

Eliminating gender inequality through education

In the past decade, the lives of women around the globe have improved tremendously thanks to concerted efforts by international communities and national governments in increasing the level of awareness on gender equality and advancing the development of women. Although considerable progress has been made, new issues have emerged requiring the attention of all parties. Thus, the theme “Empowering Women in Facing the Challenges of Globalisation”, chosen for the Non-Aligned Movement ministerial meeting held at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre in early May, was indeed appropriate as empowering women represents the very core of any national development strategy. Of the many specific areas of concerns highlighted for discussion, education was among the issues discussed at the meeting as a tool to empower women as well to reduce gender disparity.

In many countries, closing the gender gap in education has now become a development priority. It has been identified that education is the primary vehicle for women not only to build basic capabilities but also to play a meaningful role in bringing about equitable social and economic development. Acknowledging the importance of education, in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, “ensuring equal access to and equal treatment of women and men in education” was among the twelve goals targeted to reduce gender inequality. The Education for All (EFA) Dakar Goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were adopted in 2000, have placed emphasis on the promotion of gender equality and empowering women through education.

In Malaysia, since the country gained independence, the role of women and their contribution to economic growth and development has been undeniably important. Official statistics show that as of 2003, approximately 12.3 million, nearly 49 per cent of the country’s total population, were women. Of that total, 7.7 million were in the working bracket of 15-64 years. Thus, in recognition of women’s contribution to the country, under the current five-year development plan (8MP), efforts are underway to enhance the role, position and status of women in ensuring their participation as equal partners, to achieve the nation’s development agenda. The strategic thrusts focusing on the future development of women include the provision of more education and training opportunities for women, to meet the demands of the knowledge-based economy and to improve women’s upward mobility in the labour market. Likewise, the Third Outline Perspective Plan (OPP3), which spans a period of ten years from 2001-2010, also includes similar policy thrusts for the development of women.

The Government regards education as an important tool to empower the women of Malaysia and has consistently strengthened its education system in addition to providing more educational opportunities for women. Today, more women in Malaysia are attending universities and are enrolled in various courses such as arts and humanities, science and technology as well as vocational and technical fields. Looking at some official statistics, as at end June 2002, females comprised 48.7 per cent of the total number of students enrolled at primary schools. For the secondary level of education, this percentage was marginally higher at 50.4 per cent. At the higher learning level, statistics also show that there are more female enrollment accounting for 50.1 per cent and 58.8 per cent of total enrollment in colleges and universities, respectively. Thanks to the initiative taken by the Government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the improvement in access to higher learning has helped empower a larger percentage of Malaysian women, and more were seen moving into higher-paying occupations. According to statistics from the Mid-term review of the 8MP, the proportion of women who are legislators, senior officials and managers has increased from 5 per cent in 2000 to 5.3 per cent in 2002.

While Malaysia has made considerable progress, developing regions such as the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and especially Sub-Saharan Africa are lagging behind. A recent report prepared by the World Bank gender and development group has found that the gains were slow and uneven in the said regions. According to the report, women in South Asia, on average, have only half as many years of schooling compared with males. The report also revealed that only 60 per cent of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa were enrolled in primary school, while for secondary education, a mere 22 out of 128 countries under study will reach gender parity by 2015. The UNESCO 2005 EFA Global Monitoring report also revealed girls' enrollments at primary level at less than 90 per cent of boys' in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. At the secondary level, only Europe and Central Asia have achieved enrollment parity. Even more disconcerting, statistics from UNESCO have indicated that women comprise two-thirds of the nearly 800 million illiterates worldwide.

In the online discussion jointly organised by UNESCO and UNICEF early this year on the education and training of women and girls, universal access to education was among the major topics. The summary outcomes from the discussion included the concern that a lack of universal access to education for women would lead to greater gender disparity. Some participants have cited that negative social attitudes and cultural practices were the main reasons hindering the participation of women in education, while others identified the lack of funds (household poverty and inadequate funding from governments) as a barrier to female participation in education. Such differences in education are a reason for

concern especially since this constitutes a barrier for women to attain higher economic and social status.

Women's movements have long lobbied that access to education for a woman is a basic human right. Although serious commitments have been since the Beijing Declaration and given a targeted timeframe like those made in the EFA and MDGs, for many developing countries much needs to be done to achieve equal access to education for women. There is no doubt that education can play a vital role in improving the status of women, and enhancing their social and professional status as well as permitting them to earn higher wages. It is imperative, therefore, that the issue of gender parity in education be given the highest priority, especially if the goal of achieving gender equality in education by 2015, as pledged in the Dakar Framework and the Millennium Declaration, is to be realised. With just a decade remaining, both Governments and NGOs have to work harder to reduce the gender gap in education.

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