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PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

Target 3.A: eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

MDGs and human rights

Often acclaimed as the most significant initiative to tackle poverty and ensure progress in human development, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do not live up to the ambitions of the Millennium Declaration on which they are based and do not reflect the full spectrum of States' obligations. They do not relate to human rights law or set up redress mechanisms for abuses in order to ensure accountability. Nor do they address structural inequalities or include the participation of all stakeholders. The human rights framework provides guarantees, guidance and clear responsibilities.

The Right to Education Project believes that if the MDGs remain disconnected from legislation, monitoring and accountability, there will be no chance for unveiling discrimination, inequalities and violations and for claiming rights in order to achieve a proper human development worthy of its name. There is an urgent need to make the MDGs 'right'.

The right to education

Education is included in all major international human rights treaties.¹ All countries in the world have signed onto one, if not more, of these documents, thus accepting to bear duties in realising education as a right. In practical terms, this means recognising that education is not merely a policy goal but consists of entitlements, obligations and freedoms. According to UN documents and interpretation, these are reflected in 4 key elements (4As): Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Adaptability.²

Availability: human, material and budgetary resources should be sufficient and adequate to ensure education for all. Individuals should also be free to choose or found schools in accordance with their religious and moral convictions and with minimum standards set by the State.

Accessibility: education systems should not discriminate on any ground and positive steps should be taken to reach the most marginalised. It includes physical and economic accessibility.

Acceptability: the content of education and teaching methods should be relevant, culturally appropriate and of quality. The human rights of all those involved should be upheld in education.

Adaptability: education should be flexible so to respond to the needs and abilities of students, meet the best interests of the child, and adapt to different contexts.

MDG3 and Target 3.A

What is there

MDG3 reflects the immediate obligation to eliminate discrimination against women so to ensure equal rights with men.

Target 3.A integrates the principle of non-discrimination in education.

What is missing

MDG3 fails to include other dimensions of discrimination and inequality: violence against women; gender stereotypes; cultural, religious, traditional beliefs; differences in levels of literacy; political and economic disparities; discriminatory civil, penal and personal status laws on marriage and family relations, etc.

Target 3.A adopts a staged approach whereas the prohibition of discrimination "applies fully and immediately to all aspects of education".³ The target also lacks attention to the quality and content aspects of acceptability and adaptability of education.

¹ For a list of these treaties, what they entail and how to use them, visit www.right-to-education.org

² Tomaševski K., 1999, *Preliminary Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education*, paragraphs 42-74; UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, *General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 6.

³ CESCR, *General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 31.

What this means

In 2005 the world missed the initial target for MDG3: gender parity in primary and secondary schools was not achieved in 74 countries. We need to learn from that experience. Ensuring the elimination of gender disparity in access to education is not enough for the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in society. Nor is it a substitute for the elimination of discrimination against girls and women in and through education. States need to take positive steps to eliminate barriers that keep girls and women out of education. Such steps go beyond providing equal access and refer to learning content, respect of girls and women's rights in and outside school, a safe environment free from violence, appropriate infrastructures and facilities (such as separate toilets for boys and girls), teachers' training, post-primary learning opportunities, and overall transformation of power relations in the community and society at large.

Some examples of wrong focus/violations:

- The lack of attention to social and power dynamics concerning girls and women hinders analysis of reasons for drop-outs (violence, child marriage, etc.) which in turn undermine MDG3 as a whole and all the other goals, too.
- No reference to quality education means no opportunity to assess how learning can develop capabilities to access health provision and forms of economic, social, cultural and political participation that are so important for women's human development and empowerment.
- MDG3's limited focus only on educational access neglects the broader issues of women's literacy, non formal learning, employability prospects, and unpaid burden of care.

What we recommend

The MDGs have already brought about tremendous improvements. Notwithstanding progress, much remains to be done in order to achieve the 2015 aspirations in full respect of the human dignity and rights of the world's population. The Right to Education Project recommends including the following aspects in future strategies for the achievement of MDG3 and Target 3.A. This would not only reconfirm education as a powerful tool for human emancipation and advancement, but also enhance results and facilitate the task of States to fulfil legal commitments they have agreed to undertake.

- Ensure that each MDG contains gender-sensitive targets.
- Address evident and hidden structural, cultural and economic barriers that prevent girls from going to school: lack of appropriate sanitary facilities, attitudes towards girls' education as a bad investment, violence in and around school, traditional practices and customary laws, fees, etc.
- Align the minimum age for marriage with the end of compulsory education in legislation and practice.
- Set and respect minimum standards for quality and content of education that are bias-free and equally valid for boys and girls (teacher training and recruitment, curricula, learning outcomes, teaching methods, etc.).
- Ensure regular monitoring of both quantity and quality of education, using fully disaggregated rights-based indicators to capture multiple forms of discrimination against women and girls.

For more information, please visit www.right-to-education.org