



DEFENDING WOMEN AND GIRLS' RIGHT TO EDUCATION: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

**Summary: Online panel event
on the International Day of
Education, 24 January 2023**



**GENEVA CENTRE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVANCEMENT AND
GLOBAL DIALOGUE**



DEFENDING WOMEN AND GIRLS' RIGHT TO EDUCATION: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

MODERATION

Dr. Umesh Palwankar

Executive Director, Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

PANELLISTS

Ms. Elizabeth Broderick

Member of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

Ms. Belquis Ahmadi

Senior Program Officer, United States Institute of Peace

Dr. Racquel Warner

Career Educator, Academic Consultant

Ms. Saba Ismail

Co-Founder, Aware Girls, Pakistan

Ms. Shekeba Ahmadi

Women's Rights Advocate; CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation

Dr. Mona Mostafa El-Sholkamy

Associate Professor, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government

Ms. Prasansa Karki

Program Development Coordinator, Nagarik Aawaz (Citizen's Voice), Nepal



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DEFENDING WOMEN AND GIRLS' RIGHT TO EDUCATION: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

ONLINE PANEL EVENT

24 JANUARY 2023
12-13:15 PM CET

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REGISTRATIONS: (ZOOM)

GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

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FOREWORD

Women and girls in many parts of the world continue to suffer discrimination in the area of education, despite the progress made in narrowing gender gaps in this regard over the past decades. The prolonged school closures and unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, protracted conflicts, natural disasters and forced displacement, poverty and inequalities within countries are making it harder for female students to exercise their right to education.

Denying women and girls their inherent right to education not only represents a flagrant violation of the basic human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination, but also results in a significant setback at various levels of the socio-economic fabric of a country, especially in the domains of health, justice and education, by contributing to a lack of female doctors, lawyers and teachers. Moreover, it considerably aggravates the risk of child labor, forced, underage marriages, early pregnancies, female genital mutilation and domestic and gender-based violence. Ensuring access to education for all serves as a buffer against such injustices and human rights violations.

On the occasion of the International Day of Education, celebrated each year on 24 January, and building on the global momentum generated by the UN Transforming Education Summit in September 2022, the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue organized an online panel event entitled “Defending Women and Girls’ Right to Education: Current Challenges and Perspectives”.

The event aimed at creating a forum for discussion and mobilization around women and girls’ right to education. The speakers shared their professional experiences in this domain, identified and analyzed both, major challenges and good practices on how to encourage more national and international commitments from the governments, and proposed concrete initiatives and action from the grassroots level up, to ensure the right to education for every woman and girl. This would represent a major contribution towards laying the foundation for women’s empowerment and fostering an environment of coexistence, mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation, leading to just, peaceful and inclusive societies.



Dr Umesh Palwankar
Executive Director

Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

PANEL DISCUSSION

On the International Day of Education¹, celebrated each year on 24 January, and building on the global momentum generated by the UN Transforming Education Summit² in September 2022, the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue organized an online event entitled “Defending Women and Girls’ Right to Education: Current Challenges and Perspectives”³.

The panel event aimed to create a space for discussion and called for mobilization around women and girls’ right to education. The speakers addressed good practices on how to encourage more national and international commitments from the governments and shared concrete initiatives and stories of action from the grassroots level to ensure the right to education for every woman and girl. The panelists also provided recommendations to governments, civil society, the private sector, international and regional organizations and other stakeholders in order to encourage valuing women and girls’ voices and providing equal learning opportunities in all countries and contexts.

Event Moderator:

 **Dr. Umesh Palwankar**, the Executive Director of the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

Panelists:

-  **Ms. Elizabeth Broderick**, Member of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls
-  **Ms. Belquis Ahmadi**, Senior Program Officer, United States Institute of Peace
-  **Ms. Shekeba Ahmadi**, Women’s Rights Advocate; CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation
-  **Dr. Racquel Warner**, Career Educator, Academic Consultant
-  **Ms. Saba Ismail**, Co-Founder, Aware Girls, Pakistan
-  **Ms. Prasansa Karki**, Program Development Coordinator, Nagarik Aawaz (Citizen's Voice), Nepal
-  **Dr. Mona El-Sholkamy**, Associate Professor, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government

¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/education>

² <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit>

³ Watch the full recording of the panel event: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_60_Olbnol

Opening Remarks by Dr Umesh Palwankar, Executive Director of the Geneva Centre

In his introductory remarks, the Geneva Centre's Executive Director Dr Umesh Palwankar welcomed the esteemed panelists and thanked them for having accepted the invitation to share their analyses and insights flowing from their expertise and extensive experience in the field in regard to the subject of the panel.



Dr Palwankar briefly presented the Geneva Centre, founded in 2013, which is an independent human rights think-tank with Special Consultative status in ECOSOC. The Centre's work rests on four pillars: research and publication on vital human rights issues, training and national capacity building in the field of human rights, international advocacy through reporting on important human rights developments and conferences, in particular the Human Rights Council, and the promotion of a global inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue through the organization of international conferences and panel debates.

In regard to the theme of the panel, Dr Palwankar observed that the right to education, equally for men and women, is enshrined international law right from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights onwards, including in the 2 International Covenants of 1966 and several other treaties. Denying women and girls this basic human right would violate the fundamental principles of equality and non-discrimination, embody a policy of flagrant gender discrimination, contrary international law and run against the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly 4 and 5. It would also seriously undermine the goals of the international community to establish just, tolerant, inclusive and prosperous societies.

The esteemed 7 panelists, from international organizations, academia, think-tanks and NGOs working in the field, will offer their insights, analyses and recommendations for ways forward on this issue of vital importance in human rights. A follow-up publication, containing summaries of the oral presentations, the Q&A session, and the written contributions of the panelists, will be issued and distributed widely online, in social media, on the Geneva Centre's website and sent to the Centre's interlocutors which include Permanent Missions in Geneva, international organizations, NGOs, academia, the media. A full video of the event will also be released by the Geneva Centre and shared on our YouTube⁴ channel and website⁵.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo27M8pm9WLUdQH4hc4sDg>

⁵ <https://gchragd.org/>

Ms. Elizabeth Broderick, Member of the United Nations Working Group on discrimination against women and girls



Elizabeth Broderick is a member of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls since 1 November 2017. As Australia's longest serving Sex Discrimination Commissioner (2007-2015), she advanced gender equality and women's human rights through research and advocacy including in relation to preventing violence against women, economic security for women, balancing paid work and unpaid caring responsibilities, women's leadership and gender equality laws and institutions. Ms. Broderick also led a major review into the treatment of women in Australia's military and Federal Police. She was a member of the World Bank Gender Advisory Board, Global Co-Chair of the UN Global Compact's Women's Empowerment Principles Leadership Group, and Special Adviser to the Executive Director of UN Women and Under-Secretary General on Private Sector Engagement.

Speaking on behalf of the Working Group, Ms. Elizabeth Broderick said that in their country missions and official communications they are witness to the rise of authoritarian, nationalist and fundamentalist actors which lead to very difficult consequences for human rights, in particular, rights related to women and girls, and gender equality. This **pushback** is intertwined with other alarming trends, including anti-migrant trend, anti-democracy trend and a push to shutdown civic space.

According to UNICEF, worldwide there are 129 million girls out of school, and only 49% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary school education. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, putting over 11 million girls at risk of not returning to school. Decades of educational and gender equality outcomes are at risk. Fewer girls in the classrooms means fewer women to make valuable social and economic contributions to their communities, or, as Ms. Broderick put it, "if girls lose out, we all lose out". The education of women and girls is one of the most **effective investments** for sustainable and inclusive development and peace.

Recently, the Working Group has been asked to undertake a **joint fact-finding mission to Afghanistan** with the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan. There, the ban on girls' access to secondary education undermines a number of rights and principles, including those guaranteed in the CEDAW⁶ Convention and other international Conventions. The Working Group has sent a number of official allegation letters to the de facto authorities in Afghanistan and joined several public statements calling on a reversal of the decision to close schools and universities. Ms. Broderick also quoted a number of **relevant Articles under CEDAW**, including Article 2 and Article 5 but, notably, Article 10 that guarantees the right of women and girls to education, promotes gender equality, and endows every woman with equal rights as men in the field of education from pre-school to higher technical education.

⁶ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Girls and women's right to education is an **essential obligation of States** because education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. However, gender still remains a primary indicator of education attainment, which prevents girls from achieving higher social and economic status and perpetuates a cycle of inequality and discrimination.

The Working Group has identified many barriers to girls' access to education, one of which is **school-related gender based violence**. The violence girls experience on their way to school – or back from school – can also be one of the barriers that severely curtails their educational opportunities. The Working Group's 2022 report concluded that equal access to inclusive and quality education is pivotal in enabling **girls and young women's activism**. Schools should also promote human rights, explain the harmful impact of discriminatory stereotypes and support critical thinking skills. There was a need to reassert the universality of human rights so that every woman and girl, everywhere, could live a life of dignity and respect – which starts with every girl having a right to quality education.

