

Statement for IFUW Representatives attending the 58th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2014

Access to Quality Secondary Education for Girls – beyond the Millennium Goals

The International Federation of University Women (IFUW) is committed to girls' and women's access to and retention in all levels of education up to post-secondary and tertiary education especially and including the retention of girls and women from the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

Science and Technology

The organization also strongly supports greater participation by women and girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) throughout the educational pathways. In many countries the doors to STEM education remain firmly shut to women and girls. Yet these areas of study represent the key components of today's technological society.

Apart from ideas of cultural appropriateness, the primary reasons for the exclusion of women and girls from STEM subjects at school are national or individual poverty, or a combination of both. Attracting girls to STEM subjects is a first step. The elimination of gender-based discrimination in STEM education and employment must be a priority if women are to be attracted to and remain engaged in STEM careers.

Governments of member states must recognise the vital importance of STEM subjects in their national curricula. Some high profile private sector organisations and NGOs have proved willing to assist in funding general educational programmes in developing countries. Technology-based businesses and NGOs may do the same for STEM education to unleash the brain power of girls and women and benefit their own development, the careers of women and girls and the technologies of the future.

Access to quality secondary and tertiary education for women and girls is a basic human right and one of the most effective strategies for the achievement of equality for women and girls. While significant progress has been made towards the achievement of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 – education at the primary level, barriers remain to the achievement of the elimination of gender discrimination in secondary education (MDG3).

At its 31st Triennial Conference in Istanbul, Turkey (August 2013), the organization's delegates reaffirmed support for the 'Right to safe access to education for all girls and women' and voiced particular concern for areas of the world which required immediate focus and attention. A further resolution urged governments to collaborate with Indigenous leaders to provide designated educational funding to create a system of affordable, quality education.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGS)

Progress on MDG 2 - 'Achieve universal primary education' slowed from 2007 as a result of the global economic downturn; it is unlikely that access to universal primary education will be achieved by 2015. The goal - 'Promote gender equality and empower women' (MDG 3) is even less likely to be achieved as a result of global fiscal constraints. The organization calls

on Member States to extend their initiatives for the education of girls and women beyond 2015.

Quality Secondary Education for Girls

The World Forum on Education (Dakar, 2000) established six education goals and included an explicit reference to achieving secondary education for girls.

In 2013, demand for secondary education is soaring thanks to the higher primary education completion rates. However, the 2012 United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Global Monitoring Report estimated that 71 million adolescents should be in secondary school.

Of the estimated 130 million young people who do not attend school, 70 per cent are girls. In 19 African countries the secondary school completion rate for adolescent girls is below 5 per cent. During the economic downturn girls have been the first to be withdrawn from school. Girls have other barriers to school attendance including unsafe school access and hostile school environments that do not take into account their specific needs as girls and women, as well as traditional and cultural practices that prevent their fullest participation. Gender-based violence is a barrier to girl's and women's education.

What is at Stake?

Girls who enter adulthood without basic literacy and numeracy skills are more vulnerable to poverty, hunger, violence and abuse, exploitation and trafficking, HIV / AIDS and maternal mortality. Even when enrolled at school, many cannot learn because of unsuitable school buildings, unsanitary conditions or lack of educational resources such as textbooks and qualified female teachers.

Disabled, ethnic, refugees and indigenous women and girls and those with language or significant cultural differences may face significant barriers to learning and suffer disproportionately and dropout rates are high.

Our organization calls upon the Governments of member states to develop alternative forms of education, for example those based on new technologies, which will allow women and girls displaced from the system to complete their education informally.

Other Benefits of Secondary Education

On average, women with secondary education have 1.5 fewer children than those with only primary education or no schooling at all. Women with more education have more decision making power over their own lives and in civil society. It is estimated that every extra year of secondary schooling for girls can increase their future earning power by 10-20 per cent. Educated women are more aware of their own and others' human rights and are less likely to be the victims of violence, sex trafficking and HIV / AIDS.

The Legal Framework of Rights

The right to education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Girls and women need education about their rights and responsibilities. If they are to take their place in society and to achieve their fullest potential it is essential that they have access to all levels of education including tertiary education and enable them to make the fullest possible contributions to society in return.

Measuring Achievement

Quality disaggregated data about women and girls and their involvement in the technologies of the future is essential to measure progress more accurately in the post 2015 world and to assist policy makers in making intelligent decisions about the allocation of educational resources.

Current data from most countries focuses primarily on numbers of students enrolled.

There is an urgent need to assess the quality of the learning environment and what is being taught and learned in classrooms, while to be useful in assessing the effectiveness of programmes for women and girls, this data must be in a sex disaggregated form. This will give a more accurate picture of the situation as a whole.

While governments should consult the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as to the most useful data to collect for international comparison purposes, key headings will include school enrolment and attendance, learning and achievement, literacy and numeracy, course completion rates and transitioning to the next education level. Information on the numbers and distribution of teachers and their salaries will be useful.

Recommendations

The International Federation of University Women calls upon the 58th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women to:

1. **Hold** the governments of member states accountable for the commitments they made when ratifying international treaties and agreements, especially those relating to the education of women and girls.
2. **Urge** all levels of government, NGOs and private businesses to work together to create a system of affordable, quality funded education for all women and girls, especially those suffering disadvantage.
3. **Urge** the governments of member states to put policies and funding in place to ensure that girls and women can enjoy full access to secondary education including science and technology subjects.
4. **Urge** governments of member states to ensure that a robust framework of accountability to their international treaty obligations with respect to the education of women and girls is made an integral part of their post 2015 goals.
5. **Ensure** that governments of member states collect accurate and relevant data related to the education of women and girls by requiring that all data is provided in a sex disaggregated form.

The International Federation of University Women (IFUW) is the leading women's organisation run by and for women advocating for women's and girls' rights and empowerment through access to quality education and training up to the highest levels. The organization's mission is to promote and advocate for the right to quality affordable education for women and girls, especially higher and further education, to enable them to attain a decent standard of living, personal autonomy, participation in civil society and all other human rights.