Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fourth session
1 – 12 March 2010

Panel discussion

"Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work"

Thursday, 4 March 2010, 1:15 – 2:45 p.m.

ISSUES PAPER

I. Introduction

In accordance with the methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women (ECOSOC resolution 2006/9), the Division for the Advancement of Women organizes a panel event in the margins of each annual session to enable a preliminary discussion on the priority theme of the subsequent session. During the fifty-fourth session of the Commission, a panel discussion on "Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work" will be organized in preparation for the Commission's fifty-fifth session in 2011.

II. Background

The Beijing Platform for Action highlighted education as a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace, and urged Governments to eliminate disparities between women and men in access to education and educational outcomes at all levels and in all forms of education, including primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational training, adult literacy and lifelong learning, in line with the outcome of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All.[1] At the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly in June 2000, Governments called for equal access to education and the elimination of gender disparities in education, including vocational training, and science and technology. They highlighted the need to develop policies and programmes to enhance the employability of women and their access to quality jobs, through improving access to formal, non-formal and vocational training, lifelong learning and retraining, and long-distance education. The importance of addressing gender stereotyping as one of the root causes of occupational segregation was also emphasized.

World leaders committed to achieving gender equality in education with goals to be reached by 2015. In 2000, the World Education Forum in Dakar set the six Education for All (EFA) goals, two of which focus specifically on achieving gender equality in education. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) address gender equality and education in two of the eight goals. MDG2 focuses on universal primary education, while one of the targets of MDG3 on gender

[1] http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/background/world_conference_jomtien.shtml

equality and women's empowerment is the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education.

The Commission on the Status of Women last considered education and training as a priority theme in 1997, and has repeatedly addressed critical aspects of women's and girls' access to, and participation in education, training, science and technology, as well as access to decent work in its deliberations and outcomes, including in its agreed conclusions of 2007 on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.[2]

Women's and girls' access to, and participation in education, training, science and technology, and their access to full employment and decent work are also addressed in human rights instruments and by related monitoring mechanisms. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires States parties to eliminate discrimination against women in education and employment. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights contains a specific provision on fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value for women. International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions of particular relevance to gender equality include the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), and the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156).

III. Critical issues

Education is a key driver of economic growth and social change, and its importance for achieving gender equality is well-recognized. Educated women are more likely to delay marriage, enjoy better health, and participate in family decisions.[3] Educational opportunities have expanded over the last decades, enabling a larger share of the world population to access formal education. The ratio of girls' to boys' enrolment has steadily improved, reaching 96 girls per 100 boys at primary level, 95 girls per 100 boys at secondary level, and 108 women per 100 men at tertiary level in 2007.[4]

While substantial progress has been achieved, gaps in women's and girls' access to education remain. In 2007, 72 million children of primary-school age were out of school, 54 per cent of which were girls.[5] Women's and girls' access to post-primary education remains restricted in many parts of the world. Global averages hide wide variations in participation in education both among and within countries. Factors underlying some girls' exclusion from education include poverty, geographic location, ethnicity and disability.

Furthermore, school attendance figures give no indication of learning achievement. Poor quality of education has emerged as a major concern, particularly in the developing world, as many children leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Gender stereotypes perpetuated

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[2] E/2007/27-E/CN.6/2007/9

[3] UN Millennium Project (2005). *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women.* London: Task Force on Education and Gender Equality.

[4] The gender parity ratios for developing countries only are 0.95 at the primary level, 0.94 at the secondary level, and 0.96 at the tertiary level.
UNESCO (2010). *Reaching the Marginalized*, Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010. Paris.

[5] Ibid.

by teachers and in textbooks also contribute to poorer educational results. In addition, non-formal training, an important complement to the formal education system, too rarely caters to women's specific needs.

