

Keynote presentation

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Thank you Madame Chairperson,

It is a great honour for me to address the Committee and the participants to this meeting and to offer suggestions for a General Recommendation on girls and women's right to education.

The right to education is a multifaceted and demanding right, even more so for girls and women who face a clear disadvantage in its full realisation. However, the right to education is also one of the most detailed human rights; a right that has already been acutely interpreted and adjudicated, which gives us the distinct advantage of building on solid ground.

This advantage may seem less evident when we talk about rights *through* education, perhaps the most aspirational side of such a right. Nonetheless, I would like to advocate that aspirations can indeed guide action and that there are several ways to consolidate education as a multiplier of other human rights so that girls and women can enjoy all of them fully and equally.

The right to education as a multiplier: benefits and costs

The right to education is often considered as the key to unlock other human rights. Let me quote on this Professor Katarina Tomaševski, the first UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, who put it very aptly when she said that “the right to education operates as a multiplier. It enhances all other human rights when guaranteed and forecloses the enjoyment of most, if not all, when denied”.¹

It is only *through* education that one can access and enjoy other human rights, particularly those linked to personal development, active participation in public life and employment. And it is by means of violations, denials or distortions of the right to education that discrimination, exclusion and disempowerment persist around the world today. This rings all the more true for girls and women who still remain at the margins of a life in dignity equal to that of men.

It is often said that fulfilling the right to education for all is highly demanding and costly. Let us for a moment turn the question upside down: how much does it cost to deny the right to education to some, in our case girls and women? The answer is blatant.

¹ K. Tomaševski, *Education Denied: Costs and Remedies*, New York: Zed Books, 2003, p. 1.

Denied the right to education because of their sex and economic and social status or because of the persistence of patriarchal systems or - even more dramatically - because of the intersection of all these reasons, girls and women are led into domestic work, child marriage and early child bearing, which in turn result in increased discrimination and inequality.

Without an education that is worthy of its name, girls and women face major difficulties in tackling diseases for themselves and their children, gaining ownership in sexual and reproductive choices, and participating in decisions about family life, with consequent detriment to wider societal goals.

Violations of the right to education are also detrimental for political representation. In many countries, illiterate people - the majority of whom are women - are barred from becoming candidates in elections; similarly, women's limited educational attainment hampers their full appreciation and command of public, social and political events, thus precluding to them meaningful participation in decisions that affect their lives.

Last but not least, the denial of the right to education generates exclusion of women from employment and their relegation into the informal sector. Everywhere women continue to perform unpaid care work and occupy low paid positions, while pay gaps between men and women persist in all countries. This in turn entails distortion of other rights as well as weaker bargaining power and more fragile social security.

The consequences of this state of affairs can more easily damage rather than benefit personal, economic and social development. Violations and denials of girls and women's right to education are costing us dearly. But they are not without remedy.

Reality check: progress should not justify complacency

The multiplier effect of the right to education has been duly included in all relevant international strategies. From the Beijing Platform of Action to the Millennium Development Goals, through the Dakar Framework of Action, education has been crucially recognised as the key for improvements in women's health, standard of living, participation and empowerment.

Due to all these strategies, there have been many achievements for girls and women. However, when checking progress against reality, it becomes evident that effective action is lagging behind rhetoric. The gap between education goals and rights has translated over time into a gap between achievements and effective enjoyment of rights *through* education.

Only last week, at the launch of the Beijing+20 campaign, the Executive Director of UN Women reminded us that "Twenty years ago, 11 per cent of parliamentarians were women. Today nearly 22 per cent of MPs are women. Progress yes, but we need more and faster. Twenty years ago, 40 per cent of women were engaged in wage and salaried employment. Today 48 per cent of women do. Progress yes, but too slow and too little".²

² See more at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/6/executive-director-opening-remarks-at-beijing-launch-in-new-york#sthash.o5S7cWcE.dpuf>

What a powerful call to action! Progress is there, but should not justify complacency and should not hide the remaining risks and denials of rights. We need to ask ourselves why the individual gains achieved by women *through* education have not yet been transformed into a whole system of wider gains in the political, economic and social sectors. It suffices to think about all the women who still leave their jobs after becoming mothers, or female politicians who access powerful positions but remain entangled in the male-dominated web of power, or also female teachers who abound in the lower levels of education but still struggle to reach decision-making positions. Besides, persisting violence, bullying and oppression in both public and private spheres demand that we step up our efforts.

