Growing up in Canada, you probably just assume that boys and girls are entitled to equal rights — and that education is one of the most basic rights of all.

But in some places, just expressing that belief is extremely dangerous. In fact, in the South Asian country of Pakistan, one teenager has paid dearly for her conviction that every young girl deserves to go to school.

A BRUTAL ATTACK
On October 9, 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head and neck while on her way home by bus after writing an exam. Seriously injured, she was taken to a military hospital where she underwent surgery. On October 15, she was flown to the United Kingdom for further medical care, where doctors were optimistic that she would recover.

Her attacker escaped, but the Pakistani Taliban quickly claimed responsibility for the attack.

According to spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan, Ms. Yousafzai had been targeted because she spoke out against the group and promoted the education of girls. If she survived, she would be attacked again, he warned.

“She was pro-West, she was speaking against the Taliban and she was calling President Obama her idol,” Mr. Ehsan stated. “She was young, but she was promoting Western culture in Pashtun areas.”

THE TALIBAN TAKES OVER
Ms. Yousafzai’s home is in the town of Mingora in the Swat District of northwest Pakistan. In 2007, this area was taken over by the Taliban. The group immediately banned TV, music, women from going shopping, and girls’ education. Throughout the region, people’s lives changed overnight — especially the lives of girls and women.

Late in 2008, Britain’s public broadcast network, the BBC, wanted to find a young woman willing to write about life under the Taliban for its Urdu and English websites. The network approached Ms. Yousafzai’s father, who ran a private school, for help, and Ms. Yousafzai agreed to take on the task. She was just 11 at the time.

DID YOU KNOW?
In Pakistan, just 69 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls over 15 can read and write, mainly because 25 million children do not attend school. Only Nigeria has more unschooled children.

MAKING WAVES WITH A BLOG
Malala Yousafzai’s blog, called “The Diary of a Pakistani School Girl,” was written under the pseudonym Gul Makki to hide her true identity from the Taliban. In it, the schoolgirl repeatedly wrote about the importance of education for women, even though she knew she was risking her own safety.

DEFINITIONS
PASHTUN: relating to an ethnic minority speaking Pashto and living in northwestern Pakistan and southeastern Afghanistan
PSEUDONYM: a fictitious name adopted by an author
URDU: an official language of Pakistan
"I was afraid going to school because the Taliban had issued an edict banning all girls from attending schools," she wrote in one entry. "Only 11 students attended the class out of 27. The number decreased because of [the] Taliban's edict.

"On my way from school to home I heard a man saying 'I will kill you.' I hastened my pace ... to my utter relief he was talking on his mobile and must have been threatening someone else."

The blog, which started on January 3, 2009, was immensely popular. It ran for ten weeks.

IDENTITY REVEALED
Not long after Ms. Yousafzai stopped writing for the BBC, the Taliban was driven out of the Swat Valley by the Pakistani army and life returned more or less to normal for the girl and her family. She continued to speak out for girls' education, however, and in 2011, her activism earned her a nomination for the International Children's Peace Prize. Later the same year, the Pakistan government awarded her its first National Peace Prize.

The awards were a huge honour, but they came with a price: she had to give up her anonymity. That meant she became, overnight, both a heroine and the Taliban's target.

ANGER AND OUTRAGE
Responses condemning the attack on Ms. Yousafzai came swiftly from around the world.

"Directing violence at children is barbaric," said a U.S. State Department spokesman. "It's cowardly and our hearts go out to her."

In Pakistan, tens of thousands rallied on October 14 to express their anger and outrage at the Taliban and to offer prayers for Ms. Yousafzai's quick recovery. Pakistan's Prime Minister also condemned the attack.

"Malala is my daughter, too," said Mr. Raja Pervaiz Ashraf. "She is Pakistan's daughter. If this [extremist] mindset persists, which girl in Pakistan will be safe?"

FEAR SILENCES MANY
Yet many other Pakistani politicians and celebrities were reluctant to condemn those behind the shooting. They were worried that if they criticized the Taliban, they — or members of their families — could become the group's next victim.