Ms. Belquis Ahmadi, Senior Program Officer at the United States Institute of Peace



Belquis Ahmadi, Senior Program Officer, United States Institute of Peace, is a human rights lawyer with over 20 years of experience working on issues related to rule of law, civil society development, governance, democracy, countering violent extremism and peacebuilding. Currently she focuses on countering violent extremism, and promoting the rule of law, women's access to justice and women's participation in peace processes. Ms. Ahmadi has provided senior-level policy advice and representation on complex governance, electoral and access to justice initiatives. She has worked on development projects in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Middle East, and published on countering violent extremism, elections, access to justice and women's political participation.

Ms. Belquis Ahmadi started her statement by providing a **brief overview of the state of education in Afghanistan before August 2021**. 3 million girls and 7 million boys were in schools, close to 200 private and public universities operated throughout the country, where both men and women were pursuing their desired degrees. There were some 68,000 female teachers and lecturers. The number of registered schools was reported to be around 16,500, with an additional 13,000 registered madrasa throughout the country, for boys and girls.

Since the Taliban took control, their messaging around girls' education has lacked cohesion. In September 2021, the Taliban announced that only boys were permitted to return to class, despite their earlier claims that all students would continue their higher education in the light of Sharia law. In December 2021, girls were no longer allowed to attend secondary school. A year later, on 20 December 2022, a letter was issued by Taliban Ministry of High Education to all universities stating that girls would be suspended "until a suitable environment" was provided.

Ms. Ahmadi then discussed **the negative impact on the physical and mental well-being of girls**. Girls she had talked to told her the ban on education had had an enormous psychological impact on them, affecting their self-image, self-confidence and self-worth. Many girls were suffering from depression

and anxiety. This was even worse for women in rural areas and in families living in poverty. Girls feared that the more the schools remained closed the greater were the chances of them being forced into marriage, including early marriage. It was difficult to find out the exact number of girls who committed or attempted to commit suicide because of Taliban's discriminatory anti-women policies, but this number was raising.

Ms. Ahmadi also addressed the **economic and social impact of the Taliban's ban on education**. She cited UNICEF's August 2022 report, which estimated that the decision to deny girls a high school education translated into a \$500 million loss or about 2.5% of the nation's GDP and predicted that Afghanistan would not be able to regain the GDP lost or reach its true potential productivity without fulfilling girls' rights to access and complete secondary education. Alternatively, if the 3 million girls and women who are deprived of the right to education were allowed to exercise their right to education and employment, their combined contribution to Afghanistan's economy would be around \$5.4 billion. The Taliban's discrimination, however, has enforced the patriarchal norms that women were not "worthy" investing in.

Dr. Racquel Warner, Career Educator, Academic Consultant



Dr. Racquel Warner has worked in various academic and leadership positions at three major off-shore branch campuses in the UAE since 2003. A career educator with over 25 years international teaching experience, her professional engagement has been defined by her keen interest in social justice and equality. In her home country of Jamaica, Dr. Warner has initiated inner city community engagement projects that connected benevolent business owners with families who needed educational assistance. She also works actively in communities in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Kenya to support the development and accessibility of quality education to at risk groups.

Dr. Racquel Warner, in her statement, underlined that there are **several barriers** to girls' education, both income- and not income-related, such as living in a war-torn area, having despotic regimes and violations of human rights, which, increasingly, was not only happening in Eastern countries, but in a lot of Western countries as well. Other barriers include teaching practices: from a pedagogical perspective there are gender-responsive ways to be applied, but the quality of education remains not gender-responsive, resulting in a gender gap in terms of learning and skills development for girls.

Dr. Warner then brought up the UNESCO's **"LAYS" – Learning-adjusted Years of Schooling** – framework developed to empirically measure the effect of school closures and the attendant learning loss around the world. Before the pandemic, students globally were completing an average of 11.2 years of schooling, in terms of chronological years. In terms of the quality of learning, however, that amount was only 7.9 years of quality schooling. Despite the governments' rhetoric, the quality of education is not necessarily resulting in girls and women being educated to the level where they can function in the society. Even though education is being provided and even if we understand what the

barriers are, the conversation needs to be opened to look more into the retention of girls in school and the quality of education, according to Dr. Warner.

Dr. Warner also addressed the learning loss that has happened because of COVID-19, which can be amounted to **learning poverty**. We can presume, she said, that since women and girls have experienced more significantly the effects of COVID-19, the regressive impact on their education is going to be significant.

Finally, it is important to look at the **policies** and include non-state actors and private partners who could help governments to attenuate the pandemic- and non-pandemic-related problems, by using technology and developing gender-equitable and emotionally-equitable education models. Policies should also onboard men, as in many places men are the decision-makers. The conversation on the right to education for women has gone on for a millennium, concluded Dr. Warner, and if we are still having it, it is because not enough has been done. At this critical point, we should reflect on what we have not done correctly so far.

Ms. Shekeba Ahmadi, Women's Rights Advocate, CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation



Shekeba Ahmadi is a women's rights advocate and an aspiring leader in the field of Peace and Conflict Resolution, currently working with the Women in Peacemaking team at the CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation.

Ms. Ahmadi has contributed to the work of not-to-profit organizations in Singapore, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan for the last 6 years. Ms. Ahmadi's previous role at the Embassy of Finland in Kabul was Development Cooperation Advisor.

Ms. Shekeba Ahmadi started her statement by saying she was deeply saddened by closures of secondary schools and universities for girls and women in her native Afghanistan. Education changed her own life and empowered her meaningfully. Ms. Ahmadi shared that she was the first girl and child in her family to receive school and university education and hoped not to be the last. It broke her heart when her nieces asked about the re-opening of schools in Kabul – a question that still remains open.

Ms. Ahmadi discussed some current challenges in education, from both an advocate's and an ordinary person's perspective. It is the responsibility of each government to prioritize and remedy the education systems affected by the **consequences of COVID-19** and to reform the education policies to respond to local-level need. For instance, **Bangladesh** is one of the countries where education was majorly hit by COVID-19, and around 1.7 million students dropped out of schools and universities. There is a need for a programme to help enroll and re-integrate dropped out students and strengthen second chances of admitting them to schools and other educational institutions.

Access to quality education is a basic right for everyone, but children and girls are most vulnerable in the context where education is disrupted by conflict, as boys can fall in child labour and girls in child marriages. **Yemen** and **Afghanistan** are some of the real-time examples of such misery. The mental health of children affected by war and conflict is another major concern. It is the moral duty of the international community to respond to these situations and support peace talks to end wars and ensure quality education for children, said Ms. Ahmadi.

Development and humanitarian programmes, depending on the context, should respond to the needs of disrupted education systems in affected zones. The civil society, too, can play a significant role to advocate for alternatives, such as online or informal schooling in areas where formal schools are destroyed. Education can be utilized as a tool to promote peace and gender equality for sustainable change. However, it is also witnessed to be used in reversed ways by certain **extremist groups** who aim to brainwash young children, to instrumentalize them for the promotion of their extremist ideologies.

In **Afghanistan**, nearly 30% of girls never entered primary education. In December 2022, university education for women was suspended. The numerous restrictions amount to systematic erasure of women from public affairs. The extremist ideology could spread from Afghanistan and affect other countries. The Muslim-majority countries should take it seriously for their own sake, as the resulting Islamophobia would be unbearable.

A change in Afghanistan is only possible when the international community, political stakeholders, and people of the world joins forces to convey united messages of solidarity with women and people of Afghanistan. We can all play a role to keep Afghanistan on the agenda, insisted Ms. Ahmadi, through our organizations, think tanks, businesses or simply social media messages, ending the extremism in Afghanistan and not letting it be repeated elsewhere.

Ms. Saba Ismail, Co-Founder, Aware Girls (Pakistan)



Saba Ismail is an award winning human rights activist working for the empowerment of young women for over two decades. She is the Co-founder of Aware Girls (Pakistan), a women-led organisation working towards gender equality and peace. Saba is a Sié Fellow at the Sié Chéou-Kang Center, and doing a Masters in International Human Rights from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. She has served as a speaker and advisory group member at United Nations and World Bank, and received prestigious fellowships including Hurford Youth Fellowship (Washington, D.C), Vital Voices Fellowship and "Do School" Fellowship (Germany). In 2013, Saba was recognized as one of the "100 Leading Global Thinkers" by Foreign Policy, and among the "30 Under 30" youth activists by the National Endowment for Democracy.

Ms. Saba Ismail started her intervention by sharing a story. When she was working to raise awareness among women domestic workers about their rights and labor laws in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, she met Aqsa. At the age of thirteen, Aqsa was not attending school, while her brother, aged twelve, was. Aqsa had a dream of becoming a teacher but instead had to stay at home

to take care of her five younger siblings, do the housework, or cover her mother's shift at work. That was not only Aqsa's story but also one of 12 million girls out of school in Pakistan, not having the chance to escape the cycle of poverty.

