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PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY THROUGH GLOBAL EDUCATION TARGETS:

THE THIRD MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL

by Nisha Thakker*

Worldwide, young women and girls are routinely denied equal access to education that their male counterparts are privileged to receive. In April 2000, Dakar, Senegal played host to the “Dakar World Forum on Education,” which set a goal of worldwide equality in education by the year 2015.¹ Based on this forum, the United Nations also recognized the disparity in education and made its third Millennium Development Goal (“MDG”) a resolution to remedy gender inequality in primary and secondary education by 2005 “and at all levels by 2015.”²

Achieving this goal by 2015 seems optimistic; the first half of the goal was not fulfilled since a gender gap still exists in primary and secondary education. In a report released in 2003, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (“UNICEF”) urged that “accelerated action” must be taken to get more girls into school over the next two years, otherwise other MDGs, including goals to reduce poverty and improve the human condition, would also not be realized.³ By keeping the girls away from the classroom, they will lack the knowledge necessary, for example, to keep themselves out of poverty and maintain a lifestyle free from HIV/AIDS.

According to the UNICEF report, at least nine million more girls are kept out of school than boys every year, and those who enroll drop out faster than boys.⁴ The report alleges that girls are the first to be removed from the classroom due to “persistent and often subtle gender discrimination” that is prevalent in many of the societies where enrollment is low.⁵ Many families pull girls out of school when money is tight or when a young girl becomes of marrying age. These instances are telltale signs that the targets may be unrealistic, and explain criticisms that they are “over simplistic and too quantitative” – the targets do not take into account “differences among countries and cultures.”⁶ Unfortunately, there are no firm international statistics for cultural occurrences such as the phenomena of child-brides and violence against women – situations that have a great deal of influence on how girls are educated.⁷

In December of 2003, UNICEF argued that the goal of equal education by 2005 and 2015 could still be met if worldwide donors followed through on their funding promises made in 1990 at the Jomtien Conference and World Summit for Children, and again in 1996.⁸ Despite these promises, total funding to developing countries declined in the 1990s “and bilateral funding for education plummeted even further.”⁹ A United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (“UNESCO”) report issued in 2002 found that between 1990 and 2001, funding from the international community to education fell from five to four billion dollars.¹⁰ The report also concluded that “an extra \$5.6 billion will be needed annually to achieve the universal primary education and gender goals alone.”¹¹

Most telling about the progress of the goal is that the number of girls left out of school in sub-Saharan Africa has actually increased from twenty million in 1990 to 24 million in 2002.¹² The UN Secretary-General’s annual report on the progress of the goals issued in 2005 admits that the exceptions to achievement of

the primary education goal are sub-Saharan Africa and Southern and Western Asia, and that even less progress is being made in secondary education in those areas.¹³ It is likely that education goals are not being met because of pervasive gender discrimination on all fronts – not just in education.

Gender discrimination in all forms, including ingrained social norms, prejudices, and traditional customs, must also be battled in order to recognize that education is a right, not a privilege. According to the UNICEF report, “eighty-three percent of all girls left out of school live in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific,” countries where women battle every day for their own safety.¹⁴ To be able to provide equal opportunities to education for these girls, countries should also provide aid to combat HIV/AIDS, violence against women, poverty, and human trafficking.

The goal of achieving gender equality in education cannot stand on its own – it must go hand-in-hand with the eradication of the obstacles standing in young girls’ way to that education. All is not lost, however, with respect to the third MDG. The UN Secretary General’s report found that Eastern Africa, Northern Africa, Asia, and Southeast Asia are all approaching educational equality with over ninety girls per one hundred boys in primary and secondary education classrooms.¹⁵ As countries are given the opportunity and assistance to develop, even more countries will be able to realize the goal of education equality. 

ENDNOTES:

¹ UN EDUC., SCI., & CULTURAL ORG. (“UNESCO”), DAKAR FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION, EDUCATION FOR ALL: MEETING OUR COLLECTIVE COMMITMENTS, (Apr. 26-28, 2000), available at http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/dakfram_eng.shtml (last visited Nov. 3, 2005).

² UNITED NATIONS, MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS, available at <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/goals.html> (last visited Oct. 27, 2005).

³ CAROL BELLAMY, THE STATE OF THE WORLD’S CHILDREN 2004, at 20, available at http://www.unicef.org/sowc04/files/SOWC_04_eng.pdf (last visited Oct. 27, 2005).

⁴ *Id.* at 41.

⁵ *Id.* at 17.

⁶ Choike.org, Gender Equality in Education: World Fails to Meet MDG 3, http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/3207.html (last visited Oct. 27, 2005).

⁷ *See id.*

⁸ CAROL BELLAMY, *supra* note 3, at 38. International donor countries and financial institutions promised increased funds for education spending at both these conferences in both 1990 and 1996, but have yet to deliver on a majority of these promises.

⁹ CAROL BELLAMY, *supra* note 3, at 46.

¹⁰ UNESCO, INST. FOR STATISTICS, 2002 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Is the World on Track?* (June 10, 2003), available at http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=5289_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC (last visited Nov. 3, 2005).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² CAROL BELLAMY, *supra* note 3, at 41.

¹³ UNITED NATIONS, THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS REPORT 2005, at 14-1, available at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/pdf/MDG%20Book.pdf> (last visited Oct. 27, 2005) [hereinafter MDG Report].

¹⁴ CAROL BELLAMY, *supra* note 3, at 41.

¹⁵ MDG Report, *supra* note 13, at 15.

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