"They [Pakistan leaders] can't condemn [the] Taliban because they are afraid," said Ms. Yousafzai's cousin.

As a result, he said, "The terrorists ... they are free to kill innocent people. They are power-crazed bullies." ★

WHAT IS THE TALIBAN?
The Taliban is an Islamic fundamentalist militant group that controlled much of Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. It supported the terrorist network al-Qaeda and that group's 9/11 attacks on the U.S.

The Taliban government was defeated after a coalition of countries, including Canada, invaded Afghanistan following the 2001 attacks on the U.S. Some members and supporters went into hiding in Afghanistan; others fled to neighbouring Pakistan, a mainly Muslim country of about 190 million people.

Since their defeat, however, the Taliban has regrouped. In recent years, it has been trying to extend its influence within Pakistan and has been launching attacks aimed at regaining control of Afghanistan.

Wherever they hold power, the Taliban enforce a strict interpretation of Islamic law. They are strongly opposed to the Western way of life and demand that women wear burqas at all times in public and don't work, and they prevent girls from being educated after the age of eight.

DEFINITIONS
9/11: September 11, 2001, the day terrorists flew into and destroyed the World Trade Center in New York
ACTIVISM: a policy of taking direct action to achieve an end
AL-QAEDA: a radical fringe Islamic terrorist group
BURQAS: loose robes that cover ultra-religious Muslim women from head to toe
COALITION: an alliance between groups for a specific reason
EDICT: a decree or proclamation issued by an authority
FUNDAMENTALIST: a person who strictly adheres to a rigid set of principles or beliefs
MILITANT: a fighting, warring, or aggressive person or party
INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S PEACE PRIZE: a prize awarded annually by the KidsRights Foundation to a young person who has made a contribution towards children's rights
1. Explain what the **Taliban** is.

2. What types of rules do the Taliban enforce in areas they control?

3. Which area in Pakistan did the Taliban take control of in 2007?

4. What did Malala Yousafzai agree to do in late 2008?

5. What happened to Malala Yousafzai and her family after the Taliban was driven out of the Swat Valley?

6. What happened to Malala Yousafzai on October 9?

7. Describe the medical treatment she received.

8. How did some people in Pakistan react to this attack?
BETWEEN THE LINES

Making an inference: An inference is a conclusion drawn from evidence. A plausible inference is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.

What inferences can you draw from the fact that Pakistan has the second-most children out of school in the world, after Nigeria?

JUST TALK ABOUT IT

Consider the following: “Of course, it was a risk [to let her write the blog],” Malala’s father told BBC in January, 2012. “But I think that not talking was a greater risk than that because then ultimately we would have given in to the slavery and subjugation of ruthless terrorism and extremism.”

a) What is your understanding of the term 'subjugation'? Of 'ruthless'? Use a dictionary to help you define these words, if necessary.

b) Using your own words, explain the meaning of this quote. What is Malala’s father saying?

c) Respond to this quote. For what reasons do you agree with Malala’s father's perspective? For what reasons do you disagree?

d) If you were Malala’s father, how would you have handled the BBC’s request to have Malala write a blog on life under the Taliban? Explain.

ONLINE

Visit our student website at www.news4youth.com and click on the What in the World? tab to:

1. Find out more about the International Day of the Girl, a United Nations-sponsored event to support more opportunity for girls and to increase awareness of the inequality faced by girls worldwide, which was held for the first time just two days before the attack on Malala (or visit http://dayofthegirl.org/about/). Then, view the International Day of the Girl video 'Because I am a girl' (or visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4xcDv4cobY).

2. Vote in our monthly poll:

The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded each year for outstanding contributions in peace. Following the attack on Malala, an online petition was started to have the teen nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. What do you think of this idea?

I support Malala’s nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize. / I am against Malala’s nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize.

3. Submit your thoughts to our forum:

Although Malala is recovering, she will face many challenges in the years ahead, both physical and emotional. What would you like to say to Malala to encourage her as she heals and looks ahead to her future?

A good submission is clearly written, logically organized (including an introduction and a conclusion), and supported with plausible reasoning.

We'll post the best submissions! ★