In **Pakistan**, 21% of girls are married by their eighteenth birthday, and 3% by the age of 15. Most of them are unable to complete their schooling after getting married off. Education, which should be a fundamental right, is a privilege accessible to a few. According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report⁷, Pakistan had the second-worst gender parity in the world and ranks 135th out of 146 countries for educational attainment. Harmful gender stereotypes also create economic incentives to give males schooling priority.

Ms. Ismail's team at **Aware Girls** works in rural areas to mobilize parents to send their daughters to school. Many parents have shared their concerns about their daughters' safety. The schools are far away, some do not have boundary walls, and the girls risk facing harassment. Education is not free, and many families cannot afford it. The combination of these factors is keeping millions of girls out of school who would otherwise become lawyers, teachers, doctors, scientists, or social entrepreneurs. *Aware Girls* adopted the approach of creating spaces and providing tools for girls to become champions and advocate for their right to education. They directly trained 300 girls who organized effectively and lobbied with the policymakers for the policy changes they wanted to see in their communities. These girl champions demanded that schools be safe, accessible, and free of cost.

Research and work at *Aware Girls* at the grassroots have shown that completion of high-quality higher secondary education for girls escalates the economic growth of communities, improves the quality of life for girls and increases women's political participation. The **COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate change** have exacerbated the education crisis in the world. Malala Yousafzai, Noble Peace Prize Laureate, and an alumna of *Aware Girls*, has urged countries to focus on reducing the financing gap for girls' education.

Ms. Ismail regretted that education was severely **underfunded** in Pakistan. Like many other countries, Pakistan spends more on military and defense than on constructing schools and offering high-quality education for girls. For every dollar invested in girls' rights and education, developing countries could see a return of \$2.80, highlighted Ms. Ismail, which is equivalent to billions of dollars in increased GDP.

In addition to financial investments, a **holistic approach** at the national and global levels is needed, which should include policies and programs for girls and women to have equal access to education and initiatives to advance gender equality. These policies must also engage men and boys in these efforts.

⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>

Ms. Prasansa Karki, Program Development Coordinator, Nagarik Aawaz (Nepal)



Prasansa Karki is a Program Development Coordinator at Nagarik Aawaz (the citizen's voice, Nepal), a peacebuilding organization that promotes youth and women engagement in community peacebuilding. Ms. Karki has been engaged in the field of human rights and peacebuilding for the past eleven years. Her aptitude is promoting peace work, conflict transformation, and nonviolent movement. She holds a Master's degree in Applied Conflict Transformation Studies from Cambodia and was awarded the Faculty Excellence Award by the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies.

Ms. Prasansa Karki started by sharing her personal story. Being raised by a single mother, she always knew how important her education was for her and she wanted to complete her degree before getting married. Now, a mother of two herself, she wondered why her daughter and son should receive differential treatment or perceive any discrimination. Every individual should be looked at as a human being, not as a male or female, Karki said.

Ms. Karki then briefly shared the history of education in **Nepal** where, until the 1950s, education was available only to the narrow elite. Over the years, Nepal's education approach has shifted to a multicultural education system, however, a holistic approach to education is still missing. The notions of "human rights" or "child rights" are not yet very familiar. People working in human rights are still perceived as working in the "NGO-sector".

Her organization, **Nagarik Aawaz**, is a peacebuilding organization that works with conflict-affected women and their children. It visions a *Just and Peaceful Nepal* through engaging youth, women, children and marginalized groups as a key to realizing the goal, through informal education, peer-learning activities, by broadening the definition of education, teaching history and sharing stories of strength. As schools in Nepal have fixed curricula and timetables, **Nagarik Aawaz** often hosts its activities on Friday afternoons, introducing topics such as peace, friendship, or the way students want to treat others and be themselves treated – i.e., the notions that, as Ms. Karki puts it, "make a better human being".

The organization also focuses on shifting the identity of youth, especially girls, who, in a very patriarchy-driven society, are often perceived as a "burden to the family", by enhancing their leadership skills, building their confidence, and having more communication with people beyond their families. Additionally, the **Nagarik Aawaz** brings local stakeholders such as health workers, teachers, and local governance employees to sit together for inter-generational dialogues and activities to better understand what young peoples' opinions are. Finally, Ms. Karki touched upon the importance of psycho-social care in schools, including training teachers on mental health and the importance of avoiding corporal punishment in schools.

Dr. Mona Mostafa El-Sholkamy, Associate Professor, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government



Dr. Mona El-Sholkamy, Associate Professor, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, is an affiliate of the Harvard Business School Microeconomics of Competitiveness group. Her research interests are in the areas of Macroeconomic, Education and Health Policies, Sustainable Development, Food Security, and Sovereign Wealth Funds. Dr. El-Sholkamy has published in the International Journal of Management and Applied Sciences; Journal of Business and Economics; and Cambridge University Press; among others. She is currently a member and Chair of the FAO Regional Network of Experts. El-Sholkamy received her Ph.D. from the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University, and her Master's and Bachelor's degrees in Economics from the American University in Cairo.

In her statement, Dr. Mona El-Sholkamy, shared some current perspectives and challenges with respect to the **Egyptian context**. She started by saying that, in 2021, the female literacy rate in Egypt was 83.3%. Egypt was actively addressing the 2030 Sustainable Agenda, having brought the 17 sustainable development goals to each governorate, for all people, especially the young, to have sufficient information on the SDGs.

Providing some **general context**, Dr. Mostafa El-Sholkamy mentioned that structural reforms, targeted subsidies, and interventions in the most vulnerable regions contributed to a reduction in poverty rates, which was reflected in education attainment records, especially among girls. The pre-university education system was one of the largest globally in terms of student and teacher numbers, while participation in primary education was close to universal, with the net enrolment ratio standing at 100.2%. Since 2020, digital learning platforms have been rapidly developed, but utilization has remained relatively low.

The **constitutional and legal framework** for promoting women's rights with emphasis on education for girls continued to play an important role in improving the situation. The 2014 Constitution and its 2019 amendments paid great attention to the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment. The Child Law was amended in accordance with Law No. 126 of 2008 to guarantee, among others, the right of a custodial mother to have jurisdiction over her children's education, and the establishment of a nursery in each prison for the children of imprisoned women. All the above efforts fell under Egypt's National Sustainable Development Strategy "Egypt Vision 2030", which considers the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment a crosscutting issue that intersects with its other themes, related to economic development, education, health, social justice and others.

Dr. El-Sholkamy also provided several examples of success stories, including owing to **international assistance of agencies such as USAID**. Through bilateral aid programs in 2019-2020, USAID supported Egypt's technical secondary schools, trained adult literacy facilitators, provided girls living in rural communities with high quality and engaging learning environments in community schools, and, in

cooperation with the Government of Egypt, focused on supporting women and girls' education and improving the workforce readiness. Other initiatives included **supporting women to succeed as entrepreneurs and as emerging community leaders**.

Another project, led by **UN Women Egypt** with the support of the Embassy of Japan, targeted young women and girls in five communities in the governorates of Greater Cairo, Minia, Luxor, Aswan and the Red Sea, aiming to reduce the gender gap in education, both in formal and informal schools. Dr. El-Sholkamy ended her presentation by bringing up some **social challenges**, such as population pressure, the need to continuously upgrade the skills of the teachers, and pressure on the public school system partly due to a great number of refugees in Egypt. She also highlighted the key role of awareness raising efforts regarding the importance of education for women and girls, which should be accompanied by legal reforms enforced by law.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS SESSION

Question: *How can we help young girls in refugee camps access education?*

Dr. Racquel Warner, Career Educator, Academic Consultant

Refugee contexts are very particular, due to political and funding issues, as well as the social stigma that is attached. Essentially any host country needs to come to an understanding that they are not only hosting refugees, but they also need to fulfill their human rights objectives of meeting the basic human rights of people who are displaced. A larger conversation is needed about what is the duty of the hosting country, as well as how aid agencies or individuals sponsoring many of the refugee camps get access to funding. The priority needs to be setting protocols, that part of this funding must be used to attract teachers to the refugee context and training them to deal with the intersectionalities that arise with people who come from situations of gender-based violence or war torn areas, who want to get an education. And that education must not just be math and reading – it needs to include life skills, gender issues, refugee's rights, and financial management. While a whole raft of reforms is needed in addressing this issue, it begins with host countries realizing that this is not a secondary agenda. If we are to host people and have refugee camps, education must be put at the center. This is how the cycle can be broken.

Question: *Given the theme of the panel, how do you see the role of the media on the one hand and the private sector on the other?*

Ms. Belquis Ahmadi, Senior Program Officer, United States Institute of Peace

Both the traditional media, social media, and the private sector play a significant role in raising awareness about the importance of education for boys and girls as well as adopting educational curriculums for those out of school. Unfortunately, at least in Afghanistan, neither of these two entities fulfil their responsibilities in providing that platform and opportunities which, however, are undeniably two very important sectors.

