

THE IMPERATIVE OF EDUCATING GIRLS

by Julia Gillard

Looking back on the last 15 years since the international community set a bold goal to educate more of the world's girls, it's possible to feel a mixture of accomplishment and futility.

On the accomplishment side of the ledger, more girls in developing countries are in primary school than ever before, and many countries are moving gradually toward gender parity in education systems. Indeed, in some places, the rise in girls

SECTION 3 : LEARNING FOR LIFE

Julia Gillard, the former Prime Minister of Australia, is the Chair of the Board of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). She is also a distinguished fellow for education at the Brookings Institutions. Between 2010 and 2013, while serving as Prime Minister, she delivered nation-changing policies, including reforming Australia's education at every level from early childhood to university education; improving the provision and sustainability of healthcare, aged care and dental care; and commencing the nation's first ever national scheme to care for people with disabilities. Before becoming Prime Minister, Ms Gillard was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and Social Inclusion.

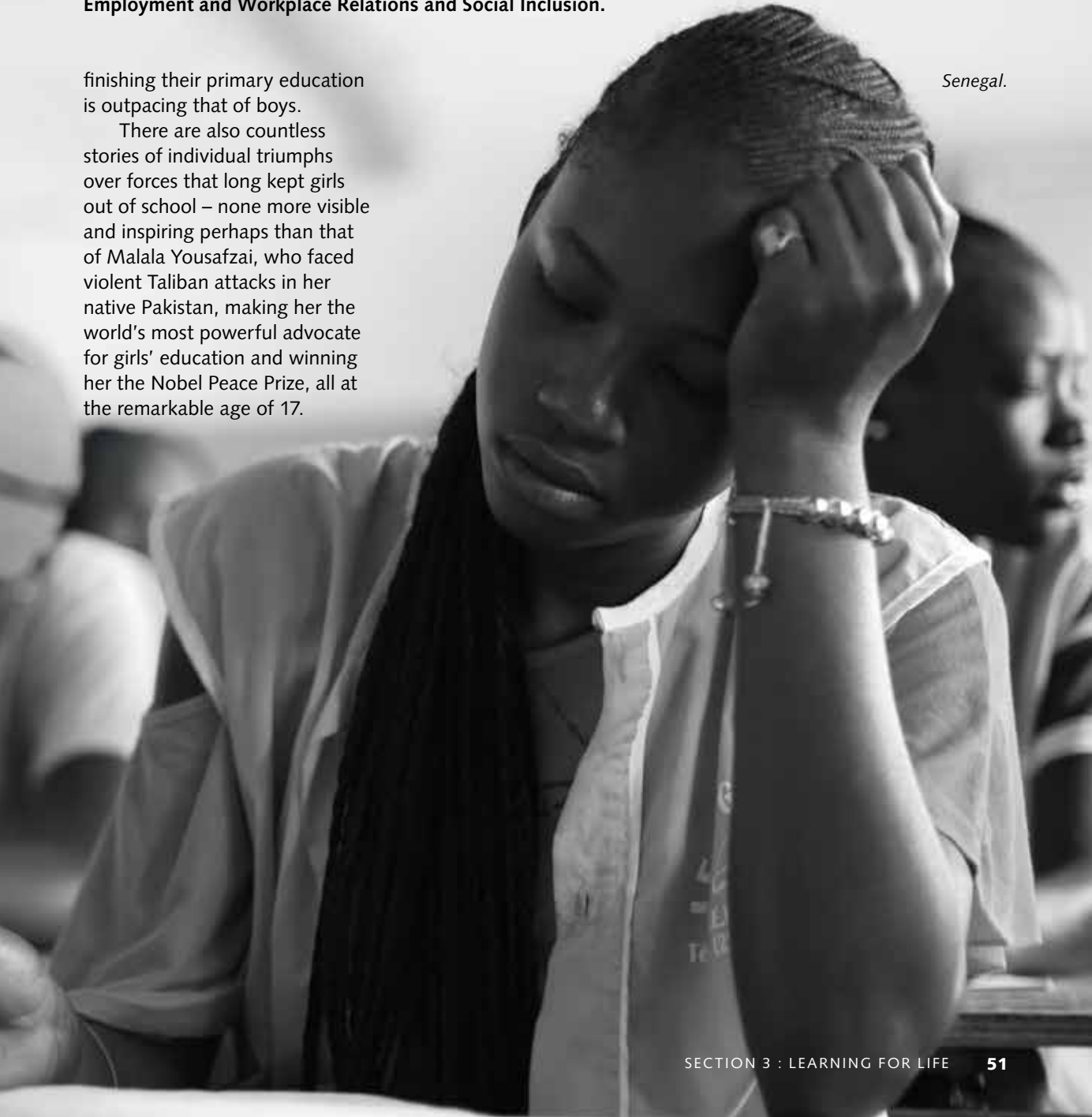


MARIELE SMITH

finishing their primary education is outpacing that of boys.

