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June 11, 2007

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Education

G-8 Faces Lesson on School Girls in Battle Zones

Run Date: 06/05/07

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When the world's wealthiest nations meet at the G-8 summit in Germany this week, aid workers plan to remind them that education pledges they made to children--the majority of them girls--are not being met in the world's worst conflict zones.

(WOMENSENEWS)--In Darfur, Sudan, girls are traditionally responsible for farming, cooking, cleaning and caring for the family.

That leaves little time for school and their parents often see little value in educating them. The overall enrollment rate in Darfur is one of the lowest in the world, with 28 percent of all children attending school, and aid organizations are reporting that only 1 in 4 is a female.



Schoolgirls attend class in one of the refugee camps in Darfur

Credit: Megan McKenna/
Women's Commission.

Now, however, in refugee camps, many girls are getting a chance to go to school for the first time. Since fighting broke out four years ago between the Sudanese government, their allied militias and rebel groups, 2 million people have fled to these camps, where relief organizations have been able to set up schools.

"Prior to the conflict in Darfur, there were few schools and they were not accessible to everyone. The refugee camps have raised awareness of the value of education just through the presence of schools," says Jenny Perlman Robinson, who works on education in emergencies for the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children in New York City and visited camps in Darfur last year.

But this kind of schooling is the exception rather than the norm for children and especially girls, living in the 28 countries--18 of which are in Africa--identified as conflict-affected by Save the Children.

Of the 77 million children worldwide who do not have access to school this year, 39 million live in places that are either in the midst of war or emerging from it. Of those not in school, nearly 60 percent, or 44 million, are girls.

Development specialists plan to raise the issue of educational aid starting tomorrow when the world's richest countries meet in Heiligendamm,

Germany, from June 6 to June 8 for this year's "group of eight," or G-8, policy summit for the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Canada, and Russia. Together, these nations account for 65 percent of the world economy.

Aid Fell After Pledges Rose

Aid, particularly to Africa, will hold a prominent place on the G-8 agenda. Two years ago the group pledged to double its overall development annual aid by 2010, but aid levels actually fell to \$56.5 billion in 2006 from \$59.6 billion in 2005.

The U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, which monitors global education levels, estimates that \$9 billion per year in international aid is needed for low-income countries to achieve universal primary education. Donors committed \$3 billion in aid for basic education in 2005; Save the Children reports that only half of that was actually disbursed.

Universal primary education is one of the Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight targets for reducing extreme poverty by 2015 that world governments committed to in 2000.

Save the Children says that none of the G-8 members has contributed its fair share--the amount each donor government should give according to its relative wealth--of the \$9 billion targeted for annual educational aid.

Amid this overall shortfall, conflict zones are particularly neglected.

Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany all give less than 15 percent of their education aid to conflict-affected countries, while Japan gives 21 percent and Italy almost 40 percent.

On average, between 2003 and 2005, the U.S. gave \$500 million in education aid, most out of all donors but still only 14 percent of what it should give based on its gross national income. Half of that U.S. aid went to war-torn countries.

U.S. education aid might get a boost from a bill, the 2007 Education For All Act, introduced in May by Sen. Hillary Clinton, Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith, Rep. Nita Lowey of New York and Alabama Rep. Spencer Bachus. The legislation would provide \$10 billion over the next five years--four times the current U.S. aid level--to support developing countries, particularly unstable societies, in attaining universal elementary education.

Lobbying to Keep Promises

Anti-poverty activists have been lobbying G-8 governments to reaffirm and follow through on their promises, including their pledges to support girls' education.

"Unless these governments are pushed, they won't make good on their commitments," said Susan Braden, director of public policy and advocacy for Washington-based Save the Children.

Braden said girls are more likely to become victims of trafficking and forced prostitution during a conflict and that schools can provide an invaluable safe place where they can get emotional support, learn how to avoid HIV infection and build job skills to help their families.

In the Zam Zam camp, a former village in the desert of Northern Darfur where some 35,000 displaced people had taken refuge by the summer of 2006, Robinson found six schools with approximately 4,500 students in total, a nearly equal mix of girls and boys. But she also discovered that the educational programs set up in these camps are threatened by a lack of funding. Besides a lack of textbooks, blackboards, desks, and chairs, there was also a shortage of teachers, who received no salary.

Aid workers say the explanation for such funding problems is two-fold: not only have leading donor nations failed to keep pledges to assist in schooling the world's poorest children, the school aid they do give tends to be directed more at stable governments than at places torn apart by violence.

Aid for 'Good Performers'

Development agencies have also preferred giving aid to "good performers," countries characterized by transparency, rule of law and democratic freedoms. Conflict-affected countries are often the very opposite, with weak governance and decimated institutions that cannot deliver services such as education even if there is the political will to do so.

As a result, according to Save the Children, these fragile states receive 43 percent less overall aid than what they should be getting based on their population and poverty levels. Of the development assistance they do get only 4 percent is committed to education.

This educational deficit, particularly for girls, hinders communities from stabilizing, says Ellen van Kalmthout, senior advisor on education in emergencies for the United Nations Children's Fund. "Women often take the role of peacemakers in their communities and so educating girls is crucial to promoting peace and reconciliation."

Schooling becomes particularly uncertain for girls in conflict zones, says van Kalmthout. "Parents are usually more concerned with girls' safety and in conflict situations they are more quick to keep them out of school than boys." Conflict can also undermine family resources, leading parents to withdraw girls from school in order to save money or to have the girls take on additional household responsibilities. And the increased economic pressure can put them at risk for other abuses.

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Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

For more information:

Save the Children's Rewrite the Future Campaign:
<http://www.savethechildren.org/campaigns/rewrite-the-future/index.html>

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children:
<http://www.womenscommission.org/>

United Nations Girls' Education Initiative:
<http://www.ungei.org/>

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