WRITTEN CONTRIBUTIONS SUBMITTED BY THE PANELISTS

Ms. Elizabeth Broderick

Hello and thank you for inviting the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls to be part of your celebrations on the occasion of the International Day of Education. My name is Elizabeth Broderick, I'm a member of the Working Group and it is a great pleasure to be with you today.

There has never been a more important time to be reasserting women and girls' right to education and I never let myself forget that the fact that we have the honor to present today, to be part of this conversation, to be part of this celebration, is thanks to our education. Without an education we wouldn't be able to be part of this virtual or physical room, discussing strategies to safeguard the rights of women and girls and particularly during a time of major pushback.

And that pushback is reaching new heights in our country missions, in our official communications. We are bearing witness to the rise of many more authoritarian, nationalist, and fundamentalist actors around the world. And that is leading to very difficult consequences for human rights and in particular rights related to women and girls and gender equality.

While a backlash against the rights of women and girls are distinct and a central aspect of a broader backlash, that pushback is intertwined with other alarming trends. One is an anti-migrant trend, an anti-democracy trend and a push to shut down civic space.

Let's today look specifically at the rights of women and girls to education. Where are we at? According to UNICEF, worldwide 129 million girls who are out of school today, and only 49% – less than half of all countries – have achieved gender parity in primary school education. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated that situation. It has put over 11 million girls at risk of not returning to school. There is a real fear, that our hard-fought progress and decades of progress towards educational and gender quality outcomes for women and girls is at risk.

If there are fewer girls in the classroom, it means fewer women who can make valuable social and economic contributions to their communities in the future. As I like to say: *"If girls lose out, we all lose out"*. The education of women and girls is one of the most effective investments for sustainable and inclusive development and peace.

Recently, the Working Group has been asked to undertake a joint fact-finding mission to Afghanistan with the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of persons in Afghanistan. In countries like this, the ban on girls' secondary education undermines a number of rights and principles. Those that are guaranteed in what we call the CEDAW Convention, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women⁸, but also in many other international conventions. CEDAW, established as an international bill of rights for women, and our Working Group has been able to send a number of official allegation letters to the de facto authority in Afghanistan, and joined several public statements calling on a reversal of the decision to close schools and universities.

Under CEDAW we have a number of Articles. Article 2, which condemns all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and Article 5, which requires states to modify social and cultural patterns of

⁸ [The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women) (CEDAW) is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. On 18 December 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

conduct in order to eliminate discrimination against women and girls. The most important Article for our discussion today is Article 10, which guarantees the rights of women and girls to education. It promotes gender equality, endowing every woman with equal rights as those of men in the field of education, from pre-school to higher technical education. It also provides for the elimination of any gender stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education.

Girls' and women's right to education is an essential obligation of states, because what we know is, education is both a human right in itself, and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. And not only that, but it is also recognized as one of the best financial investments that states can make.

Yet whilst we have seen several decades of improvement worldwide, and it has been wonderful to see that, gender still remains a primary indicator of educational attainment, which actually prevents girls from achieving higher social and economic status and perpetuates the cycle of inequality and discrimination.

In the Working Group we have identified many barriers to girls' access to education, one of which is school related gender-based violence. This plays out differently in different regions of the world, but in many regions of the world we also know that girls risk their lives every day just getting to school. The violence they experience on the way to school or on the way home from school can be a barrier which severely curtails girls' access to educational opportunities.

In our report last year (2022) on girls' and young women's activism⁹ we found that equal access to inclusive, culturally appropriate and quality education is also pivotal to enable girls' and young women's activism. Most importantly, where schools teach human rights, where they promote an understanding of harmful impact of gendered social norms and discriminatory stereotypes, and support critical thinking skills, that is when we see the best outcome for women and girls.

Education matters. Indeed, the blatant human rights violations of women and girls' rights and their right to education currently happening in certain countries is just the tip of the iceberg.

We need to reassert the universality of human rights so that every woman and girl everywhere can live a life of dignity and respect. And that starts with every girl having access to a quality education.

Thank you.

Ms. Belquis Ahmadi

Brief overview

Prior to **Taliban** taking control of **Afghanistan**, in August 2021, there were 3 million girls and 7 million boys in schools throughout the country. There were close to 200 private and public universities (140 and 39 respectively) where both males and females were pursuing their desired fields of education. There were some 68,000 female teachers and lecturers.

The number of registered schools with the ministry of education was reported to be around 16,500. Additionally, there were an estimated 13,000 registered madrasa throughout the country, for boys

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5025-girls-and-young-womens-activism-report-working-group>

and girls.¹⁰ In those madrasas 70% of the curriculum was focused on Islamic subjects while 30% was focused on modern education (science, literature and other subjects that were thought in schools)¹¹.

Annually, more than 20,000 Afghans received scholarships to study in universities in the region alone¹². Hundreds more went to the West to pursue master or PhD degrees¹³.

The state of education in Afghanistan since Taliban's takeover

The Taliban's messaging around girls' education has lacked cohesion from the moment the group took power. Many of their declarations have been simply contradictory, indicating division within the Taliban leadership and a lack of consensus on national policies.

In August 2021, for example, **Abdul Baqi Haqqani**, minister of higher education, told AFP, "The people of Afghanistan will continue their higher education in the light of Sharia law in safety without being in a mixed male and female environment"¹⁴.

A month later, the Taliban announced that only boys were permitted to return to class. Two months later in December, acting Deputy Education **Minister Abdul Hakim Hemat** said in a BBC interview¹⁵ that girls would not be allowed to attend secondary school until a new education policy was approved.

The Taliban's newly appointed Minister of Education in September questioned the importance of education itself, saying, "No PhD or master's degree is valuable today. You see that the Mullahs and Taliban that are in power have no PhD, masters or even a high school degree, but they are the greatest of all"¹⁶.

On December 20, 2022, Taliban Ministry of High Education issued a letter to all public and private universities stating that its scholars had evaluated the university curriculum and environment, and attendance for girls would be suspended "until a suitable environment" was provided. The decision was enforced the following day.

The long-term impact of Taliban's ban on education

1) *Economic and Social*

In its August 2022 report, **UNICEF** estimated that the decision to deny girls a high school education translated into a \$500 million loss or about 2.5% of the nation's GDP (gross domestic product). UNICEF also predicts that Afghanistan won't be able to regain the GDP lost or reach its true potential productivity without fulfilling girls' rights to access and complete secondary education. UNICEF's analysis of the current education in Afghanistan provides as stark reality check. If the 3 million girls who are deprived of the right to education and women were allowed to exercise their right to education and employment, their combined contribution to Afghanistan's economy would be around \$5.4 billion.¹⁷

Taliban policies undermine women's role and deprive them of their dignity, rights and status both at home and in the society. If the ban on girls' high school education becomes permanent, it would

¹⁰ <https://www.darivwa.com/a/seminary-school-afghanistan/1726615.html>

¹¹ <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-169095>

¹² <https://www.dw.com/en/why-india-is-no-longer-a-destination-for-afghan-students/a-61212135>

¹³ <https://mofa.gov.pk/testing-language/>

¹⁴ https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_afghan-woman-tops-national-university-exam-uncertain-about-future-under-taliban/6210154.html

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/59576128>

¹⁶ <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/talibans-new-education-min-says-no-phd-masters-valuable-mullahs-and-taliban-greatest.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/unicefusa/2022/08/16/unicef-help-needed-to-save-lives-safeguard-futures-in-afghanistan/?sh=18487571e16c>

eventually exclude women from all sectors of the society under the cover of religion. But without receiving higher education the pipeline of educated women to fill these jobs will run dry.

2) Health

Girls I talk to tell me the ban on education has had an enormous psychological impact on them. It has affected their self-image, self-confidence and self-worth. Families tell us that their young daughters are suffering from depression and anxiety. This is even worse for women in rural areas and those in families suffering from poverty. Girls fear that the more the schools remain closed for them the greater are the chances of them being forced into marriage. Early marriage as we well know poses increased health risk to young girls.

According to UNICEF the ban on education “Not only violates girls’ fundamental right to education, it also exposes them to heightened anxiety, and greater risk of exploitation and abuse, including child trafficking, early and forced marriage”. In the absence of human/women’s rights organizations and dedicated and functioning government agencies, we will probably never find out the exact number of girls who commit or attempt to commit suicide because of Taliban’s discriminatory anti-women policies.

Last month, a female student of medicine in Nangarhar attempted to commit suicide after learning Taliban had banned university education for girls¹⁸.

Reaction to the Taliban’s ban on university education for girls

Afghan girls and boys protested the ban through street protests, male university professors’ resignation and male students boycotting the classes. Taliban arrested some of the protestors and professors that resigned and decided to close the university for male students on temporary basis too. Taliban mobilized their armed forces to enforce the decision and prevent anyone that protests.

Internationally, except China and Russia, all major countries condemned the Taliban’s decisions. European and the Northern American, Afghan neighboring countries, and Muslim majority countries (Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, UAE...) condemned the ban on the universities.

