

WINTER 2019

EDUCATING GIRLS

‘AGENDA 2030’ SHOULD BE ‘GENDER 2030’

EVENT REPORT



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What more can the EU do to stop girls' education languishing as a footnote and instead be the headline to the conversation about the world's sustainable development goals?

Gender equality and access to quality education are key parts of the UN's Agenda 2030, but should it be called 'Gender 2030?', asked Friends of Europe at its Educating Girls debate in Brussels on 27 February.

Every day 130m girls are not in school and, by any measure, they and the wider world are worse off for it. So why are we failing to remove the barriers in their way and how can we "change this rather nasty paradigm?" asked moderator and director for Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe, **Shada Islam**.

"None of the 17 UN goals can be achieved without the active participation of women," she said.

Speakers from the UN, the European Commission and specialist NGOs were asked to consider whether the EU should: use girls' education as a key condition for countries receiving development aid; make it a specific part of accession talks, and deny aid and trade benefits to those spending more on defence than education.

Efforts being made to provide girls with more role models and mentors, especially in the 'non-traditional' career areas of STEM and IT, is vital work, said **Geetanjali Narayan**, UNICEF Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina: "I think that's very, very important and can be supported by policy decisions," she said.

Also, at ground level, as well as dealing with structural barriers to education – such as lack of access to toilets – speakers emphasised the importance of having a direct dialogue with communities.

Participants also heard from **Bangio Ali**, Education Officer at the AVSI Foundation, in Kenya, who focuses on girls and mothers' rights and out-of-school children. Against all odds, she managed to receive a college education and went on to work with girls and families in her own Somali community, including in refugee camps.

"I am where I am because of education," she said.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

If the 130m girls out of school today were their own country, it would be the 10th largest in the world.

Girls are 1.5 times more likely than boys to be excluded from primary education. Just 29% of countries have achieved gender parity at upper secondary level. Two-thirds of the world's 758m illiterate people are women.

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Matt Reed

CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation UK

“There is a growing gap between our understanding of how gender shapes our societies, and how gender is recognised in political decision-making”

Geetanjali Narayan

UNICEF Representative for
Bosnia and Herzegovina

The impact of those “devastating statistics” on those girls’ life chances and wellbeing are obvious, said Shada Islam. Equally damning is what the world is missing out on, socially and economically, by failing to ensure girls become “powerful active citizens”, she said.

We need to focus on the myriad of structural obstacles to girls entering – and staying in – the classroom, as well as cultural or religious barriers, said panellist **Matt Reed**, CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation UK. Girls are often absent from school for reasons like the need to collect firewood and water, lack of access to toilets in schools, safety and security concerns, or schools being too far away, he noted.

Once girls are out of education or employment they’re more likely to be “stuck there...in an intergenerational cycle of poverty”, said UNICEF’s Geetanjali Narayan. Even when girls are in school there is an “early and pernicious gender bias in our education systems” – seen, for example, in attitudes to what girls and boys should study, she said, adding that there were “very significant stereotypes in the education system that are being passed on to children”.

As a principle donor that often “drives what others do” the EU could put more pressure on countries failing to address the gender gap, said one contributor. “There’s simply a problem of political will”, he added.

The issue of political will is “absolutely key” agreed Narayan.

“For the EU in particular, this could become very much a priority for the accession countries, for example to have gender parity at preschool, primary and secondary levels, to have a certain target for enrolment of girl to close that gap. Very simple things that would actually bring about transformative change.”

Susanne Conze, Deputy Head of Unit for Strategy and Investments at the European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, said development projects had to include gender equality action plans, and there was a “strong will to do more”, but added: “Nevertheless, I think we all feel that too little is being done.”

“There is a growing gap between our understanding of how gender shapes our societies, and how gender is recognised in political decision-making,” she said.

TALKING TO COMMUNITIES WORKS

There’s a need to change the conversation from being “top-down” to putting the voices of those affected at the forefront, said **Larisa Hovannisian**, CEO of Teach for Armenia.

The NGO she founded sources graduates and young professionals – who they call ‘fellows’ – and places them in under-served public schools to work as teachers, mentors and leaders in those disadvantaged communities for at least two years.

Work is done with parents and communities, to “change mindsets” and enable them to take ownership, she said.

“Our fellows – women and men – are serving as role models. It’s incredible how much goes into working with the families. They live in these villages with the families they’re serving.”

“It takes time, real commitment and a genuine authentic conversation. We have numerous stories like the parents who wanted to marry their daughter off at 15 and, after a year of our fellow working with the family – by going to their house, breaking bread with them – this girl is in university studying to be an engineer.”

Similarly, in the Aga Khan Foundation’s work as part of an NGO coalition in Afghanistan, there’s a focus on community-level dialogue, explained Matt Reed.

In their work with 350,000 girls they have increased enrolment by 142%, and graduation rates by 10 times.

“And we are working in areas controlled by Taliban. How do we do that? The first entry point is to create a dialogue in the community. You are engaging women and men, together with the mullahs and saying ‘why are we not sending the girls to school’?.”

“All those barriers that I talked about come up. So with the UK Department for International Development we have created a set of flexible funds so we can problem-solve with communities. As you go through the list you can tick things off - so you don’t have a toilet? We will build you a toilet. There is no clean water? Let’s get the clean water in.”