There are also countless stories of individual triumphs over forces that long kept girls out of school – none more visible and inspiring perhaps than that of Malala Yousafzai, who faced violent Taliban attacks in her native Pakistan, making her the world's most powerful advocate for girls' education and winning her the Nobel Peace Prize, all at the remarkable age of 17.

Senegal.



It's also reassuring that in the last decade and a half, more people around the world – from grassroots activists to government and NGO leaders – have come not only to understand but also speak out for the imperative of educating girls. It's heartening that there are far more voices making that case than ever before, through traditional media, social media, NGOs, high-profile events and government actions.

Educating girls is key to development

The logic of girls' education has never been hard to grasp. Evidence shows that if you educate a girl, she will be able to make better life choices, earn a higher income and contribute much more to her family and community life than she would without education.

We know, for example, that a child whose mother can read is 50 per cent more likely to live past age five¹, that women's education over the past 40 years has prevented more than four million child deaths², that investing in girls could boost sub-Saharan Africa's agricultural outputs by 25 per cent³, that one additional school year can increase a woman's earnings by up to 20 per cent⁴ and that increasing the number of women with a secondary education by one per cent can raise a country's annual per-capita economic growth by 0.3 per cent.⁵

Educating girls, in other words, is a virtuous cycle: good for each individual girl, as well as her family, community, nation and, ultimately, the world.

Still, in spite of undeniably good news, it's hard not to feel discouraged.

Start with the stark reality that we remain far from the finish line set 25 years ago by the Education for All agenda. While it's true that 48 per cent of all children in school in developing countries are girls, the majority of all out-of-school children (31 million out of 58 million) are also girls.⁶

Girls face many education challenges

Indeed, women represent nearly two-thirds of the world's 781 million illiterate⁷; cultural practices that marry off girls early and require them to care for their families instead of going to school are still widespread; in many countries where the number of girls completing primary school is surging, too few are moving on to lower secondary and secondary school, let alone to higher education. Also, a number of nations struggle to keep schoolgirls safe from harassment and violence and to recruit enough teachers who can provide the encouragement and peace of mind that helps them thrive in school.

And let's not forget that there are terrorist groups, like Boko Haram in Nigeria or the Taliban in Pakistan, waging war against the very idea of educating girls. As the Coalition Against Attacks on Education

has diligently documented, Boko Haram has in recent years carried out brutal attacks on schools and, as the world learned last year, kidnapped young girls in order to keep them from going to school.⁸ Not surprisingly, many parents in the region simply stopped sending their children, particularly their girls, to school.⁹

Crisis – civil war, natural disasters or epidemic – represents one of the biggest impediments to giving poor girls and boys alike the education they deserve. We've seen some progress: the Global Partnership for Education works with 60 developing countries, almost half of which are fragile and conflict-affected. In these countries, there were substantially more children (68 per cent) who completed primary school in 2012 than there were in 2000 (55 per cent).¹⁰ But the fact remains that about 82 per cent of all out-of-school children in the 60 partner developing countries of the Global Partnership for Education – or roughly 33.5 million – today reside in such conflict-affected and fragile states.¹¹

So, while there has been some good progress, we are far from done. As we move ahead, we must be mindful of several important factors.

Systems matter

The Education for All movement no doubt contributed to a rise in awareness about the need for giving more children across the developing world greater access to quality education. It also spawned more concrete action to fulfil that goal.

But, as we've learned at the Global Partnership for Education, all the good will and expense will miss their mark unless

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they are organised into sound, comprehensive systems. School construction, teacher training, development of new pedagogical approaches are important tools to improve education systems. But in isolation and without an overarching plan they will reach only a limited number of children. Developing countries need approaches that are sustainable, support the overall system and fit all the various inputs together into a coherent whole that can lift all boats over time.

A good education system strives for educational excellence at all levels and ensures that all schools, teachers and students meet widely accepted standards. A system has to be responsive and accountable to the public. And it must be built on best practices and evidence, driven by reliable local data, and, ultimately, owned and operated by each country.¹²

When it comes to educating girls, the biggest success stories come from those countries that have laid out clear, actionable and systemic blueprints to tackle the issue, usually through a multi-year strategic education plan. It starts with a sincere commitment and depends on concerted, concrete follow-through.

In Yemen, for example, the Ministry for Education set out to get more girls in school, particularly in more remote communities. With co-funding by the Global Partnership and other partners, the Ministry launched a multi-pronged effort that included a training programme to establish a bigger pool of qualified female public-school teachers, a public information campaign that urged more girls to go to school and

the elimination of school fees so families in need could send their daughters to school. As a result, girls' net enrolment in primary education in Yemen rose significantly, from 42 per cent in 1999 to 81 per cent in 2013.¹³ It's reassuring, even if we can't yet claim victory. But Yemen's clear commitment has made the difference. Our hope is that recent upheaval in the country does not reverse these gains.

