

Text for keynote

**“Access to education in the context of applicable legal and conceptual frameworks”**

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(Geneva, 7 July 2014)

**[SLIDE 1: COVER]**

It is an immense honour for me to be given this opportunity to present on the conceptual framework and the legal and policy contexts of girls and women’s access to education.

Girls’ and women’s access to education has witnessed significant expansion over the last two decades. The number of girls enrolled in primary school has increased by nearly 40 million since 1999, with gender parity achieved in 104 countries out of the 173 with data in 2011; enrolment of girls in lower secondary education has also nearly doubled in some regional countries, notably in Sub-Saharan Africa, while South and West Asia saw a 30-percentage point increase from 52% to 80% (GER) for the same period.

**[SLIDE 2]**

It is probably fair to say that the quantitative progress in access to education has been made possible by the enhancement of both legal and policy environments, especially in support of girls’ and women’s education, both at international and national levels.

At the international level, CEDAW continues to be one of the most important legal frameworks in promoting girls’ and women’s right to education. It serves to complement and reinforce UNESCO’s **Convention against Discrimination in Education (CADE)**, by guiding Member States to implement gender-responsive policies and practices that seek to expand access to and improve the quality of education for women and girls, at all levels.

According to UNESCO’s recent overview of the measures supporting the right to education reported by Member States within the framework of the Eighth Consultation, **40 out of the 59 reporting Member States** have made explicit reference to guaranteeing girls’ and women’s right to education or forbidding gender-based discrimination under national constitution, legislation or specific policies.

For example, as early as 1992, **Nepal’s Education Regulation** made it mandatory for every primary school to have at least one female teacher as means to improve girls’ access to education; In **Pakistan, Article 25-A on Right to free and compulsory education** inserted in the Constitution in 2012, gives particular emphasis on girls’ access and opportunity to education.

### [SLIDE 3]

Indeed, many of today's existing strategies and sector plans to expand access to education for girls' and women are informed by the five core principles of right to education and gender equality. These five core principles are:

- a) **first, the principle of non-discrimination;**
- b) **second, the principle of lifelong learning**, that, education opportunities should not be limited to primary and secondary education.
- c) **third, that the right to education should be based on high standards of equity, and ensure the 4As Human Rights-based Approach**, whereby education should be Available, Accessible, Acceptable, and Adaptable to all girls and women
- d) **forth, that right to education should be "Transformational"** to support broader gender equality objectives;
- e) **and, fifth, that girls and women's right to education** should facilitate enjoyment of other socio-cultural, economic and political rights.

These five principles are reflected and reiterated in the Dakar Education for All Goals and Framework for Action of 2000, providing a conceptual framework for prioritizing girls' and women's education at all levels. Some of the latest developments in this respect are the launching of the **National Girls' Education strategies** in **Uganda** in 2012 and **Malawi** this year (2014), to guide interventions to increase girls' enrolment and retention and to accelerate the progress towards achieving EFA Goal 5 and MDG 2 and 3.

The passing of laws and development of policies and strategies reflect the recognition by governments of the significant transformational impact that girls' and women's education have, not only on themselves but also on their families, communities, and the country as a whole.

### [SLIDE 4]

Indeed, abundance of research evidence exists today to show that educating girls can save millions of lives; educated mothers are less likely to die in child birth; and education enhances job opportunities, helping households to escape poverty and narrowing pay gaps between men and women.

### [SLIDE 5]

Despite strong political commitments, including the obligations by the State parties to the CEDAW and Convention against Discrimination in Education, and research evidence, the latest data on educational trends continue to reveal very challenging situation for realizing girls' and women's right to education:

- **31 million girls were out of school in 2011**, of whom 55% are expected never to enroll
- Gender parity has been achieved in only **60% of countries at primary level** in 2011 and in only **38% of countries at secondary level**.
- **Of the 774 million illiterate adults, 493 million, or two-thirds, are women**, a trend that has not changed for over 20 years.

**[SLIDE 6: Key messages]**

Certainly the world has made significant achievements in education overall. However, the current situation and pace of progress in girls' and women's education, as revealed by the available data, do not necessarily reflect the high level of political commitments and legal and policy provisions that are meant to realize their right to education.

Critical gender gap remains in access, retention, completion and transition, despite evidence to argue for the value of investing in expanding girls' and women's educational opportunities. This is because barriers to access to education are not only educational or financial in nature, but more frequently associated with gender-based discrimination due to social and cultural factors.

In recent years, increasing incidence of gender-based violence and abuse against girls in and around education settings is also becoming a major concern as it stand as a serious barrier to their participation in education, and also jeopardizing the important progress made to date.

We need to reaffirm education as a fundamental human right. However, laws and policies to improve access to education for girls and women are not enough to fully realize their right to education. A multi-disciplinary comprehensive approach is critical to promoting girls' and women's education. The transformational impact of education, especially that of girls and women, must be recognized and addressed also in legal and policy frameworks of other development sectors such as health, labour, or justice, etc., in order to ensure a coordinated and holistic approach to promoting girls' and women's right to education.

Thank you very much for your attention.