EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 11, 2013, marks the International Day of the Girl Child. This day of recognition, established by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2011, aims to raise awareness of the status of female children’s rights worldwide. The theme for this year’s observance is “Innovating for Girls’ Education.” The Women and Human Rights in the Middle East Program at Rice University’s Baker Institute would like to honor this day by presenting an issue brief on the current opportunities and challenges facing the education of girls in the region. This report also aims to highlight the risks to girls’ education in transitional Arab countries such as Syria. During times of crisis, in particular, equitable access to education and the safety of children must be an international priority. It is the responsibility of the international community to ensure these educational opportunities and establish programs that teach the technical skills necessary for young women to be active and productive members of society.

INTRODUCTION

The most recent findings of the Arab Human Development Report indicate that education has become more accessible for girls elsewhere, but the Arab region still lags behind with one of the lowest rates of female education worldwide. Only three-quarters of all females have access to education. In 2012, girls represented 48 percent of the total enrollment in primary and secondary schools in the Arab world. Interestingly, in many countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, women outnumber men at the university level. Furthermore, Arab girls have statistically been found to perform better in school than their male peers across educational levels. Dropout rates are lower for girls than they are for boys, and girls are less likely to repeat a grade in school. Girls have been found to outperform boys in school regardless of the country’s political structure or system of governance.

“Education is a fundamental part of women’s empowerment—without it, women will not be stakeholders in their respective societies,” wrote Toni Verstandig, chair of the Aspen Institute’s Middle East Programs, in the Huffington Post.

Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as Qatar and the UAE, have been especially successful in increasing female enrollment in education. Despite the increased educational opportunities available to young women, unemployment rates remain high, which Kevin Watkins, director of the Education for All Global Monitoring Report describes in the World Education Blog as a “chronic misalignment of the education system and employment markets.” Educational systems...
Another such program called Middle East Education through Technology, or MEET, an educational initiative organized by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, works to provide young Israelis and Palestinians with the technical skills to inspire change in their communities. Youth programs with a technical focus like TechGirls and MEET provide young people with valuable skills and self-confidence, and should be emulated throughout the Middle East.

LEARNING AMID TURMOIL

Although the education of girls in the Middle East has been on an upward trend in recent years, the region has undergone immeasurable turmoil, most recently in Syria, that has endangered not only girls’ educational opportunities, but their safety as well. Recently a school near Aleppo was bombed and at least ten children died in the attack; many more were burned by the napalm–like chemical the bomb contained. The heartbreaking attack will be covered in the BBC documentary Saving Syria’s Children airing in early October 2013. Hundreds of schools have been damaged or destroyed, and those that remain open are under constant threat. More than 1.5 million Syrians have fled their homes in fear, and taken up residence in makeshift refugee camps in nearby countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Schooling in such camps is often limited to primary education, if it is offered at all. According to the High Commissioner for Refugees, one in five refugee children is not part of the formal education system. The sense of insecurity for women and girls is heightened, making leaving the home, let alone going to school, a dangerous endeavor. Without safety or stability, the future of Syrian children’s education remains uncertain.

The new school year began in Aleppo just two weeks ago, and despite the dangers, several schools have decided to reopen. Last year many schools were forced to close and makeshift classes were held in mosques and apartment buildings. Newly reopened
EDUCATING GIRLS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

schools have been flooded with students who come to school overjoyed, eager for an escape from the chaos and strife. “I want to learn. I don’t want to stay in the house listening to the sounds of bombs,” explained a young girl named Huda to Aljazeera. Although the schools are overcrowded and many students cannot afford backpacks or other school supplies, returning to the classroom represents a gradual restoration of normalcy and will give the students a taste of the childhood that they have missed since the start of the war.

The deteriorating state of education in Syria has not gone unnoticed internationally. Led by Pakistani Malala Yousafzai, 16, who last year was shot by the Taliban for promoting education for girls, youth activists have urged world leaders to raise $175 million dollars to educate 400,000 Syrian children. U.N. education envoy Gordon Brown stressed that Syrian children must not become a lost generation, uneducated and unemployable, and that they should get the opportunities they deserve. Farah Haddad, a 20-year-old Syrian student, agreed, telling Reuters, “When the war is ended, there will be no way for us to bring back the dead, or mend the hearts of mothers in Syria, but we can surely equip Syrian children to wrestle with a Syria when the bombs stop exploding.”

THE POLICY IMPERATIVE

Investment in girls’ education is critical to the societal, political, and economic development of the Middle East. While educational opportunities have improved for girls across the region, more societal and educational initiatives and efforts should be geared toward increased female inclusion in fields such as technology, engineering, and computer science. Young girls in the Arab world have proven that they are hardworking and motivated; local governments and educational establishments should invest more in opportunities for young people. Moreover, studies have shown that investments in girls’ education do not just benefit their own future; they will also have a tremendous impact on the next generation—the children of the young women now being educated. Well-educated women are also a valuable asset for their communities as a whole, especially in less developed areas.

The United States should continue to host exchange programs, such as TechGirls and MEET, which provide girls with invaluable skills and international experiences, and encourage them to be real agents of change in their own societies. Most critically, the United States and the international community must make a special effort to ensure the safety of children in war-torn regions such as Syria, and provide the necessary funding to create desperately needed educational opportunities for refugees and those children that remain within the country. The U.N. initiative spearheaded by Malala Yousafzai is a noble and necessary endeavor that should pave the way for similar initiatives for female empowerment throughout the region.

ENDNOTES


13. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

AUTHOR

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