The condemnation was especially strong from Saudi Arabia, the **Imam of Al Azhar** and Organization of Islamic Conference — all of them called on the Taliban to reverse their decision and called Taliban’s action un-Islamic.

Dr. Racquel Warner

In 1992 **Larry Summers** who served as Vice President, Development Economics, and Chief Economist at the World Bank, said “Money spent increasing the education of girls is not only more socially productive than military outlays. It is also far more productive than other social sector outlays - and than the vastly larger physical capital outlays projected for the next decade”. **Mark Parker** (2009), Former CEO of Nike said “Every global company should invest in the girl effect. Economists have demonstrated that it is the best possible return on investment. With targeted investments linked to market demand, adolescent girls will reverse cycles of poverty and have a huge impact on our global economy”. **Queen Rania** of Jordan expanded on this idea in 2013 when she said, “We know that if we can get girls to attend school and keep them there, you can change the course of a nation”.

¹⁸ [Taliban fighters ‘point guns at women’ & tell them to go home amid #LetHerLearn campaign | Rest of the World News \(republicworld.com\)](https://www.republicworld.com/news/afghanistan/taliban-fighters-point-guns-at-women-tell-them-to-go-home-amid-let-her-learn-campaign)

In 2015, US President **Barack Obama** said that “the single best indicator of whether a nation will succeed is how it treats its women. When women have health care and women have education, families are stronger, communities are more prosperous, children do better in school, nations are more prosperous.”

United Arab Emirates’ former Minister of State for Tolerance, **Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi** wrote that “educating a girl does far more than place a child behind a desk. It is the surest pathway to reducing infant mortality, mitigating high birth rates, slowing migratory pressures, and unlocking economic potential.”

In 2021, former UK Prime Minister **Boris Johnson** said that it is his “fervent belief” that improving girls’ education in developing countries is the best way to ‘lift communities out of poverty.’

International organizations agree

In early 2021, the Group of Seven (G7) stated that “nowhere is our resolve stronger than in addressing the global set-back in girls’ education.”

All of these statements for the past three decades focus on the instrumental value of girls’ education, and they seem to acknowledge that education is a most powerful means of empowering girls and women and protecting them from the violation of their human rights. Investment in girls’ and women’s education has proven to transform, and even save, lives—the lives of girls and women. Education sets in motion a powerful cycle of improved life prospects. Extant research from UNESCO and WHO and other agencies, report that when girls and women are educated, they gain skills, self-confidence and capabilities to make better decisions related to maternal choices, better nutrition, health care, and education for her family. Education unleashes a woman’s potential to contribute socially and economically to her family’s and community’s wellbeing.

Yet, today, millions of girls and women across the world continue to live in debilitating poverty and are denied their right to education. Two thirds of the world’s illiterate adults are women. Data from UNESCO reports that around the world, 129 million girls are out of school, including 32 million of primary school age, 30 million of lower-secondary school age, and 67 million of upper-secondary school age. A 2018 World Bank study estimates that the “limited educational opportunities for girls, and barriers to completing 12 years of education, cost countries between US\$15 trillion¹ and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.”

Barriers to women and girls’ education

Barriers to girls’ education – like poverty, child marriage and gender-based violence – vary among countries and communities. Poor families often favor boys when investing in education.

A 1% decrease in per capita income is associated with a 0.57% increase in the likelihood of girls being out-of-school versus 0.52% for boys of primary school age. The same is true at the secondary-school age for girls and boys in the same age group. It is also reported that other non-income, social, and cultural factors caused more girls to drop out of school in some economies (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

In some places, schools do not meet the safety, hygiene or sanitation needs of girls. In others, teaching practices are not gender-responsive and result in gender gaps in learning and skills development.

Setbacks caused by natural disasters, wars and other such misfortunes that result in extended school closures or lack of access in the early stages of a person’s life can have irrevocable impact on lifetime

earnings and opportunities. If girls miss the opportunity to learn vital skills and knowledge early in life, their progression, learning and retention is jeopardized. The same outcome is true if girls do not have the opportunity to complete their education.

UNESCO developed a framework known as **Learning-adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS)** to empirically measure the effect of school closures and the attendant learning loss. This tool is now used as a global instrument that monitors both the quantity and quality of education. Before the pandemic, students globally completed an average of 11.2 years of schooling. That sounds great, doesn't it? The reality, however, is that when adjusted for the quality of learning, that amount was only 7.9 years of quality schooling. A simulation that factored 5 months of school closures due to COVID-19 indicated an immediate loss of 0.6 years of schooling adjusted for quality, bringing the effective learning that a student can achieve down to 7.3 years (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

In economic terms, this foregone learning is expected to translate into earning losses equivalent to 6% of average pre-pandemic global earnings. Expected losses in lifetime earnings because of learning loss reached \$3.2 trillion in constant 2020 US dollars—equivalent to 13% of Asia's GDP in 2020 (Asian Development Bank).

There are also political barriers which continue to undermine efforts to achieve gender parity in education around the world. While the **2022 Gender Gap Report**¹⁹ has indicated a positive trend in terms of access to education retention of girls and women in education pathways, it is still at sub optimal levels. Despite billions of funds being made available to tackle COVID-19, less than 3 per cent of COVID-19 stimulus funds have gone to education.

I have been following with great interest the current World Economic Forum in Davos and I am yet to hear any sessions addressing learning loss due to COVID-19 and conflicts. I have not heard about any sessions about education and how the world will recover from the loss of learning that resulted from the pandemic. Evidently, the war in Ukraine, Space exploration and the looming recession require more urgent action. Evidently, what is lacking among world leaders is the will to act. As the pandemic unmasked the ineptitude and unpreparedness of so many public institutions, it became very obvious that the global effort to addressing deficiencies in girls' and women's education remain woefully insufficient and that the vicious spiral the failure sets in motion continue to setback economies globally.

The regressive effect of COVID-19 on women and girls' education

Countries all over the world made dramatic gains in girls' education over the past half century, in many cases eliminating gaps between girls and boys (and in some cases, even reversing them). Now more than two years into the pandemic, despite most schools being reopened, the disruptions in education will leave lasting impacts, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable girls.

Overall, World Bank estimates that as a result of school closures in low- and middle-income countries, the number of children who cannot read or understand a simple text by the age of 10, a phenomenon referred to as **learning poverty** will rise sharply, potentially increasing to 70% from the previous 53%. It is not too presumptuous to assert at this point that girls will likely experience this more than boys, because girls were also more affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than boys. A study in South Africa found larger learning losses for girls (English learning losses in 4th graders were 27% higher for girls than for boys). Data from Bangladesh showed one in ten girls aged 12-15 will not return to school after

¹⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>

their school reopened. Higher rates of dropout for girls were found in grades 10 and 12 in Uganda and in Kenya²⁰ (2021).

In Nepal, prior to COVID-19, girls' enrolment in schools had increased significantly with gender parity index of the boys and girls reaching 1:1, which means the total share of girls in classrooms is 50 percent. The government's economic survey report for the fiscal year 2020-21 showed that over two-thirds of the students enrolled in grade one dropped out of the school system by the time they reached grade 12, which is the final year of school education. The report shows that the retention rate up to grade 12 in the current fiscal year was 29.2 percent. A survey of girls in Bangladesh, found that 53% of girls reported spending less time on education than before the COVID-19 lockdown, and 93% report more time spent on household chores and childcare.

Since the closure of schools in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Jamaica, approximately 120,000 children, as reported by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information (MOEYI), have been disengaged from learning. Schools have had little or no regular contact with these students. These children who have been lost to learning represent almost 25% of the enrolment in public primary and secondary schools (UNICEF, 2021).

While these are a few examples and evidence is still emerging, they paint a clear picture: girls already disadvantaged by education systems and society will be worse off after the COVID-19 pandemic. The pipeline effect of this learning loss will soon register in developed countries, that benefit from migrant labor or from low-cost skilled labor from countries like Nepal, Bangladesh India and Philippines.

Solutions to consider

To address education for girls and women, a collaborative, cross boundary approach among state and non-state actors is required. Political commitment is essential for raising the profile of the issue and increasing girls' and women's access to schooling.

1. **Use technology to increase access and attenuate learning loss.** The advances in creating access can be addressed through partnerships between telecom providers, educational institutions and aid agencies. For example, in Nepal, the government partnered with media houses, internet providers, radio and television stations to broadcast lessons to students during the lockdown. The technology to make remote access to quality education is available. The same technologies can be optimized for attenuation of learning loss and learning poverty. A cross boundary approach that looks at all the stakeholders who can make this possible for constituents is required. Connecting successful school resources with marginalized communities over the internet where possible, could be considered. Of course, basic investment in required electricity and internet infrastructure is a prerequisite.
2. **Develop gender-equitable education/emotionally-equitable systems** that empower girls and boys and promote the development of life skills – like self-management, communication, negotiation and critical thinking – that young people need to succeed. They close skills gaps that perpetuate pay gaps and build prosperity for entire countries. Gender-equitable education systems can contribute to reductions in school-related gender-based violence and harmful practices. Wellbeing and mental health of poor people matter. These are not luxuries for the privileged. Developing a response to girls' and women's education that focuses on wellbeing and mental health is part of the solution.

