

**Malala: We must all fight courageously for the right to education.**

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In an exclusive interview with Vatican Media, Malala Yousafzai, 2014 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, speaks about her commitment to girls' education through the Malala Fund and reflects on the right to go to school for children in war-torn countries. She also emphasizes the importance of interreligious dialogue in promoting the global right to education.

By Alessandro Gisotti

At the age of 14, in her fight to affirm women's right to education in her home country of Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai became the target of a brutal Taliban attack that nearly cost her life. But Malala did not stop. She continued the struggle she had begun at just 11 years old, when she started a blog advocating for girls' right to go to school in her native Swat Valley. In a remarkably short time, she became a global force in promoting the right to education for women everywhere. She has become a source of inspiration for countless people—both women and men—who have joined her cause.

In 2014, at only 17, Malala became the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Together with her father, the schoolteacher Ziauddin Yousafzai, she founded the Malala Fund, which for over a decade has been fighting for access to education through concrete projects and initiatives.

In this exclusive interview with Vatican News, Malala speaks about her passionate commitment to girls' education, reflects on the millions of children denied schooling due to war, and highlights the importance of interfaith dialogue, even for promoting education.

**Q:** Your journey from a young blogger in Swat Valley to a global advocate for education is a source of inspiration worldwide. How has your personal experience and your commitment to education changed over the years?

**A:** When I began speaking out for girls' education, I was quite hopeful. I believed that government and institutional leaders who voiced their support would leverage their power to take quick, decisive action to transform the world for young women. Now, at 28, I can acknowledge a more frustrating truth: change takes time. Despite years of advocacy, more than 122 million girls remain out of school. Experience has taught me that progress demands more than promises — it requires creative solutions, sustained resources and patience. But these challenges have not dimmed my sense of urgency to create a better future for girls. This is my mission in life, and it always will be.

**Q:** Conflicts and violence, from Syria to Ukraine, from Gaza to South Sudan, prevent millions of children—especially girls—from attending school, exacerbating the global literacy crisis. How can we ensure these kids are not left behind, forgotten?

**A:** Thinking about this keeps me up at night. How many children are falling asleep to the sound of gunshots right now? How many schools have been bombed this week? How many families have been separated forever and will never recover? In Gaza, the number of children killed is staggering and horrific. When we see a genocide like this, it sometimes feels like a hopeless situation, like there's nothing we can do — but that's not true. To help impacted children by conflict, we can fund education in emergencies and support local organizations providing spaces for children to key resources, learning materials and mental health support. Keeping children in school, or getting them back to school as soon as possible, is vitally important to their psychosocial well-being and sense of security.

**Q:** The situation for Afghan girls under Taliban rule remains terrible, with severe restrictions on their access to education. In Afghanistan, the future of an entire generation of women is at risk. What actions is the Malala Fund taking to support Afghan girls', and what can the international community do to sustain these efforts?

**A:** The scale of the Taliban's oppression is almost unimaginable. Women and girls are banned from education, work and any form of public and political participation. They are controlling every part of a woman's life, including if she can go to a park, how loud her voice can be, how she dresses. This is more than gender discrimination; it is gender apartheid. This week, Malala Fund announced that we are committing \$3 million in new and extended grants to help girls in Afghanistan by meeting urgent education needs and pushing for long-term justice. From home-based schools to satellite TV and radio, online platforms, and offline apps, we support innovative, flexible programmes that keep girls learning under Taliban rule. Through our Afghanistan Initiative, we're also standing alongside women leaders and human rights defenders to lead a global movement — pressing world leaders to end gender apartheid and secure the future of girls' education.

**Q:** You've emphasized many times - notably receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 - that education is a fundamental human right to protect and promote. You risked your life for that right. How do you see education contributing to achieve goals like gender equality, economic development, and peace, particularly in marginalized communities?

**A:** Education fuels hope for a more peaceful, more equal future. School is where children learn critical thinking and how to problem-solve. It is also where they make friends, build compassion, and learn to work with others. These skills are key to tackling injustices—like misogyny and discrimination—and reminding people of our shared humanity.

**Q:** Through the Malala Fund you empower local education champions. Can you share a story of a grassroots activist whose work has inspired you, and how does their approach demonstrate the power of community-based literacy initiatives?

**A:** From an early age, I saw how one person can make a positive impact. My father, a schoolteacher in our hometown in Pakistan, often went door to door persuading families to send their daughters to school. His efforts changed the lives of countless girls — and their families. My father and I started Malala Fund to help more change makers expand

their reach. Today, we partner with locally led organizations in Afghanistan, Brazil, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Tanzania who are driving progress for girls' education. This summer, I visited Kongwa District in Tanzania to see our partner Msichang Initiative in action. Their organization helps young mothers who were forced to leave school continue their education. I toured classrooms, met with their team and listened to students share about the barriers they faced to learn and the determination driving them forward. Msichang Initiative has helped more than 400 young women return to school so far. Their efforts reaffirmed for me why this is so critical — and how deeply it matters to invest in innovative, passionate people who want to help girls succeed.

**Q:** Pope Leo XIV, like Pope Francis, has underlined the importance of education as fundamental for fostering peace and promoting human rights. Do you agree that interreligious dialogue can enhance educational initiatives?

**A:** Absolutely. There is always something people can learn from one another. When I started at university, I met so many new friends from around the world who exposed me to various religions, values and interests. It challenged some of my beliefs and expanded my worldview for the better. This time was so important to my life and shaping who I am today that I've written a lot about it in my new memoir, *Finding My Way*. I hope that readers will see in my story how friendship and community can change us as individuals and that the connections we build can change the world around us. When people of different faiths come together, it can serve as an opportunity to better understand one another and remind us of the many values we all share. I really believe in education's power to bridge gaps and promote empathy across cultures and religions.

**Q:** In a few days we will celebrate the UN International Literacy Day (8 September). What message would you share with our audience to inspire action toward ensuring every child, especially girls, can read, write, and learn freely?

**A:** Every day there are countless girls who study by candlelight, walk miles to school, or learn in defiance of those who tell them to stay home. Their courage and determination to learn inspires me.

In Islam, acts of service and seeking knowledge are core tenets of faith. I know these are also valued in the Catholic tradition. If there are girls who can risk everything for the chance to learn, then I feel we can all find the strength to raise our voices alongside them.

Change will not happen on its own. We must listen to girls and call on our leaders to invest in education and long-lasting solutions.