

UNESCO launches Malala Funds-in-Trust for girls' education

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Director General Irina Bokova and the Pakistan's Minister of State for Education, Training and Standards in Higher Education Muhammad Baleeghur Rehman signed Malala Funds-in-Trust agreement to support better access, improved quality and safe learning environment for girls in the hard-to-reach areas of Pakistan.

The \$7 million funds-in-trust will focus on building up capacities in both formal and non-formal education, from gender-sensitive training for teachers to awareness-raising in communities to support girls' education. This marks the launch of an operational phase, following the high-level advocacy event co-hosted by UNESCO and the Government of Pakistan in December 2012, when the Malala Fund for Girls' Right to Education was announced. Girls' education is one of the most powerful forces for human dignity. It is a human rights issue and a breakthrough strategy for human development and peace. There is no better long-term investment a country can make to foster social inclusion, justice, equity and economic growth," said the Director-General

Baligh-ur-Rehman said, "Pakistan is home to 3.8 million out-of-school girls, while those in school are more likely to drop out than boys. Today gender disparities between boys and girls in access to primary education stand at 10%." "With the Malala Fund programme implemented in Pakistan, we intend to narrow that gap to 5% in 3 years," he added.

Commenting on the spirit of this fund, the director general said, "Education is not just about quantity or putting more money or improving enrolment rates. It is about the quality of education provided in schools, it is about teacher training; it is about relevant competencies for decent jobs and an inclusive society. The Malala fund will address this."

During a National Forum on Girls' Right to Education, the minister also outlined measures taken by the government to accelerate progress, including the adoption of free and compulsory education for all children 5 to 16 as a constitutional right, adopted with the technical support of UNESCO, and a commitment to increase education spending from 2% to 4% of GDP, along with the development of a national plan of action to define targeted initiatives. The rights accorded to girls in Islam are absolutely equal to those of boys," said Minister Baligh ur-Rehman. "Education in today's world is not a choice but a fundamental right of every child. Government is responsible morally, ethically and constitutionally to provide education for every child regardless of creed or gender."

During the forum, attended by UN partners, civil society groups, experts and donors, the emphasis was put on changing attitudes, training female teachers and making schools accessible and safe, especially in remote and rural areas. Families want to send girls to school but they want safe, quality education for their girls. Schools need to be located closer to families and sharper policies in place to reach the un-reached, said Mrs Bokova. The commitment of families and local leaders, including religious leaders, is essential to convince everyone that education is the best investment for the future.

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