While education has many non-market benefits, it is commonly expected to lead to improved productivity and higher earnings. Women's educational gains, however, do not always translate into improved employment opportunities. Among the 20 to 24 year-old population, women continue to lag behind men in labour force participation in all regions, with South Asia recording the greatest gap with 82 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women employed or seeking employment.[6] Moreover, one third of young women (15-24 year old) in developing countries are "jobless", that is, they are either not employed and actively seeking work, or out of the labour force and not in school, compared with one fifth of young men.[7]

A range of factors explains this disparity. Women's access to employment is constrained by caregiving responsibilities, which in some regions are compounded by early marriage and childbearing. In some contexts, social norms restrict women's physical mobility or make it unacceptable for them to work. When looking for work, women may have less access to broad social networks than men, which in turn limits information on job opportunities. They also face biases on the part of employers: research suggests that in some countries and in some industries, employers prefer hiring men.[8]

Women who find employment, whether in the informal or formal sector, also face many challenges, including over-representation in vulnerable employment, wage differentials and limited career development. One factor contributing to the gap in earnings between women and men is occupational segregation. Women tend to dominate lower-paying sectors such as teaching and care-work, and to be under-represented in traditionally "male" fields, for instance, science and engineering.

International tests and surveys show only small differences between 15-year-old girls and boys in performance and interest in science, but divergent preferences for science-related careers, with girls more likely to envision a future in health sciences, including nursing, and boys more likely to want to become computer scientists or technicians.[9] At the university level, the median share of female students is 41 per cent in science and 21 per cent in engineering.[10] Women tend to opt for life sciences, for example biology and chemistry, rather than disciplines such as physics or computing,[11] which are perceived to have a "dominant masculine culture".[12] Other factors influencing women's decision to work or remain in science and technology occupations include concerns about vertical segregation, unequal pay and lack of work-life balance. Questions have

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[6] World Bank (2008). Ready for work. [Available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/ReadyforWorkfactsheet.pdf]

[7] Katz, E. (2008). Promoting young women's employment: what works? Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

[8] Morrison, A. and S. Sabarwal (2008). The economic participation of adolescent girls and young women: why does it matter? Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

[9] OECD (2009). *Equally Prepared for Life? How 15-year-old Boys and Girls Perform in School*. Paris.

[10] UNESCO (2010). *Reaching the Marginalized*, Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010. Paris.

[11] UNESCO (2007). *Science, Technology and Gender: An International Report*. Paris.

[12] Lynch, K. and M. Feeley (2009). *Gender and Education – Lessons from Research for Policy Makers*. Brussels: European Commission.

also been raised about possible gender biases in the measurement of performance and scientific excellence.[13]

Women's limited participation in science and technology education and employment has many negative consequences. Not only does it narrow the range of job opportunities available to women, but it also limits their influence over the science research agenda, leading to the potential neglect of topics affecting their well-being and interests. This situation is also detrimental for society at large: national economies, increasingly driven by scientific and technological innovation, forego the contribution of a large talent pool.

IV. Format and outcome of the interactive expert panel

The panel will take the form of an interactive dialogue. Three expert panellists will make presentations of no more than seven minutes. Member States, United Nations system entities and non-governmental organizations will be encouraged to share experiences, raise issues that should be considered within the theme, and/or respond to the panellists' presentations. Interventions from the floor will be limited to three minutes. The dialogue will feed into preparations for the priority theme of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2011, and a moderator's summary of the dialogue will be prepared and posted on the website of the Division for the Advancement of Women.

V. Issues for consideration in the interactive dialogue

The following issues could be considered:

- What initiatives have been successful in addressing the remaining barriers to women's access to and retention in formal and non-formal education? What efforts have been made to increase women's participation in non-formal education, including literacy and job training?
- What are the gender-specific implications of poor quality education? What is the impact on women's and men's employment prospects?
- What explains the limited representation of women in science and technology education and employment? What efforts have been successful in addressing this situation?
- What role do gender stereotypes and attitudes play in women's limited participation in science and technology? What are good practices in challenging such stereotypes?
- What are the consequences of women's limited participation in science and technology? How does it affect research and development?
- Why do economic returns to education vary between women and men at different levels of education? What are the policy implications for women's education and employment?
- What policies are needed to accelerate the integration of the growing number of young educated women into the workforce? What measures have been successful in improving the school-to-work transition for women?

[13] UNESCO (2007). *Science, Technology and Gender: An International Report*. Paris.