²⁰ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/home>

3. **Policy Levers:** Complimentary policies are needed to improve educational access and outcomes for girls and women. Push for laws and policies that protect women's rights and promote equity, but don't stop there. Support school-to-work transitions by strengthening cross-sector collaboration between school and industry.

Countries should embed gender parity as a central goal of policies and practices to build a sustained and robust recovery. Reflecting gender norms in policies and interventions that at present tend to be masculinized. There are many dimensions that intersect when addressing girls and women's education. Collecting data on multiple vulnerabilities and on which girls are not receiving a good-quality education. Design interventions that cut across intersectionality. Subsidize childcare. Leverage technology to reduce the burden of care work.

Retention and quality of education need to be a strategic objective. Building coalitions between government, civil society, and partners to achieve gender equity, using girls' education as one instrument for attaining it. Practices such as lowering fees, providing scholarships, grants NOT LOANS are examples of targeted efforts that have translated into higher girls' school enrolments in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Yemen, Morocco, Uganda and Brazil.

We know that the gender gap is wider at higher levels of education, so it is not enough for girls to merely sign up for school; they need to remain in school. Governments, educators and communities must address issues such as institutionalized gender limiting practices that reinforce women's lower status, poor school quality, and early marriage and childbearing, which often cut short women's education. Making 12 years of education a universal goal and leveraging technology to improve quality education through sponsored programs and connecting institutions with scalable best practices can address this issue. Knowledge and skills sharing through remote learning should be considered.

The mismatch between education and the skills needed for today's workforce must be corrected. These steps may ensure that girls and women gain the optimal benefits from education.

Advocacy and action on the issue of access, quality and retention in girls' and women's education cannot be put on the back burner, because the results have so far proven to be a major setback to achieving SDG 4. Collaborative investment between state and non-state actors through PPPs in programs that work at scale, implementing strategic policies that consider meaningful outcomes and revised pedagogical practices are essential starting points to attenuating this intractable decades old issue without further delays.

Ms. Saba Ismail

I want to share a story. A few years ago, I was working to raise awareness among women workers about their rights and labor laws in the **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan**. I was working closely with the women domestic workers. My bond with the community was strong, and I used to visit their homes and have casual conversations with them over a cup of tea. During one of my visits to **Sadaf's** house, who was one of the domestic workers, I came to know that she has six children. Her oldest daughter, who was almost thirteen years old, was not attending school, and her brother, who was twelve, was going to school. This compelled me to ask her why so. Her facial expressions changed immediately, and she explained why she wasn't attending school with utter desperation. She said:

“Every morning, as I see my neighbors' children leave for school, I wish I could join them too. I miss my school days and my dreams of becoming a teacher. When my youngest brother was born, I had to stop attending school to care for my younger siblings. My father is poor and has a low income, so my mother has to work to care for our needs. The families where my mother works does not allow her to bring my younger siblings, and she cannot afford to miss a day from her job. My mom can work without worrying while I care for my siblings and do the housework. I cover my mother's shift at work when she is sick, so she won't lose her salary.”

Her name was **Aqsa**.

This is not only the story of Aqsa, who had the dream of becoming a teacher and instead was staying at home taking care of her siblings, but also the story of 12 million girls who are out of school in Pakistan.

All her life Aqsa and the 12 million other girls would probably never have the chance to escape the cycle of poverty, have access to quality healthcare services, and are much more vulnerable to early marriages and domestic abuse.

In Pakistan, 21 percent of girls are married by their eighteenth birthday, and three percent are married by the age of 15. Most of them are unable to complete their schooling after getting married off. These girls are less likely ever to be empowered enough to make decisions for themselves and less likely to be able to reach their full economic potential. Education, which should be a fundamental right, is a privilege accessible only to a few.

I can personally relate to girls getting married at an early age and not having the opportunity to realize their dreams. When I was thirteen one of my cousins who was almost of my age and was dreaming to become a pilot, was told one day that she cannot go to school anymore because she is getting married to a man fifteen years elder than her. This incident deeply affected me and my sister which led us to establish **Aware Girls**. Aware Girls aspire to empower young women and girls so that they can have equal access to education, employment, health care services, and decision-making.

Due to gendered social norms, girls in Pakistan experience more obstacles to obtaining an education than boys. According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report²¹, Pakistan has the second-worst gender parity of any country and ranks 135th out of 146 for educational attainment. Harmful gender stereotypes create economic incentives to give males' schooling priority. Sons are expected to stay with their parents after marriage, while daughters typically move in with their husband's families; hence, putting sons to school is considered a more significant investment in the family's financial future.

Our team at Aware Girls started working in rural areas to mobilize parents to send their daughters to school, after coming across many girls like Aqsa. During the campaigns, parents told us that it is not them who prevent their daughters from attending school, but their daughters' safety comes first. The schools are far away, some don't have boundary walls, and girls must walk to far-away schools and face harassment. Furthermore, education is not free; and many schools lack female teachers, many families cannot afford to send their daughters to school. The combination of these multiple factors holds millions of girls out of school who would otherwise become lawyers, teachers, doctors, scientists, or social entrepreneurs.

Aware Girls took steps toward a future where no girl is left out of the classroom or denied the opportunity to pursue her aspirations of becoming a lawyer, a politician, or a businesswoman. My organization adopted the approach of creating spaces and providing tools to girls to help them become champions and advocate for their right to education. We directly trained 300 girls who

²¹ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>

organized effectively and lobbied with the policymakers for the policy changes they wanted to see in their communities. These girl champions demanded that schools be safe, accessible, and free of cost.

Aware Girls has been running programs to educate women and girls about their human rights and to strengthen their leadership skills enabling them to be the changemakers. We established **Girl Power Clubs** in schools and communities which act as leadership incubators for girls. Aware Girls believe that if change is to come in our society it will come through young women and girls.

Working with communities is essential in addition to working with policymakers, since community beliefs affect how we approach the problems with girls' education. We have been working with the communities to sensitize them to the importance of girls' education. We organized fifty community sessions in five districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reaching out to more than 1,200 community members.

Research and our work at Aware Girls at the grass root have shown that completion of high-quality higher secondary education for girls escalates the economic growth of communities and improves the quality of life for girls, increasing women's political participation and ability to make decisions for themselves. But in Pakistan, there is a greater lack of political will to invest in the education of young women.

The COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate change have exacerbated the education crisis in the world. **Malala Yousafzai**, the Noble Peace Prize Laureate and an alumna of Aware Girls, urged the countries to focus on reducing the financing gap for girls' education. Through investing in girls' education, girls will be able to unleash their economic potential, they will be able to live better lives, and the communities will thrive.

Education is severely underfunded in Pakistan. In 2021–22, only 1.77 percent of the GDP was spent on the education sector, whereas 3.8% of the GDP was spent on the military, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan. Many other countries, like Pakistan, which spends more on military and defense, believe purchasing weapons, missiles, and fighter jets is more advantageous and profitable than constructing schools and offering high-quality education to girls. All these countries are making wrong decisions. Education is a right, and there is no need to justify a girl's right to education. But for those who doubt it, the governments who do not invest in girls' education and **Taliban** who deny women their right to education—let me tell them that for every dollar invested into girls' rights and education, developing countries could see a return of \$2.80 - which is equivalent to billions of dollars in increased GDP.

In addition to financial investments, a holistic approach at the national and global levels is needed to address the root causes and symptoms of these issues. This approach should include policies and programs that ensure that girls and women have equal access to education and initiatives to advance gender equality and empower girls and women. Furthermore, these policies must engage men and boys in these efforts.

We are here celebrating the **International Day of Education**, but we will be truly celebrating this day when all girls and women are fully able to exercise their right to education!

Thank you!

Ms. Prasansa Karki

Brief Introduction of Nagarik Aawaz - a peace building organization

Nagarik Aawaz (NA), a non-governmental organization, was founded in 2001 at the height of the armed conflict in Nepal. It visions a **Just and Peaceful Nepal** through engaging youths, women

(including conflict affected women) and marginalized groups as a key to realizing the goal. It creates space for promoting transformative peace leaders through investing in bringing transformation at personal, psychosocial, social and cultural levels. These leaders challenge both the structural and individual levels that instigate violence and encourage dialogue for mitigating measures to promote peace at all levels.

Over the last 21 years, Nagarik Aawaz has been partnering with local organizations, stakeholders and government agencies to plan, design and execute the initiatives prioritizing the contextual need and promoting the socio-cultural aspect of the respective communities. We focus on strengthening and amplifying voices of peace from the local to the central level through facilitating dialogue, empowerment and engagement of diverse communities to build sustained behavioral change for lasting peace.

