The East Asia and Pacific South Asia Regional UNGEI I take the opportunity of this year’s International Women’s Day to highlight the need for more awareness and action to end violence against women and girls, particularly in schools. The United Nations defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.’

Gender-based violence is an issue that can occur in all settings, including the classroom, and is one manifestation of underlying gender inequality. Gender-based violence discourages girls and boys from going to school and results in lack of motivation and interest in education and may lead to the risk of dropping out of schools. It may also cause parents to keep daughters out of school for fear that they will be victimized. In Papua New Guinea, female students were found to be fearful of sexual assault and violence in and on their way to school. Girls confront many obstacles in terms of access, retention and success - stemming from family, cultural, social, educational, legal or political contexts.

Gender-based violence can take different forms including corporal punishment and sexual harassment or economic violence where males choose to restrict access to resources and refuse to support the entrance of girls into schools. Within the educational context, these violent acts can be perpetrated by pupils on other pupils, by teachers on pupils, by pupils on teachers and also by teachers on other teachers. Whether physical, verbal, emotional or psychological, this violence has severe educational, emotional and psychological consequences. Although girls are often more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, boys too are at risk. Many boys also experience violence in schools and may be bullied or harassed, and may be victims of gender-based violence in schools. Violence in schools is thus a gender issue and can increase the risk for child labour and exploitation. Experts agree that “gender scripting”, or stereotypical expectations for masculinity and femininity could play a role in the increase of school-related, gender-based violence. Such unchallenged gender scripting may have potentially harmful effects on the development of both boys and girls and may lead to the perpetuation of gender-based violence.

USAID estimates that, worldwide, almost half of all female students and a sizable number of male students experience some form of sexual violence in an education context. A number of studies in South Asia indicate that violence in schools, notably corporal punishment, leads to students dropping out. A USAID report, quoting a study in eight countries in South-East Asia, noted that corporal punishment was widely used in several schools in all eight countries. A survey in Nepal also found that 14 per cent of school dropouts can be attributed to fear of teachers.

In 2006, the UN World Report on Violence against Children emphasized the importance of developing a rights-based approach and “anti-school-violence” policies and programmes. It states that “schools are uniquely placed to break the patterns of violence by giving children, their parents and communities the knowledge and skills to communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts in more constructive ways.” The report also notes that States should promote and protect the human rights of women and girls and address all forms of gender discrimination as part of a comprehensive gender-based violence-prevention strategy.

Education can become a key tool to empower girls and women to exercise their rights and protect themselves from gender-based violence. However, concerted action on the part of Governments must also be taken to ensure that education policies are inclusive and strides are taken to address the multiplicity of factors and barriers that prevent women and girls from accessing education and benefitting fully from outcomes of a quality education.

To mark this occasion, the East Asia and Pacific and South Asia Regional United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) urges the renewed commitment to uphold education as an inalienable human right. Countries are urged to ensure the provision of quality education for all, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, caste, income level, disability or any other factor which might exclude them from their right to quality education. Ensuring equal access to inclusive foundational education and lifelong learning opportunities for girls, women, boys and men can aid in the journey to end violence against all.
The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) is the Education For All flagship for girls’ education and the principal movement to narrow the gender gap in primary and secondary education, and to ensure that by 2015, all children everywhere will be able to complete primary schooling, and that by then, girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education. UNGEI works through partnerships with organizations committed to these goals at global, regional, and country levels. To learn more about UNGEI, visit www.ungei.org.