

Op Ed: Women's Access to Education

By Chelsea Scott

It's almost impossible to believe that it's only been two years since young Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai was discharged from getting shot in the head just for wanting an education. An essential key that we often take for granted, are the cause of death many girls around the world. Just imagine yourself being adorned for your wedding day before even being enrolled into middle school with no hope of any education for the rest of your life. Women's access to education has been recognized as a fundamental right, yet 62 million girls are lacking education worldwide. Being raised in a privileged society, it is often difficult to comprehend that there are many freedoms that we take for granted which others do not have. For example, nearly 33 million children of primary school age who do not have access to education globally, and more than half of these are girls. It is not that these girls don't desire to have an education, it is the many barriers they face that keep them from reaching their goals. As a whole, we need to not only identify those barriers but work to remove them in order to evoke positive change.

Barriers to girls' access to education in places such as Africa and the Middle East would include a lack of schools within walking distance of rural homes, school environments that are unsafe when girls alone are subjected to sexual abuse by other students and even teachers, and the high cost of school fees in many areas, which makes families have to choose between the children they can afford to educate. Increasingly, adolescent girls also face economic and social demands that further disrupt their education, spanning from household obligations and child labor to child marriage, gender-based violence and female genital mutilation; girls who face

multiple disadvantages are the furthest behind. All of these obstacles can be solved but one must first look at the customs and norms of these developing countries.

The lack of education starts with the gender gap that has also become a global issue. When cultural norms in countries favor boys over girls, spending resources on females are seen as a waste of time. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, boys are almost twice as likely as girls to complete secondary schooling and are offered a plethora of opportunities. Of all the barriers keeping girls away from education, poverty remains the most important. It is impossible to send a child to school if it is unaffordable. In societies where resources are scarce, a family will be more willing to invest in the males, knowing that the girls will soon be married off (some as young as 13) and will not have use for education. Education is not valued or is seen as irrelevant for women's traditional roles in society.

In order to find solutions to overcome these barriers, the issue must be addressed from a cultural standpoint. In countries like Pakistan where its patriarchal nature continues to benefit males, problems affecting girls become less important to deal with especially when the lack of funds cause for a strict budget. Ultimately, solutions to the barriers of education for females, depend on raising awareness and encourage a shift in cultural values. Through the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), the organization helps regain the rights of girls and assist countries that result in achieving gender equality in education. This specific organization focuses more on the empowerment of women.

A new organization, She's the First, found on many university campuses, utilizes a different approach. They attempt to raise awareness among university students about the barriers to girls' educations and encourage students to raise funds to sponsor girls from 11

different countries to provide primary and secondary schooling. She's the First provides scholarships to girls in low-income countries, nurturing first-generation graduates and encourages the involvement of the generations that follow.

From a national perspective, an Education for All Act has been introduced by the U.S. congress. The bill would ensure that the U.S. provides the resources and leadership necessary to contribute to a successful international effort to provide all children with a quality basic education. It was initially presented in 2011 and has been seeking the vote of congress members since then.

Beyond supporting these organizations, here are ways you can help from your own home:

- Donate to an organization of your choice that helps educate young girls
- Ask members of your congress to vote for the Education for All Act
- Connect and advocate through social media

When young activists and victims like Malala put a face to the issues facing many of these girls around the world, it brings the problem home instead of making it feel like these ongoing occurrences are so far from us that we cannot help.

Nearly 62 million girls around the world go on without proper schooling and are forced to tackle many challenges all for a factor in which they cannot control. It can be solved with the start of providing one girl not only an education, but a choice.