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For immediate release:

Gender Inequality Saps Gains in Basic Education: East Asia/Pacific

BANGKOK– In East Asia and the Pacific, gender inequalities in basic education are still pervasive. These undermine the success of rising enrolment rates among children, lead to early school drop out, especially of girls, and help to perpetuate poverty.

This reality is the focus of a key gathering of regional education experts here aimed at highlighting the different faces of gender discrimination in the classroom as well as the need to expand education access for marginalized children, including the impoverished, those with disabilities, child labourers, and ethnic minorities.

The East Asia and Pacific United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) Gender in Education Roundtable will highlight the challenges as well as brainstorm on solutions, emphasizing the need for action. In a world where a decent basic education determines the chances for gainful employment, if not a rise out of poverty and a better standard of living, the consequences of mistreatment or discrimination based on gender can be tragic.

A panel of experts will debate the pressing gender issues at the one-day Roundtable, which is organized by 13 regional UNGEI partners.* An estimated seventy delegates from government, and the humanitarian and social fields will participate in this event, along with girls' education activists.

This region has been making steady progress towards universal basic education and is on track to meet the Millennium Development Goal calling, by 2015, for all girls and boys to complete a full course of primary schooling. In East Asia and the Pacific, the number of boys and girls enrolled in primary school is almost at parity: girls account for 48 per cent of the 206.2 million children registered in primary school.

However, in some countries, there is still a noticeable gender gap. In Lao PDR, 81 per cent of girls are enrolled in primary school, against 86 per cent of boys. The differential is more pronounced for secondary education. In Cambodia, for example, net enrolment in secondary school is 19 per cent for females and 30 per cent for males, while in Papua New Guinea, the figures are 21 per cent and 27 per cent respectively. In Viet Nam, where enrolment rates are high for both sexes, girls from ethnic minorities constitute a particularly vulnerable group. They are denied their right to an education more than is the case for ethnic minority boys and girl drop-out rates, especially in remote regions, are higher.

Girls are not necessarily at a disadvantage everywhere. Fewer boys than girls actually go to school – especially at secondary level - in the Philippines, Mongolia and Malaysia. One reason for this is that boys are often co-opted to work full-time to earn money, putting an end to their formal learning. In the Philippines, 65 per cent of girls attend secondary school, against 54 per cent of boys.

Even in countries where girls and boys are close to enjoying equal educational opportunities, empowerment is still often only one-sided, with girls commonly side-tracked. Gender inequality in schools manifests in many ways, including: an absence of security, particularly for girls, in commuting to school, school designs that lack separate latrines for girls and boys, gender bias in textbooks and teaching materials which often portray girls in domestic environments with limited skills, and stereotyping by teachers of gender roles in society. These are often major factors in forcing girls to drop out of primary school, and even if they do complete a full course, they often face greater challenges than boys in advancing to secondary education.

For teachers, gender inequalities are also entrenched in the work place. Male and female teachers face differences in how they participate in school management decisions as well as in their working conditions, status, training and the resources earmarked for them. In many countries, men predominate in higher-level teaching positions. In Cambodia, at primary level, approximately 41 per cent of teachers are female, while in upper secondary level, only 27% are.

The Roundtable will unveil promising strategies to combat gender inequality and improve access to education for marginalized children. An example: A unique education project in China's Gansu province, one of its poorest regions, significantly increased the enrolment of girls, and in particular minority girls, in school by providing financial support and scholarships to students, training teachers, ensuring participation by the community in school planning and improving the quality of education with new materials and an innovative curriculum design. This project is one of several featured in the UNGEI joint publication, *Towards Equal Opportunities for All: Empowering Girls Through Partnerships in Education*, to be launched at the Roundtable.

The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative is the Education For All flagship for girls' education and principal movement to narrow the gender gap in primary and secondary education. UNGEI works through partnerships to ensure that by 2015, all children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete primary schooling and that by then, boys and girls will have equal access to all levels of education.

UNGEI website: <http://www.ungei.org/>

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