles that are more girl-friendly. Other countries/territories (such as Egypt, South Sudan) are making a difference by offering separate bathroom facilities for girls – a simple yet effective way of ensuring parental support to the schooling of their daughters. The schooling offer for girls is made more attractive to parents when, as in Egypt and Yemen, school fees are waived, and when, as in Egypt and South Sudan, food is provided for students when they attend classes. In Egypt, a World Food Programme (WFP) service is in place to also supply food rations to those families that send their girls to school on a regular basis. South Sudan has roped in NGO support to offer scholarships to girls so that they can continue with their education beyond primary schooling, and has been especially innovative in providing second-chance education through Alternative Learning Programmes to over-age girls who missed out on their basic education. Iraq too has opted for an Accelerated Learning model for out-of-school girls who failed to get primary education due to the prevailing situation in the country. A six-year programme has been compressed into three years, and is already being delivered to 18,000 students, opening up the pathway to secondary schooling. Fifty thousand students – most of whom are girls – are being targeted by this project. Other innovative ways of repackaging the school offer in order to make education more accessible to girls is through the use of supplementary learning materials, a strategy that Iraq learnt from Palestine's use of simple but effective distance learning strategies to ensure that children remained engaged in education in conflict-ridden Hebron during the second *Intifada* (see Sultana 2003; also Sultana, 2006).

5. Fifthly, all the countries spoke about the need to develop joint strategies with a whole **range of partners** in order to chalk up greater successes in attracting and keeping girls in schools. These partnerships typically include local NGOs, community volunteer groups, national and international donors, the UN family (especially WFP, UNDP, UNCHR, UNRWA, ILO), and various representatives from civil society. A key issue and challenge here is to ensure that the partners do come together in ways that ensure that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Several of the countries present emphasised the importance of having national networks and alliances to avoid fragmented efforts, and of having an integrated approach pulling all initiatives together to avoid overlap, to ensure efficiency, and to enhance sustainability in the scaling up phase. Yemen, for instance, established a Girls' Education Sector in 2005, with a view to ensuring coherence in strategy development. In November 2006, UNICEF and UNESCO offices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, together with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, created a task force to start the process of integrating UNGEI into the Palestinian education system. The Task force also includes the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Women's Research and Documentation Centre, and the Palestinian National Commission for Education, Culture and Science.

Interestingly enough, while some countries – like Iraq – emphasised the negative role that can be played by religious factions in reinforcing stereotypical attitudes toward girls, others noted that religion could be an emancipatory force that could and indeed should be used to facilitate girls' access to schooling. It was pointed out, for instance, that in the case of the lead religion in the region, Islam, there is a clear obligation to give an education to one and all, and that education is formally acknowledged as a process that should support individual growth from the cradle to the grave. In Yemen, mosques and religious men, such as sheikhs and imams, have an important role to play in relation to girls' education due to their influential role in the communities they serve. Parents – particularly those in rural areas – are more readily convinced if the messages about girls' right to education are given by religious leaders. In recognition of this, a training programme is being offered to imams, in collaboration with the Al Waqf Ministry, in order to ensure that their influence can shape community's attitudes in ways that work in favour of girls' interests.

## Remaining challenges

A key issue that emerged from the discussions among the workshop participants relates to the **sustainability of gains** made in ensuring girls' access to schooling. One of the success stories in the region in this regard is Tunisia, a country that has managed to maintain its commitment to gender equity since it gained independence more than four decades ago. Here, however, neo-liberal agendas are becoming increasingly attractive, with an increasing tendency for the state to restrict its hitherto generous education budget, and to encourage private sector investment. International experience with such a strategy tells us that increasing the share of private ownership of the formal education sector can, in some cases, lead to excellent schools for a minority, and 'sink schools' for the majority, with the poorer and less privileged social and gender groups losing out. Sustainability is also difficult when investment in schooling fails to give economic and social returns to individuals, their families and their communities. In Algeria, for instance, the correlation between education and economic growth, the distribution of incomes and the reduction of poverty is weak, especially for women. Twenty-four percent of unemployed persons are females, while the corresponding figure for males is 12.5%. Furthermore, 20.5% of unemployed with secondary level education are female, while only 6% are males. Yemen's positive discrimination policy to ensure an employment quota for women is a wise acknowledgement of the fact that educational gains have to be translated into increased economic opportunities for women. Failure to achieve this can lead to situations as those experienced in South Sudan, where women are almost invisible in both government and private employment, leading to a serious lack of role models for girls.

For those countries that have attained gender parity or are well on their way to doing so – such as Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia among others – the challenge has shifted from a preoccupation with access to a concern about quality education for all. In some cases, the concern for quality education for all seems to have dislodged the attention somewhat toward another dimension of gender equity, namely the under-performance of boys compared to girls. Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia were among the countries that provided some evidence to underscore the fact that boys, when compared to females from their own age cohort, are more likely to repeat a class, to take up jobs when they attend secondary schooling, to drop out of school, and to perform less successfully in examinations at all levels, including baccalaureate and higher education.

Here, the Child-Friendly School (CFS) framework can serve as a useful normative target, guiding programming and resource allocation, including training. For individual schools and communities it can be both a goal and a tool

for improving quality through self-assessment, school development planning and management, as well as a way of mobilising the community around education and child rights. One of the strengths of the CFS framework, which was referred to by several of the workshop participants, is that it comprehensively addresses a whole range of issues raised in the discussion (including links between schools and the community, emphasis on joyful and effective learning, and care and protection of learners) without losing sight of the fact that gender issues should not just be a transversal theme, but need to be focused on specifically at all levels of the system.

The struggle for gender equity in the region is clearly multifaceted and often vibrant, engaging a whole range of innovative strategies within and outside of schools. Some important gains have been registered – and the publication on the GEI in Egypt bears testimony to that. It is clear, though, that much remains to be done. Achievements have to be consolidated and sustained over time. Every step forward that is successfully taken reveals new challenges that have to be overcome. In facing up to these, a regional dimension can add value to the efforts of individual countries, not least by facilitating the sharing of examples of successful practice, which may have relevance to different if overlapping contexts. In pursuing and persevering in this struggle, the region has to keep its eyes firmly fixed on one of the most worthy of all causes: the preservation and enhancement of the dignity of the girl child.

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