



**Interview of the Month**  
**Nora Fyles, Director**  
**United Nations Girls' Education Initiative**  
**October 2016**

**1. GenderHopes: Can you tell us more about the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) and how it works as a partnership of various institutions?**

Nora Fyles: UNGEI is a multi-stakeholder partnership **launched in 2000 to champion the implementation of gender and education goals**. We are committed to improving the quality and availability of girls' education and contributing to the empowerment of girls and women through transformative education. UNGEI is an advocacy-oriented partnership, which includes 27 global and regional member organizations, 4 regional partnerships and nearly 50 associated country partnerships, as well as a far-reaching global network.

UNGEI's policy advocacy efforts focus on four key strategic priorities:

- An enhanced focus on marginalized and excluded groups;
- The reduction/elimination of school-related gender-based violence;
- Improved learning outcomes for girls; and
- An increased number of girls transitioning to secondary education and accessing post-primary opportunities.

**2. How close were we to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of “all children completing primary schooling by 2015”? What are the shortcomings?**

The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) increase our ambition considerably beyond the MDG target, but new research shows that not even our vision of universal primary completion is likely to be achieved by our new deadline of 2030. Achieving SDG 4 that all children will complete both primary and secondary education is clearly beyond reach.

We are also far from achieving the SDG 4 targets. Target 4.5, for example, claims among other things, that by 2030 we will '*eliminate gender disparities in education*'. Currently only two-thirds of all countries have achieved gender parity at the primary level and far fewer at the secondary and tertiary level. While in some countries it is boys who are disengaging, underperforming and dropping out, in the majority of countries where there are disparities, it is girls

who are not enrolling or completing primary school. Gender also intersects with other factors of disadvantage, such as poverty, location, language and disability. Thus, poor rural girls, girls with disability, and ethnic minority girls face the most serious barriers to entering school and moving through the school system. Across the board, girls in countries affected by conflict are the least likely to attend school. Adolescent girls in such countries are 90% more likely to be out of school than girls elsewhere.

**Among other strategies, to overcome these significant gender gaps in education there is a need for greater emphasis on partnerships and data.** Investment in country level cross-sectoral approaches and partnerships is necessary to ensure that girls remain in school, especially at the secondary level. Cross-sectoral partnerships and integrated programming help address the needs and barriers of the girl child which go beyond education – menstrual hygiene management, sexual and reproductive health and rights and discriminatory gender norms - such as child marriage and gender based violence in and around school (SRGBV). In terms of data, there is currently insufficient **data on gender equality in education** - particularly in areas such as SRGBV. Without data as a basis to understand trends, we cannot effectively target and address the needs of girls and boys or make progress towards our 2030 agenda.

### **3. What is the biggest challenge in getting all girls into a good education system? How does UNGEI target the hardest-to-reach girls?**

**The first of UNGEI's four strategic priority areas** and top of the UNGEI advocacy agenda is, "An enhanced focus on marginalized and excluded groups;" We carry this commitment through our high level policy work and in our support for research and evidence building.

**The Good Practice Fund is an example of this.** Over the last two years, UNGEI has supported 17 partners to document their work to advance girls' access and achievement in school, and also to push against discriminatory gender norms. Through the fund, UNGEI and partners uncovered some useful findings on girls and gender in education, particularly those most vulnerable, including girls with disabilities, tribal girls in remote India, slum dwellers in Nairobi, and pregnant girls and adolescent mothers in Guinea.

What we have learned through our evidence and capacity building projects with partner organisations is that the **challenges faced by girls varies based on context; however 3 of the top overarching barriers include** the cost of girls attending school, including the cost of a girl's domestic labour which the family must give up for her to attend school, early marriage and pregnancy, and discriminatory social norms - including SRGBV.

## **5. How does the partnership ensure that girls receive high-quality education?**

All members of the UNGEI partnership are in one way or another working on making quality and inclusive education available for all girls. One of the ways in which the UNGEI partnership as a whole has focused on quality education is to promote strong education systems which take the needs of girls and boys into consideration. UNGEI works closely with the Global Partnership for Education to ensure that gender considerations are well integrated into country owned national education sector plans. The UNGEI-GPE 'Guidance for Developing Gender-Responsive Education Sector Plans' (to be released shortly) is a great example of how UNGEI works with partners toward providing practical and concrete contributions toward improving girls' education. The Gender Responsive Sector Planning Guidance is a strategic tool aimed at assisting country-level planners and practitioners integrate gender issues into the sector planning process as they work to create quality learning environments for all. It brings an understanding to systematically addressing inequalities between girls and boys in the education system.

## **6. What concrete measures can UNGEI take to protect girls from the dangers that they might face in, out and on their way to school? (sexual harassment by teachers or fellow students, ...)**

School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) remains a serious issue for both girls and boys. For that reason, UNGEI has integrated attention to GBV across all of our work. With UNESCO, we chair the Global Working Group to End SRGBV for collective advocacy, research and the exchange of resources and experience. The UNGEI website functions as a clearing house for material on SRGBV, including current research, programming tools and policy documents. A recent addition, 'Rigorous Review of Global Research Evidence on Policy and Practice on School-Related Gender-Based Violence', examines evidence on approaches to addressing SRGBV with emphasis on research from low and middle-income countries, and is an extremely rich resource. The UNGEI Regional Partnership in East Asia and the Pacific has developed a curriculum on SRGBV intended for grades 5-6, called 'Connect with Respect: Preventing gender-based violence in schools', and this is being piloted in a number of countries in the region. UNGEI also partners with Education International to implement the Government of Canada funded project, Teacher Unions Take Action to End SRGBV, which is currently on-going in 7 unions in East and Southern Africa. For us to make any progress towards our vision of gender equitable education, we must ensure that schools are safe spaces for learning. Nothing less is good enough.

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***Nora Fyles** is the Head of the Secretariat for the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). UNGEI is a multi-stakeholder partnership committed to improving the quality and availability of girls' education and contributing to the empowerment of girls and women through education.*

*Before joining UNGEI, Ms. Fyles headed the Education Policy team for the Canadian International Development Agency from 2006 to 2012, and also served as the Senior Education Specialist for CIDA's Asia Program from 2003. Prior to her time at CIDA, Ms. Fyles worked for multilateral organizations, NGOs, educational institutions and government ministries with a focus on education and gender issues, including extended residential assignments in Vietnam, Belize, Bangladesh and Indonesia. In Canada, Ms. Fyles worked a Senior Policy Analyst for the Status of Women Canada, taught children and adults, and managed community-based literacy programs. Ms. Fyles holds an MA in International Affairs from the Norman Patterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, and a MEd from the Ontario Institute for the Studies of Education, University of Toronto.*