History of education in Nepal

Until the 1950s, education was available only to the narrow elites close to the monarchy. There were a few communities that established their own schools in that era as well. Schools were a hub for the government to promote nationalism as there was an enforcement of Nepali as the sole language, explicitly barring other indigenous languages. The education system deepened the already existing social and learning gap between the elite and the poor marginalized people. Female education started in Nepal during this period with the establishment of few girls' schools in the capital city.

Background

In a multicultural society like Nepal, where the population is spread across 125 castes or ethnic groups speaking 123 languages, education can both foster diversity, promoting social harmony and social cohesion, and fuel conflict by promoting cultural homogenization. Over the years, Nepal's education approach has shifted from a monocultural education system to a multicultural education system through introducing indigenous language, introducing topics such as child rights, human rights, conflict and peace. However, most of the changes in the syllabus took place as a result of restoration of the multiparty democracy in the 1990s and was further enhanced after armed conflict and a restoration of new federal government in Nepal in early 2000s.

Analysis

Various studies have shown that education plays a critical role in both promoting peace and jeopardizing the existing social harmony through an uneven distribution of education and manipulation of history for political interest. Education also creates an opportunity to promote dignity and mitigate the sociocultural issues of inequality based on caste, class, gender and challenging stereotypes.

The **People's Movement** of 1990 brought huge aspiration among people, but this was seen as a tool to cash people's votes by the politicians. Unfortunately, after decades of practicing a multiparty democratic system in Nepal, there was a blur change in people's life. The prolonged disparity based on gender, caste, ethnicity, class, lack of outreach on basic needs such as education, health, food and sanitation led to reasoning the deadly armed conflict in Nepal.

The **Maoists** crashed people's hope of receiving basic fundamental rights, demolishing the patriarchal system and rebuilding the society, through participation in armed conflict. Lack of education and the quality of education among the population led to seeking armed conflict as the means to get their rights. On the other hand, the lack of the government's sensitivity to tackle the issue through dialogue and mediation only further exaggerated the armed conflict.

During the decade long armed conflict schools were used as a strategic point for the Maoist to preach their ideas and force recruitment of child soldiers. Armed conflict also led to destruction of school

infrastructure, dropout rates skyrocketed, and almost all schools were shut down in the conflict zone areas where the most vulnerable and marginalized resided. The disparity was further deepened as a result of the armed conflict.

Holistic Approach to Gender and Peace Education

In Nepal, gender inequalities exist in several spheres starting from close entities such as the family to the large arena including governmental plans and policies. The root cause of inequality lies in the patriarchal values that have shaped the socio-cultural and educational structures promoting male dominance and treating women, which include more than half of the population, as second grade citizens/individuals.

Although there has been a wider range of students enrolling into schools, which has reduced discrimination, the involvement of children from poor backgrounds, the space to accommodate children that have outgrown their age for enrollment in criteria-based class especially for girls is still lacking. Lack of proper sanitation facilities, infrastructure, security, and gender sensitivity in the process of educating children has only demotivated girls to go beyond the primary education level. Also, due to other sociocultural and economic factors, 80 percent of girls drop out by the time they reach higher secondary level exposing them to early and forced marriage, domestic slavery, and trafficking.

These sociocultural and economic factors that people have to face every day as part of their lives have led to frustration and increased mental health issues among children, girls and women in particular, but also among the community as a whole.

Various Initiatives of Nagarik Aawaz

Nagarik Aawaz, since its inception, has been investing on youth. It sees youth as the pillar of change. In its initiatives, it integrates a holistic approach to minimizing the vacuum created through the traditional, narrow approach of educating the population. It accommodates more people which includes women, children, youth, marginalized groups, and male members of the community. It extends its outreach and embeds the culture of peace through awareness and education. On the other hand, it equally works with the key people - who are the local governmental agencies, health post, schools, youth clubs and women clubs in the community to lobby an inclusive approach to education for community development.

1. **Community Peace Center (CPC):** the society lacks a common space to accommodate diverse groups of people. The Peace Center is a two or three room building or space that is established in the community and is open to everyone. The **safe space approach** is the heart of NA. CPC has been successful in embedding the notion of peace to a larger audience through initiating various peace initiatives and collaborating with the community and the local stakeholders. The Peace Center has helped to expand the limited definition of community development from infrastructure to human development. Engagement of diverse people through peace circles, dialogues, campaigns, and self-reflection has helped to promote a sense of belonging, acceptance, and mutual understanding to promote security and to build a culture of peace. It has been equally successful in shifting the identity of youth as troublemakers to peace leaders who have a voice and a vision to lead the community. Community Peace Centers and the peace initiatives have helped in the promotion of the leadership of youth and women. Many youth and women represent various committees and coin their voice wherever needed. They are very active in all activities in the society such as drug abuse, violence against women, caste based discrimination, untouchability and many more.
2. **Strengthening the institutions and promoting youth/women's leadership:** peace education is not limited to schools but extended to local organizations, youth and women groups and

local government. This has helped to be aware of and integrate diverse groups from the community and open avenues to promote peace work in different sectors of the community. For example, a government agency for whom development meant infrastructure development has understood the larger definition of development. The governmental agencies of the working areas have introduced dialogue and discussions around reinforcing best practices from the past, that promote social cohesion and include the senior citizens in the whole process of community development. Local governmental agencies have facilitated establishing peace centers at public property to benefit the larger audience. There are many peace centers that were started through the project and have been handed over to the local stakeholders, running independently by the community and the local stakeholders. The initiatives have helped to explore their identity and their roles in developing their communities. Peer to peer learning has also had a huge role in advancing their knowledge, confidence, and skills.

3. **Practicing peace education at formal schools:** Schools have a crucial role in promoting peace, but a lack of opportunities for the students and children to explore beyond the narrow curriculum has led to stagnation. NA works closely with schools to educate children, teachers and the school management committees about peace. This as a result has led to improved attitudes, active listening, resilience, improved relationship between teachers and students and decreased violence and dropouts. Engagement with the school has fostered a peaceful school culture, addressing structural and cultural violence. We have been connecting schools to the wider community through peace initiatives.

Dr. Mona El-Sholkamy

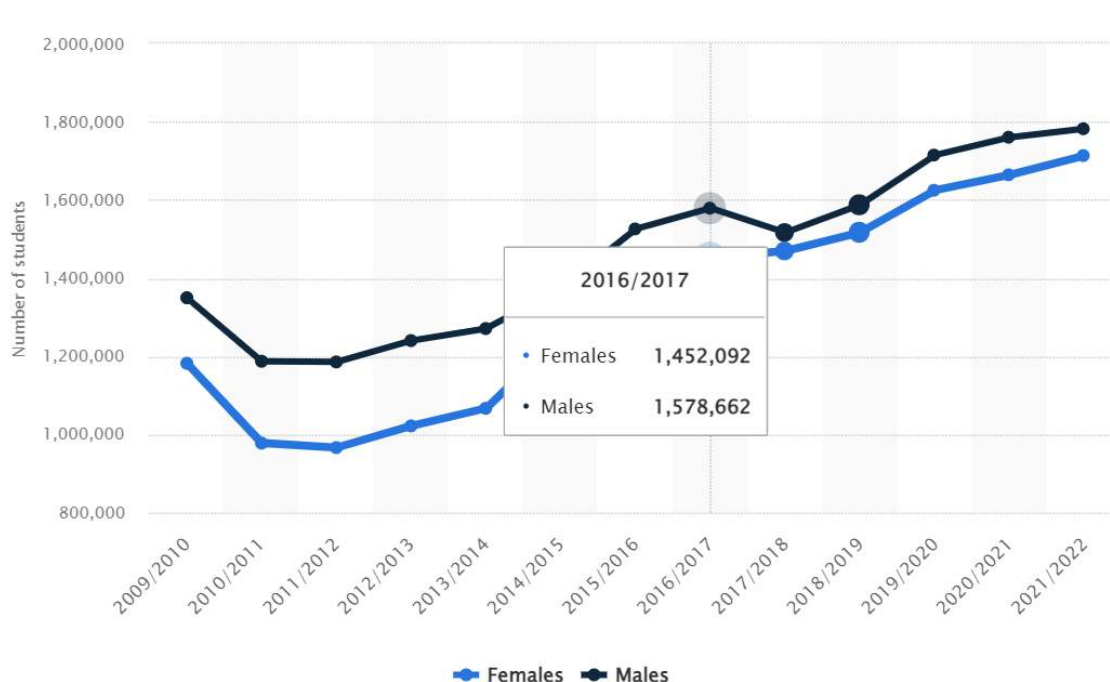
Case of Egypt: Current Perspectives

- In 2021, the female literacy rate in Egypt was 83.3%
- Egypt is one of the first countries in the world that worked to localize the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, so that each governorate - especially among young people as a major component - has sufficient information about those goals within their provinces, according to the Minister of Planning, Hala El-Said (8 August 2022)²²

Image: Number of students enrolled in higher education in Egypt²³

²² <https://www.globaldata.com/data-insights/macroeconomic/female-literacy-rate-in-egypt/>

²³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1193465/number-of-students-in-higher-education-in-egypt/>



General Facts

Structural reforms, targeted subsidies, and interventions in the most vulnerable regions (especially in upper Egypt) contributed to a reduction in the poverty rates between 2018 and 2020 – this was clearly reflected in Education attainment records, especially among girls.

