



GENDERHOPES
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Why I'm supporting Malala Day

By Jenny Humphreys

I remember a joke from my childhood which went something like this: "How do you like your new school, Susie?" asks her grandmother. "Closed!" replies Susie. Whilst I was possibly amongst a minority who enjoyed my entire school experience, there were plenty of my peers who dreamt of being anywhere rather than their classroom.

Had they been born on a different continent, in a different social situation or as a female, their perception of school may have been wholly different.

I'm writing this blog in the week that will see Malala Yousafzai present a petition to the Secretary-General of the United Nations calling for greater action by world leaders to end "an education emergency". Malala is the Pakistani schoolgirl and education activist shot by the Taliban last year for publicly raising the issue of girls' rights to education. She was lucky to survive – in June of this year a Pakistani girl and her sister were killed by her fiancé after defying his demand for them to leave school. Last week [29 students were murdered](#) in a pre-dawn attack on their boarding school in northeast Nigeria by Islamic extremists who reject all but Sharia-based education.

193 countries have ratified, or signed up to, the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), in which Article 28 recognises "the right of the child to an education... make primary education compulsory and free to all... Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools".

Yet today there are 57 million children of primary school age unable to access education; 32 million of these are girls. Millions more, like Malala, crave the knowledge, skills and opportunities a secondary education can provide them. She is correct in referring to this as an education emergency.

Children, especially girls, are denied access to an education for numerous reasons. They may live in remote areas in which the distance to their nearest school is prohibitive, or where travelling to and from school may be dangerous due to conflict, risk of abduction or harassment (or worse) by those who wish to deny education opportunities (particularly to girls). They may be denied access by their families who require them to contribute to the household income, through either labour or early marriage. They may have access to a school but still not receive an education because of a shortage of teachers (also targets of extremists), learning materials or funds to pay the fees. They may receive only a primary education, victims of community perceptions of the value of education, especially for girls. Their schools may be attacked by groups who oppose the ideologies they represent.

In failing to resolve this situation we're not only denying these children their academic learning rights, we're maintaining cycles of poverty, disease and disempowerment. It has been proven time and again that increased school attendance for both sexes sees community improvements including reduction in illness and disease (through improved understanding of hygiene practices), reduction of maternal mortalities (through fewer young girls being forced into marriage and improved awareness of pregnancy health and child-birth practices) and increased livelihoods (not only are youngsters learning skills

for generating an income but their parents have increased time in which to work). Education also slowly helps to raise the profile of women and girls as equal, productive and respected members of the community.

It is therefore understandable that, outside of our privileged Western society where petulant teenagers moan about the amount of homework they have, other children want nothing more than to attend a safe school and be taught by qualified teachers. They and their families recognise that education can provide their path out of poverty and inequality.

I have witnessed first-hand the desire of children, and their communities, to access quality education. During the 2011 conflict, I worked in Libya, supporting a programme providing primary and secondary education to hundreds of Libyan refugees who had fled to temporary camps on the Tunisian border. In the bleak and dusty camp, we erected a large school tent, bought furniture, provided learning and play materials – it wasn't fancy but it served its purpose. However within a month of opening, a day of rioting in the camp led to a fire which all but destroyed the school tent. The children, though profoundly affected by the events not only of that riot but of the larger conflict, their displacement and the total disruption of their lives, were most distraught by the loss of their school and begged for its immediate reopening. I have a photo, snapped a couple of days later, of a small group of young children sitting on a charred bench under a tree, engrossed in an impromptu lesson led by a couple of teenagers, trying to continue their language classes on a blackboard they'd salvaged from the tent.

Whilst European children play truant from school, I've taught children in a remote part of Sri Lanka who have willingly doubled their mandatory school day. After completing their school day at government schools, these children from the most impoverished families consider themselves lucky to then attend 3½ hours of supplementary English, computer and sports classes at a charity-run school, five days a week.

57 million children cannot be ignored. Whilst the [Millennium Development Goal](#) for primary education has seen improvements to school enrolments, we're still a long way off universal education.

Malala's voice has not been silenced. And on 12th July 2013, her 16th birthday, her voice will be joined by thousands more to continue the fight for every girl and boy to realise their right to a quality education. Let's hope they are heard and responded to.

For details on Malala Day and the UNs Global Initiative on Education, click here:
http://www.globaleducationfirst.org/files/Malala_Day_Social_Media_Hot_Sheet.pdf

About the author

Jenny Humphreys has worked for 3 years in the humanitarian sector. She has predominantly worked for Save the Children UK in both their London head office and the Libya emergency response programme. Her particular interests and expertise lie with education and protection programming, particularly in crisis contexts such as natural disaster or conflict.

Jenny previously worked in the private sector and has a degree in English Literature from Oxford University.