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BACKGROUND:

Gender Lens Brings a New Perspective to Educational Development

Approximately 25 years ago, a small group of international education professionals began working in the field of girls' education. At that time, some international development practitioners had come to recognize the importance of the "gender lens" in developing effective programming. Applying this lens to the education sector was a breakthrough in identifying, assessing, and understanding the realities, constraints, and solutions facing educational development around the world.

The 1990 Education for All (EFA) Conference in Jomtien, Thailand, drew the world's attention to gender discrimination and the gross inequities between girls' and boys' education throughout the developing world. At the primary and secondary levels, far more girls than boys were out of school. The next steps were clear: a gender perspective was imperative to improve the quality of education for girls and boys and to strengthen the economies and social fabric of developing countries.

Initially, the strategy focused on the demand side of the equation: educating girls to create generations of educated mothers who would insist on educating all their children — girls and boys.

But it is clear the benefits extend far beyond creating better mothers. As Kofi Annan said, "To educate girls is to reduce poverty. Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls." Educating girls strengthens economies, decreases HIV/AIDS rates and builds healthier societies. Former World Bank Chief Economist and U.S. Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers concurs, saying, "The education of girls is the single

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—Kofi Annan, U.N. Secretary General

As of 2002, nearly 1 in 5 children of **primary school** age were out of school. Of the 115 million out-of-school children, 53 percent were girls, and 75 percent lived in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

At the **secondary level**, more than 1 in 3 secondary school-age children were out of school. Although gender-specific data are limited, it is likely that an even greater proportion of those out of school were girls.

—“Children Out of School: Measuring Exclusion from Primary Education.” UNESCO/ UNICEF, 2005

most important investment that can be made in the developing world.” By the mid-1990s, girls’ education and gender equity in the classroom had gained widespread international recognition as critical development goals among fathers and mothers in rural communities, as well as among world leaders and economists.

The Acting Commissioner for Education in Uganda, Sam Onek, described the demand: “Many parents who had more than four children [the number of children per family guaranteed a free primary education through Universal Primary Education policies] simply allocated them to relatives or pleaded with the local implementers to register them.”

As demand has increased, the need to address the supply and quality side of the equation also has become clear, leading to an understanding of the need for more schools, safe school environments free of sexual harassment, separate latrines for girls and boys, and quality, gender-balanced education.

Unfortunately, while great strides have been made in access and quality to meet this increasing demand, these strides have been primarily focused at the primary level—leaving a significant number of girls unable to achieve the promise of a quality secondary education.