In Afghanistan over the last dozen years, we have witnessed what is perhaps the most dramatic transformation anywhere when it comes to girls' education. That's due in large part because post-Taliban Afghan leaders committed to systemic change and followed through on their plans. At 8.3 million, the number of enrolled students today is more than eight times what it was in 2001. Almost 40 per cent of all students are girls.¹⁴

About 60 per cent of approximately four million out-of-school children in Afghanistan are also girls.¹⁵ That's far too many. But the government has developed strong and comprehensive girls' education programmes, focused on bringing down the high gender-disparity rates in remote and insecure districts.

Gender is only one dimension

Planning for and simply directing resources at girls is not enough to address the challenge of educating them. The reality in most developing countries is that gender inequality is only one obstacle of the many girls face. Poverty, disability, ethnicity, religion and geography (do they live in rural or urban areas? Are they near or far from schools?)

are powerful factors determining whether or not a girl gets educated. If we're not taking those other factors into account, we can't possibly meet the goal of educating all girls.

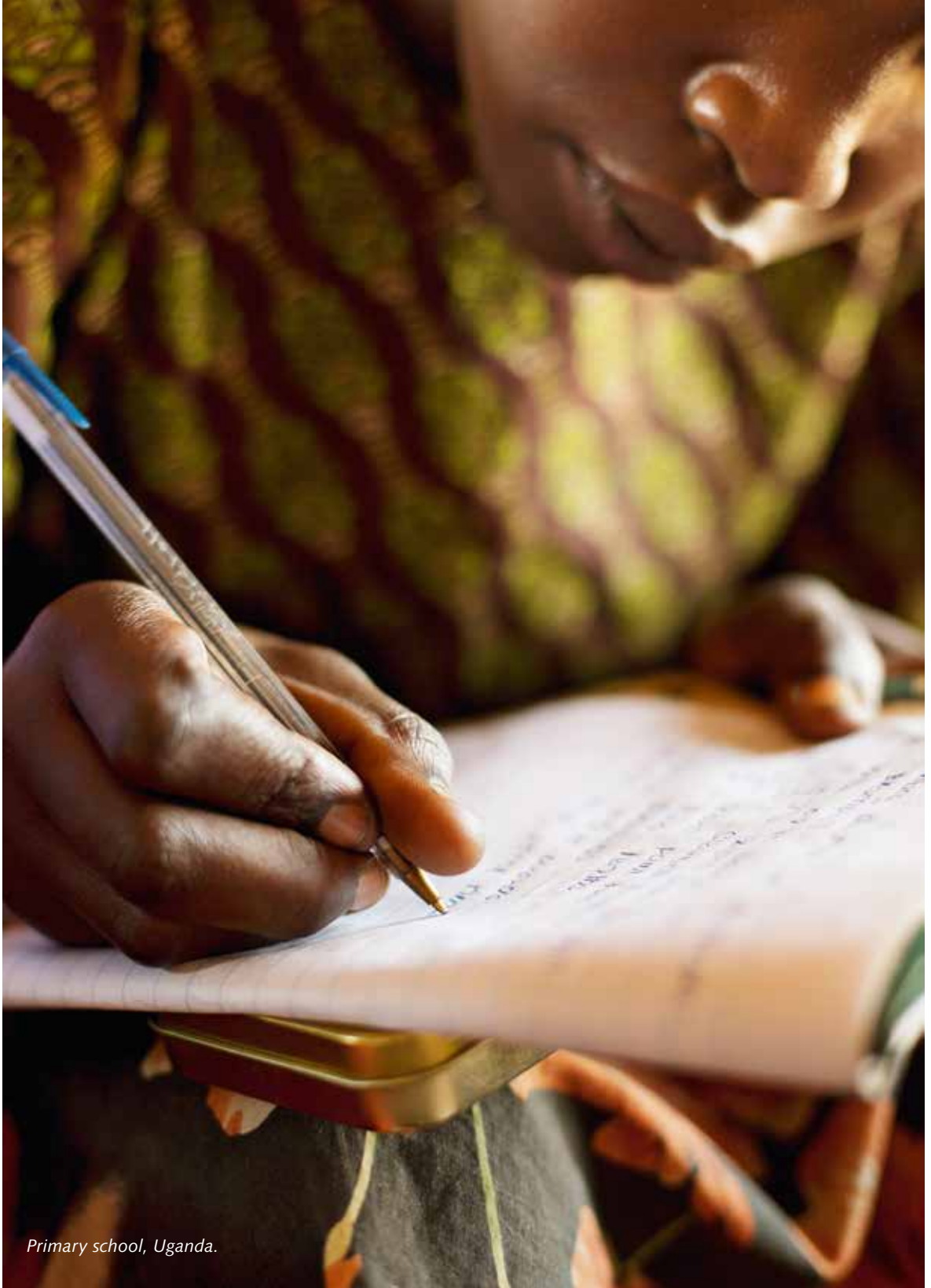
Put another way, a girl with disabilities from a poor, rural and ethnically disadvantaged family has virtually no chance of completing primary school, while the picture is more encouraging for girls from a relatively prosperous family in an urban area. As the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2013/14 noted, "If recent trends continue, the richest boys will achieve universal primary completion in 2021, but the poorest girls will not catch up until 2086."¹⁶