“When you peel away to the last layer, which is social attitudes, it’s more difficult for people to rely on them when the other excuses are gone.”

BANGIO’S STORY: ‘MY MOTHER SAID EDUCATION WAS MY OPPORTUNITY’

Being part of Kenya’s marginalised Somali community only added to the already disadvantaged position Bangio Ali grew up in as a girl.

But unlike others in her peer group, she was “fortunate” to have help from relatives who took her to school, as well as encouragement from her mother:

“It takes time, real commitment and a genuine authentic conversation. We have numerous stories like the parents who wanted to marry their daughter off at 15 and, after a year of our fellow working with the family – by going to their house, breaking bread with them – this girl is in university studying to be an engineer”

Larisa Hovannisian

Founder & CEO of Teach For Armenia

“My mother always told me ‘this is your opportunity. Education is the only thing that can make you a better person and the only way that you can help other girls from your community’”

Bangio Ali

Education Officer at AVSI Foundation Kenya

“My mum has always been there for me, supporting me. She wanted to be educated but she never got the opportunity. She always told me ‘this is your opportunity. Education is the only thing that can make you a better person and the only way that you can help other girls from your community’”.

“After high school I got my diploma to be a primary school teacher. I always wanted to work with an NGO so I could help the girls in my community, because most of them don’t attend school. Most of those fortunate enough to go don’t finish primary level.”

“I come from a Somali community which is marginalised and has a lot of socio-cultural issues, one being Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It’s something that is cultural, it’s not about religion. FGM is the worst a girl can face, especially when she’s in school.”

“Now I work with AVSI Foundation, mentoring Somali girls so they can get an education and be somebody in their lives. Being a Somali girl living in a refugee camp means facing a lot of day-to-day challenges. Some of them are defiled at a young age, there is early marriage... child abuse, child labour, psycho-social issues and stigmatisation.

“We have very few [Somali women] who are educated and working in the NGO world. When I engage the community, I can go to them personally, as a Somali girl.”

“I always wanted to help those little girls in those schools but I never knew how. I am where I am because of education. If it wasn’t for that I would not be here today.”

CONCLUSION: ‘IT’S A NO-BRAINER’

“Helping girls to access education worldwide is a key issue that can’t be underestimated. The figures are very clear. There is a need to do more,” said Susanne Conze.

With that in mind, a number of suggested solutions came out of the debate, including:

- The EU “putting its money where its mouth is” and installing girls’ education as a key condition for development aid; making it a specific part of accession talks; and denying aid and trade benefits to those spending more on defence than education
- Calling for gender parity in the European Commission and resisting ‘pushback’ on equalities in some EU countries – like Hungary – as part of ‘practising what is preached’
- Putting more work into connecting girls with role models and mentors

- Generating genuine dialogue with affected communities
- Addressing structural barriers to girls' access to schools
- Putting a stronger policy focus on training teachers to better understand the – often unconscious – gender bias that exists in the classroom
- Harnessing technology and increased connectivity to promote girls' education
- Making it easier to facilitate dialogue between the EU and the private sector, which has an increasing role in girls' empowerment projects
- Encourage others to think about girls' education as “smart economics”.

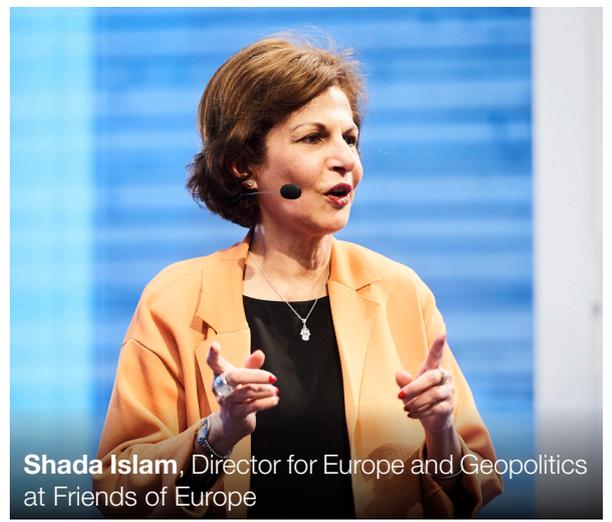
Why do we need to educate girls?

Because she'll earn more and reinvest most of it in her family; she'll be three times less likely to become HIV+; she'll marry later and have a smaller family; she'll be more equipped to resist gender-based violence and discrimination; and her children will be healthier and more likely to go to school.

Closing the gender gap could: yield over USD112bn a year to developing countries and USD12tn to global growth; help reduce a country's vulnerability to climate change and natural disaster; reduce extremism and halve the risk of war.

“Gender equality, female leadership, women's empowerment...they are not just empty slogans. We know the reasons why we need to have more women in power, in schools, in the business sector,” said Shada Islam.

“It's important for the world... it's a no brainer.”



Shada Islam, Director for Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe



Matt Reed, CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation UK



Bangio Ali, Education Officer at AVSI Foundation Kenya



Larisa Hovannisian, CEO of Teach For Armenia



Susanne Conze, Deputy Head of Unit for Strategy and Investments at the European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport



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