

Commission on the Status of Women
Forty-ninth session
28 February to 11 March 2005

Panel V: “Future perspectives on promotion of gender equality: Through the eyes of young women and men”

Summary submitted by the Moderator (Rima Salah)

1. At its 15th meeting, on 9 March 2005, the Commission held a panel discussion followed by a dialogue on “Future Perspectives on Promotion of Gender Equality: Through the Eyes of Young Women and Men”. The panelists were: Ms. Frida Ohlsson (Sweden), Secretary-General of the non-governmental organization Young Folk’s Association; Ms. Ingrid Tharasook (Thailand), B.A. student in anthropology and women’s studies; Mr. Srdjan Stakic, Adolescent and Youth Specialist, UNFPA; Ms. Catalina Devandas Aguilar (Costa Rica), former Vice-President of the Forum for Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Mr. Michael Flood (Australia), Postdoctoral Fellow at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), La Trobe University; Ms. Felicitas Martinez Solano (Mexico), Director of the Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas (National Coordination of Indigenous Women); and Mr. Edford Gandu Mutuma (Zambia), chairperson of Lentswe LaRona Young African Advocates for Rights (YAAR), and director of programmes at Youth Vision Zambia. The panel was moderated by Ms. Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). An issues paper¹ prepared by the Division for the Advancement of Women provided the framework for the dialogue.

2. Participants agreed that it was important to ensure the integration of young women’s and men’s perspectives into policies and programmes for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women, and to give greater consideration to issues that were of specific concern to them, including in relation to poverty; education and training; health, including sexual and reproductive health; HIV/AIDS; violence against young women and girls and trafficking; employment; power-relations between young women and men; their image and portrayal in the media; as well as cultural stereotypes and traditions.

3. Governments had a special responsibility to support, consult and collaborate with young people, and with youth and community organizations to address their concerns in national policies. Participants discussed the important role of youth organizations and the need to develop effective partnerships, links and networks for the promotion of equality of young women and girls. Collaboration amongst all stakeholders and sectors, including amongst inter-governmental, government and civil society organizations, young women and men and schools, parents, youth and community organizations was called for.

Participants noted good practices such as youth parliaments, the establishment of national observatories for young people, and called for the strengthening of partnerships between youth and women's organizations. They also underscored the need for support from families and communities for efforts to achieve equality of young women and girls, and the creation of an enabling environment for the girl child.

4. Participants noted that young women and girls were particularly affected by poverty, which impacted on all spheres of their lives and limited their possibilities for development and their options in many fields, such as education, health and employment. Participants stressed that the improvement of the situation of young women and girls was critical to the achievement of the objectives contained in the Millennium Declaration, and in particular the Millennium Development Goals.

5. Participants noted the continued prevalence of discriminatory stereotypes and harmful cultural practices that had an adverse impact on young women and girls, such as forced and early marriages, female genital mutilation, and preference of boys. The portrayal of young women in the media as sex objects and in stereotypical roles was a significant impediment to gender equality. Participants underscored the importance of combating cultural and religious stereotypes and practices that impede the advancement of women and the promotion of gender equality. Efforts were also needed to encourage the media to project an image of women as active participants in all spheres of life as role models for young women and girls. Such efforts should include awareness-raising and sensitization programmes.

6. The importance of education for young women and men, including non-formal education, was highlighted. Participants emphasized the benefits of non-discriminatory education for girls and boys and its contribution to ending stereotyped images, more equal relationships, mutual respect, the sharing of family responsibilities, the elimination of harmful traditional practices and change in culturally influenced constraints affecting young women and girls. The lack of access to quality education at different levels, i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary, and vocational training; sexual stereotyping and the lack of an enabling environment for girls' education were noted as major constraints to their empowerment. Participants also stressed the important link between education and employment and noted that even where women had higher levels of achievements in the field of education, men still generally earned higher incomes and were better represented in decision-making positions, a situation which was of great concern to the current generation of girls and young women.

7. Given their special vulnerabilities, participants noted the particular importance of health issues for young women and girls, and the impact of the continued widespread lack of access to, or availability of health services, sexual and reproductive health services and information, including sex education, family planning, contraceptives, safe and confidential services and treatment for young women and girls affected by HIV/AIDS. A particular concern was the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on adolescent girls. Participants highlighted the links between health, HIV/AIDS and violence against young women and girls. In this regard, participants called for particular attention to the

need for the legal and practical protection of young women and girls against all forms of violence, including domestic violence, trafficking and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, required particular attention.

8. Participants discussed the importance of recognizing, and responding to the diversity of young women's experiences. While many women in general experienced gender-based discrimination, specific groups of women and girls suffered from multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination on additional grounds such as disability, race, ethnic origin, caste and social status. It was noted that young women with disabilities suffered from particularly acute forms of discrimination. They lacked access to adequate health care and sex education, were at greater risk of poverty, had fewer opportunities to participate in economic and social life and were more vulnerable to violence, including forced sterilizations. Participants stated that while it was important to integrate concerns about disabled women into all policies, programmes and legal initiatives, including the draft Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities, the specific nature of discrimination against them also required targeted attention.

9. Discrimination against young indigenous women was highlighted. Extreme poverty, structural discrimination and the degradation of the environment and natural habitats exacerbated the disadvantaged position of indigenous women. Social progress of indigenous girls was affected by factors such as malnutrition, breakdown of family structures due to alcoholism and migration, high-drop out rates from schools, and a greater share of domestic responsibilities. Participants called for the inclusion of the perspectives of young indigenous women in all policy and programme development at national and international level.

10. Participants stressed the need for young men and boys to be actively involved in efforts to achieve gender equality and the implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Young men and boys should contribute to changing stereotypical attitudes, behaviours and gender roles and strengthen policies and action for gender equality. Participants noted that traditional male roles were unfair to women and potentially harmful to young women and girls, and imposed constraints on men by perpetuating their stereotypical roles. Both young women and men had to play an important part in deconstructing traditional masculinities and shaping more gender-equal individual and societal expectations about the roles of men and women.

11. Participants noted the need for funding and technical support for youth work, and for scaling up existing pilot projects. Additional resources were needed for programmes and projects in different fields, including education, health services and awareness-raising amongst girls and boys. Capacity building, including the development of training programmes and effective tools and materials for the promotion of equality of young women and girls, was critical. The participation of women in public fora should be measured and used as a means for promoting participation of young women in public life.

12. Participants highlighted the need for youth-specific monitoring and implementation of national laws and international legal and policy instruments on gender equality, such as the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Participants noted the importance of implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security, particularly in light of the devastating effect of conflict on young women and girls, and with a view to ensuring their full participation in rebuilding their societies after conflict.

13. Participants recommended that the perspectives of young women and men should be taken into account in the context of the reform of the United Nations. The Commission on the Status of Women should specifically encourage and support programmes aimed at achieving equality of young women and girls, including programmes aimed at working with young men and boys for gender equality. Young women and men should be regularly involved in the work of the Commission, and issues facing young women and girls should be addressed by the Commission on a regular basis.