The Systematic and Widespread Attacks on Female Education and What We Must Do

BY MAY RIHANI

According to the UN Human Rights report, "Attacks Against Girls Accessing Education," approximately 3,600 separate violent acts were committed against teachers, students and schools in 2012. According to the report, between 2009 and 2014, attacks on schools took place in "at least 70 different countries" and were focused on girls, parents and teachers.

Why are such attacks happening? I believe the answer is due to the fact that education is the most transformative endeavor a female undertakes, and traditional societies — particularly ones that cherish the past — refuse to accept change.

Numerous studies have shown that females gain self-confidence as a result of education and become more involved in decision-making both within their households and within their communities. That involvement in decision-making challenges leaders who want to keep the status quo as is, or even seek to literally regain the past.

Once educated, young women want to move forward and are less likely to accept oppression and more likely to recognize that they have the right to participate in the making of decisions within their households and their communities.

Based on the information in the UN report regarding attacks against girls accessing educational institutions, and based on the clear evidence about the transformative power of female education, it is imperative that governments and international donors keep girls' education on their agendas and invest adequately in this priority.

In addition to investing adequately in girls' education, governments have the responsibility of ensuring the safety of the females who go to school.

It is a must that governments and civil societies counter terrorist tactics by adopting strategies that protect girls and schools. The attacks on female students and teachers will not just decrease the number of girls in school; it will intimidate parents from sending their girls to school at present and in the future. There is a risk of losing hard-won gains in the field of girls' education.

In addition, it is important to ensure that educational policies and practices facilitate the transition of girls from primary school to secondary school and address factors that hinder or prevent girls from completing secondary education. When key cultural, safety and administrative barriers to girls' education are addressed, then the benefits of education to the girls themselves, their families, their communities and their countries multiply.

On the other hand, if these obstacles are not addressed, a number of developing countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia will continue to experience low percentages of girls completing secondary education. Presently, in some countries such as Chad and Yemen, fewer than 25 percent of girls complete secondary education.

When more girls participate in and complete secondary education, their life expectations change — as does their behavior. The benefits accrued by them, their families and their communities are many. Here are some outcomes of secondary education that should be noted:

- The percentage of girls who are married at the ages of 12, 13 or 14 will decrease, and the age at which they marry will be delayed. The World Bank says in one of its reports that "some 65 percent of women with primary education or less globally are married as children, compared to 5 percent of women who finish high school."
- Once married, the young women will have a say in how many pregnancies they should have, resulting in a decrease in the number of pregnancies. In some rural areas in northern Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Afghanistan, for example, the number of pregnancies per uneducated woman is often eight or nine pregnancies; that number decreases when the woman is educated.
- Educated mothers with functional and analytic literacy have lower infant mortality rates, as well as lower percentages of maternal mortality.
- Educated women assume more responsibility in the decision-making process within their households and their communities.
- Educated women are not limited to traditional labor that is often unpaid: they look for, and find, paying jobs or run businesses, and, as a result, lift their families from poverty.
- By completing secondary education, the vulnerability of girls and young women is reduced, as are abuses and gender-based violence, at home and within their societies.

In summary, a girl that completes secondary education is empowered in very practical ways and tends to assert herself and play a positive transformative role in the social and economic decisions of her home and her community.

That is what extremists like Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and ISIS seek to stop. Empowered women, with minds of their own, women who want to help determine their and their families' futures as equal partners, are not acceptable to such extremists.

Educated women are less likely to accept the oppression that extremists want to impose on them and on their communities. The voices of educated women will become a transformative factor in very traditional societies where extremists dominate. It is arguably the key factor that will move us all forward to a world with less poverty, less infant and maternal mortality, less extremism and more tolerance, where respect and cooperation is not only cherished but realized. ◘ — *May Rihani is a former co-chair of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and author of* Cultures Without Borders: From Beirut to Washington, D.C.

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