We have to target approaches that focus not just on girls but also on a complex set of needs, lest we leave many stuck in poverty. Funding should focus on multiple factors that keep children – usually the hardest to reach, such as girls, those living in remote areas, and those who are of marginalised groups or disabled – out of school.

Equity is the goal

At their heart, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed to address the human needs of all people around the world. With that foundation now largely in place after nearly 15 years of extraordinary work, we have an opportunity to spend the next decade and a half on achieving true 'equity' among all.

The Sustainable Development Goals that will succeed the MDGs at the end of 2015 must aspire to deliver equity at every level of education, carrying forward the unfinished business of universal education, especially for those



Primary school, Uganda.

MIKKEL ØSTERGAARD/PANOS PICTURES

children who are very poor, those living in remote, conflict-affected and fragile regions, children with disabilities and, of course, girls.

But what does it mean to “deliver equity at every level of education”? How will we know when we’ve reached that point?

We’ll know it when every boy and every girl is able to go to a school for a quality education. When there are enough school buildings; functioning, sustainable education systems; sufficient availability of qualified teachers, particularly female teachers, who are important for girls to succeed; quality textbooks and other learning materials; and free schools that remove financial barriers to getting girls educated. We’ll know it also when all families and communities see educating girls as essential to their personal development and to the future wellbeing of their societies.

Reaching those equity goals will require a revolution in measurement of educational trends and results, which will hold governments accountable and help them understand what’s working, what’s not and why.

It will involve an improved recognition of those with limited access to schooling, particularly those girls who are hardest to reach or who face the greatest obstacles to going to or continuing in school.

And it will call for ample and strategically allocated financing for education, aimed especially at those who need it most. Too often, for example, donors set a low cost per student as a primary criterion for funding. That could leave behind girls, or children with disabilities or other specific disadvantages.

Conflict and fragility are major impediments

We’ve also got to do better at ensuring that children – and girls in particular – in conflict and fragile environments don’t lose their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get the knowledge and skills that lift them and their societies out of poverty and desperation.

That’s obviously difficult to achieve in places such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, where Ebola has killed thousands and threatens more, and in nations like the Democratic Republic of Congo or Somalia, which have been ravaged in recent years by civil war.

Clearly, in such contexts, public health systems (in the case of an outbreak like Ebola), or diplomacy and other security interventions (in the case of civil war) have to stabilise the situation. But one of the first rules of any humanitarian crisis is to ensure that children stay in school, to provide for their short-term cognitive as well as emotional needs and ensure their long-term development.

Humanitarian responses are often hobbled because education in emergencies is under-financed. In 2013, the education sector received only two per cent of requests made through humanitarian funding appeals in 2013.¹⁷ In too many crisis zones, education is not recognised as a humanitarian priority, though it should be.

We have to elevate education in emergencies so that it receives equal status with other priorities, and we need to integrate education as a primary component in all humanitarian action plans. Also, countries should do away with provisions

in their education sector plans and budgets that are ‘emergency blind’, setting aside too little funding for disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness and leaving whole societies incapable of keeping girls and boys in school when crises arise.

The world has to step up to the challenge

In spite of the growing recognition around the world that we need to give more children, especially girls, quality schooling, donor aid to basic education has dropped by seven per cent between 2010 and 2013, while overall development aid increased by more than nine per cent over the same period.

That troubling trend occurred even as developing countries themselves are putting more of their own resources into their education systems. Indeed, at the Global Partnership for Education’s replenishment conference in June 2014, 27 developing countries exceeded all expectations by pledging to increase their own education budgets by a collective US\$26 billion between 2015 and 2018. So what kind of signal does it send them when wealthier countries back away from education?

Ultimately, the shortage of funding and other critical resources hurts not only the people and societies we would otherwise support, but also the wealthy donor countries themselves. A world in which girls – and the women they become – reach their full intellectual, social and political potential is a more secure, healthier and prosperous world. When we reach – or at least approach – that state, we will all be better off. 