UNICEF’s 2010 Gender Policy mandates that all UNICEF-assisted programming, including in emergencies, contribute to gender equality in clearly defined, measurable ways. This brief provides basic information on why gender matters to Focus Area 2, Basic Education, of the Medium-Term Strategic Plan and offers practical tips on how to advance gender equality through programming in this area. For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see the Operational Guidance on Focus Area 2; for an overview of key concepts related to gender equality, see Promoting Gender Equality: An Equity-Focused Approach to Programming (Operational Guidance Overview).

**Key issues**

**Education as a human right.** UNICEF’s work in education is grounded in a human rights perspective that is supported by declarations, treaties and conventions that clearly evoke the right to education as a fundamental human right to which every child is entitled. It is, however, a basic human right that girls are less able to claim than boys. Gender disparities, beginning in early childhood and present in all stages of girls’ lives, hinder their access to quality education at all levels, as well as the capacity to use the benefits of education to improve their lives. While gender gaps in primary education are narrowing, regional disparities are still very large, especially in much of South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In 28 countries, there are still fewer than 9 girls in school for every 10 boys.

**Education for girls and boys as a key to development progress.** Providing children with a quality education that is rooted in gender equality is a valuable end in itself, and it also creates a ripple effect of opportunity that impacts generations to come. Abundant research shows the profound effect of girls’ education on a number of development objectives, including increasing family income, improving the health of children, reducing fertility and reducing the spread of HIV and AIDS. A single year of primary education correlates with a 10-20 percent increase in women’s wages later in life. Academic studies find the return to a year of secondary education is even greater – as high as 25 percent. An additional year of education for a woman has been shown to reduce the risk that her children will die in infancy by up to 10 percent.

**Moving from equality of opportunity to equality of outcomes in education.** Basic education has become much more accessible to girls globally. Indeed, the Millennium Development Goal of gender parity will be achieved in many countries. Progress on completion and survival rates of girls to the end of primary school is much more elusive, however. Discrimination against girls and women rooted in tradition and culture, coupled with deep poverty, present barriers to equal learning outcomes. Social norms, culture, religion, poverty, conflict situations, child labour practices, climate change, and HIV and AIDS all affect girls and boys, and women and men, differently and in turn affect school enrolment, attendance, survival or retention, as well as...
completion in a gender-differentiated manner. Addressing these factors, with a focus on gender mainstreaming and the empowerment of girls, is key to ensuring not just equality of opportunity but also equality of outcome.

**Tapping the transformative power of education.** As more and more countries achieve gender parity in enrolment, other issues related to the quality of the educational experience itself, particularly the potential of educational norms and methods to transform gender relations, will likely command greater attention. Such issues include ensuring gender equality within the educational system by revising teaching materials, teacher training curricula and classroom decorations; ensuring equal funding for girls’ and boys’ sports; and addressing the ways in which boys often receive much more classroom attention than girls. Schools can contribute to gender transformation by developing evidence of ways boys and girls construct identities and develop relationships in different environments.

**Key opportunities**

Reductions in gender gaps are necessary but not sufficient for gender-equal education. Only when gender discrimination is eliminated throughout the life cycle can gender equality in education be assured for both girls and boys.

- **Learners.** Socialization begins in the earliest stages of life. Children as well as teachers and administrators bring their own early socialization into the education process. Frequently, girls are raised not to value themselves highly and lack awareness of the basic human rights to which they are entitled. Boys may not question traditional gender roles that reinforce notions of male dominance. Girls are often less ready and able to participate and learn. Discrimination against girls during adolescence can also result in fewer opportunities for them to develop to their full potential.

- **Content.** Quality curricula and instructional materials need to be relevant and sensitive to both boys and girls. The representation of the roles of girls, women, boys and men and gender relations in textbooks and other teaching materials is critical. Gender equality can be advanced when girls and boys receive equal representation and respect in school materials, as well as when there is a questioning of narrow, negative and limiting gender definitions. Materials for topics such as life skills, HIV and AIDS prevention, active citizenship, negotiation skills, education regarding rights, gender equality, and respect for and appreciation of diversity offer opportunities to advance gender-equality aims.

- **Processes.** Processes that contribute to quality education for girls and boys include gender-friendly classroom organization; instructional techniques and assessment; gender-sensitive teachers; and female as well as male role models. Teachers need quality education to recognize and address the gender biases that they bring to the classroom. Technologies and materials must be equally accessible to girls and boys. Learning and teaching methods should help students to develop skills to confront and challenge bias, as well as to identify prevailing gender stereotypes and how to address them.

- **Environments.** Learning cannot occur without physical and psychosocial safety and security in the classroom, in the school and schoolyard, and on the way to and from school. This requires that safe, secure, private and sanitary facilities are available and accessible, with separate provision for girls and boys. It also requires policies and procedures to protect girls and boys from intimidation, harassment, sexual abuse and other forms of physical or mental violence, as well as policies and procedures to ensure safe reporting and follow-up of gender-based harassment (including bullying of boys). Girls and boys need equal access to safe places in which to play and socialize. Pregnant or parenting girls must be protected from discrimination.

- **Education system.** Structures and personnel to monitor and inspect nationally established standards for girls’ education are required. At this level, UNICEF has a role to play in advocating for gender equality in materials, processes and environments, supporting gender-sensitive teaching, and encouraging transformations in education that in turn foster transformations in gender relations in society at large.