In 2020/21, the share of national budget allocated to education remained almost at the same level as of 2019/20 (at 10.4%), social protection (19%) and health (6.2%). Another positive note, the public investment component of public expenditure, where the share of investment towards education and health are located, has been on a steady rise since 2016.

The pre-university education system in Egypt is one of the largest globally in terms of student and teacher numbers. In 2019/2020 about 23.6 million students were enrolled in around 56,600 schools, with the system supported by more than a million teachers.

Participation in primary education was close to universal, the net enrolment ratio (NER) stood at 100.2%, with a Gender Parity Index (GPI)²⁴ of 1.06 (gender equality).

Since 2020, digital learning platforms have been rapidly developed, but utilization is still relatively low; when surveyed, only 26% of parents said their children's schools had introduced remote learning opportunities and the number of children reporting to have accessed any platforms was as low as 61%. Egypt continues to have very high class density (53 students at primary and 49 at lower secondary stages in 2020) owing to increasing number of students, which is a major contributing factor of low quality of education. Together with allocating more resources, the Government is making efforts in overhauling the education system since 2018, by rolling out reform in the education sector (Education 2.0).

The constitutional and legal framework for promoting women's rights

²⁴ The Gender Parity Index (GPI) indicates parity between girls and boys. A GPI of less than 1 suggests girls are more disadvantaged than boys in learning opportunities and a GPI of greater than 1 suggests the other way around.

The 2014 Constitution and its amendments in 2019 pay great attention to the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment and affirmed Egypt's commitment to the international treaties and conventions it has signed on this topic, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

In **Article 1, Egypt's Constitution** adopts the principle of citizenship as a basis for Egypt's governance system, which means the rights of citizens are guaranteed by law without discrimination. In **Article 4**, it stipulates that national unity is based on the principles of equality, justice, and equal opportunities for all citizens; thus, it guarantees gender equality as a right and general principle. **Article 9** guarantees equal opportunities for all without discrimination.

Article 11 confirms the right of women to be appointed to judicial bodies, which was a matter of controversy in the past. This Article obliges the State to protect women against all forms of violence, to ensure that women are able to reconcile family duties with work requirements, and to ensure equality between women and men in all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

In addition, the **Child Law** was amended in accordance with Law No. 126 of 2008 to guarantee rights related to penalties for the marriage of a minor (under 18 years old), the right of a custodial mother to have jurisdiction over her children's education, the establishment of a nursery in each prison for the children of imprisoned women, and the amendment of issues of guardianship over money to provide care for incapacitated people and the safeguarding, supervision and management of their funds.

The National Sustainable Development Strategy: Egypt Vision 2030

The strategy considers the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment a crosscutting issue that intersects with its other themes, which are related to economic development, education, health, social justice and others.

Women were guaranteed the right to vote, and equality of opportunity was explicitly stated in the 1956 Egyptian constitution, forbidding gender-based discrimination, including education attainment. However, in 2020, Egypt ranked 134th out of the 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index²⁵. It ranked 140th out of 153 countries in women's economic participation and opportunity. Only 18% of the working-age women are participating in the economy, compared to 65% of men.

Noteworthy Achievements: The Egyptian Experience

From 2019 to 2020, bilateral aid – USAID, supported Egypt's technical secondary schools, reaching over 58,000 female teachers, students, principals, and employees with technical and vocational training. During this period, USAID also helped over 4,000 young women access jobs following graduation from technical and vocational schools. USAID helped establish the **Women Entrepreneurs Network** and **Tiye Angels**, the first women's angel investor network in Egypt, to provide financial and non-financial services to women. Accordingly, in 2020, over 1,200 women had new or better employment through USAID support and 363 women-owned microenterprises strengthened their businesses through USAID-supported **Business Development Service centers**.

From 2018-2020, USAID supported the **National Family Planning Program**, resulting in nearly 250,000 women starting using voluntary family planning methods in 11 governorates. USAID provided leadership training to 14,016 rural Egyptian women to participate in community education

²⁵ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality/>

and have leadership roles; trained 3,281 adult literacy facilitators, who engaged over 44,209 women in intergenerational adult literacy activities; and provided 27,114 girls living in rural communities, using high quality, engaging learning environments in community schools.

Over the past 5 years, USAID provided 156 university scholarships to young women studying science, technology, engineering, and math. In 2020, USAID investments in the **Women Complaints Offices** and the **National Hotline** supported a tenfold increase in legal cases filed. USAID enabled Egypt's nationwide referral system to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls by training more than 3,000 service providers and increasing the number of women and girls receiving services each year from approximately 1,000 in 2015 to over 50,000 in 2020.

USAID trained more than 3,000 law enforcement officials, health care providers, and social workers to provide health, counseling, legal, and protection services to women and girls. USAID supported the training of 14,000 community health outreach workers affiliated with the **Ministry of Health and Population** to increase awareness around all forms of violence against women including traditional harmful practices such as FGM/C and child marriage.

AREAS OF FOCUS

Example 1: USAID cooperation with GoE (Government of Egypt)

Supporting Women and Girls' Education: USAID's basic, technical, and higher education programs improve the learning, skills, and workforce readiness of all students, including women and girls. Scholarship programs expand access to high-quality education for youth with high financial need, and intergenerational literacy programming in rural areas supports girls and their mothers to learn to read.

Supporting Women to Succeed as Entrepreneurs: USAID supports female entrepreneurs in developing their businesses and improving productivity. This is achieved through training, business incubators, career fairs, and business-to-business matchmaking events.

Enabling Women's Participation in the Economy: Women face numerous challenges that may discourage them from entering the workforce, including harassment, gender-based violence, and early marriage. USAID is strengthening the legal environment around these challenges to decrease barriers to employment. USAID also supports GOE institutions, micro, small and medium enterprises, and promotes information and communication technology to empower women.

Supporting Women as Emerging Community Leaders: USAID seeks to expand the influence of women within their communities, so they can identify and address community needs, and become mediators of local disputes. This is achieved by engaging young women and girls in cross-community dialogues, by building the capacity of community champions, and by creating safe spaces for young girls.

Addressing the Impact of COVID-19: To mitigate the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 on women and girls, including increased violence against women, USAID implements activities that focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized populations. USAID funds communications campaigns to prevent domestic violence while bolstering support for hotlines and women's shelters.

Example 2: UN Women Egypt; "Education for Gender Equality"

UN Women supports Egypt's commitment to promote education as a priority catalyst for economic growth and social justice. Targeting young women and girls in five communities in the governorates of **Greater Cairo, Minia, Luxor, Aswan** and the **Red Sea**, UN Women aims to reduce the gender gap in education, both in formal and informal schools, to:

- Strengthen the quality of formal educational institutions and community mechanisms to promote education of young women and girls;
- Conduct needs assessments in the five communities, to identify and address the key constraints for girls' access to safe education;
- Bring together and partnering with the business community and educational policy makers better link education to employment needs;
- and to advocate for addressing the root causes of gender-based discrimination by expanding community knowledge and acceptance of the importance of education for young women and girls (awareness programs and localization of SDGs campaigns/UNDP).

Success facts

So far, UN Women has facilitated the **Sister Project: “Women’s Economic Empowerment in Egypt”**²⁶. This project falls under the 2021-2024 Multilateral Cooperation Programme for Gender Equality in Egypt supported by KOICA and is managed and implemented by UN Women Egypt in partnership with the National Council for Women (NCW), the Ministry of International Cooperation, the Ministry of Education and Technical Education, the Ministry of Manpower, and in collaboration with educational institutions, private sector and civil society:

- Completion of 205 infrastructure improvements,
- Building of four new community schools;
- Introduction of new interactive learning techniques and active learning methods and application with 3990 students;
- Awareness raising on diversity, accepting others and child protection reaching 14,820 students;
- Capacity enhancement of 113 teachers on active learning methodologies, behavior management and positive disciplines, and of 52 social workers on gender awareness, gender-based violence, child rights and child protection mechanism;
- A study analyzing the choices of girls in the selection of vocational education informed three policy briefs/actions to enhance vocational education and address the specific needs of young girls.

From an economical perspective, the project has enhanced mothers' skills on financial literacy, including managing records, bookkeeping, taking loans and micro-finance regulations, resulting in the establishment of 15 micro-business which enabled the re-enrollment of the mothers' daughters into schools. The interventions also supported women in registering and obtaining legal marriage certificates as well as national IDs, enabling them to access their rights and basic services.

²⁶ This programme is implemented with the generous support of the Embassy of Japan in Egypt.



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ADVANCEMENT AND
GLOBAL DIALOGUE**

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