We need to defend the rights of girls and women *through* education from ‘invisible jeopardies’ such as homologation with men and their power culture; double/triple burden of responsibilities towards work, family and society; or embedded fears of expressing innovative and different views. All these dangers oblige us to break traditional patriarchal and paternalistic schemes; to change language at school, at work, in politics, in everyday life; and for girls and women to input their own energy and identity. A ‘shock therapy’ is necessary to unhinge resistance to meaningful equality in the labour market, in institutions, in the family, while at the same time being able to maintain truly open choices for women about their lives.

The way forward

How to do this? The challenges are many, but looking at their root causes can help identify effective responses. Rights *through* education are rarely sustained because education is not deemed to be a worthwhile investment for a girl’s future. Even when girls are educated, this may appear to have little or no benefit if they cannot apply their learning to a decent and relevant job, if they cannot choose whether to marry or bear children, or if they do not have genuine opportunities for participation in public life. We need a long-term vision that tackles all these elements together, going beyond education strategies.

The gendered denial of girls and women’s rights *through* education demands solutions that address gender and education issues in a comprehensive and coherent way. Precisely because of their multi-layered impact and their multi-dimensional nature, both education and gender offer a number of entry points that can be explored further, so to redress existing discrimination, inequality and injustice. In this light, let me provide a few suggestions.

Discontinuity: much of our discussion has highlighted power relations. A pervasive, if unstated, logic of privilege and power is there and is strong; so is the decision not to give it up by those who possess that privilege and power. We must discontinue this vicious circle, at all levels, starting from homes and schools. Power is neither good nor bad; it depends on how it is used. If we work with those who fear change as loss of privilege/power and show them that it is not a matter of replacing one power with another, but a matter of enriching each other’s power so that change is beneficial for all, we can foster real progress. This requires bolder work on self-confidence and leadership skills, for both men and women, together, yet with distinct inputs.

Investments: too much attention to primary education has neglected further investment on secondary and higher education, precisely those levels where a person blossoms and develops the skills, knowledge and confidence necessary to enter the job market, build a life in dignity and actively participate in actions for the common good. This is a great opportunity that has been missed for too long. To take it up, States must invest budgetary resources on all levels of education. More efforts are also needed to keep girls in schools, for example through incentives to contrast child marriage and early pregnancies as main reasons for drop-outs. In this light, legislation should also be reviewed so that minimum ages for the end of compulsory education, for marriage and for entry into employment are coherent and aligned.

Flexibility: the focus on accessibility and availability of education needs to include acceptability and adaptability. This means capitalising on completion of quality secondary education through skills learning, training, and vocational education that are relevant to changes in the job market. It also means working more on content and attitudes: curricula should include life skills such as comprehensive education on sexuality, participatory practices for decision-making, and the means to learn how to address rights, gender, power and power relations. Overall, we must change school programmes so that educational paths are no longer influenced by rigid cultural expectations on gender roles.

Intersections: more work is needed across areas, about intersections, about multiple forms of discrimination. In substance, we should focus on innovation *of* and *in* work, politics, and family: foster flexible time-management, ensure equal pay for equal work, and go beyond mere competition among different areas of girls and women's life.

Accountability: we have made good progress on exposing violations, but less so on opposing them and holding authorities to account. Education is a State responsibility. Where State capacity is weak, other States and donors have the responsibility to assist. In this view, when implementing policy decisions, States must connect institutional resources with daily practice. Included in legal frameworks and in policies there must be a clear and firm commitment by States to provide the necessary resources to girls and women's right to education as part of their wider human rights obligations. Only by linking political commitments with legal obligations can we bridge the gap between achievements and enjoyment of rights.

Conclusion

Concluding, there is no lack of political promises to promote rights *through* education; what is lacking is the accountability afforded by legal obligations - as opposed to political pledges - and their translation into operational systems that can deliver on those promises. The Committee is in a prominent position to encourage State Parties to intensify their commitments in all the above mentioned areas, individually or through international cooperation. But we all must contribute to it in our daily lives. After all, human rights do not happen to us; we make them happen. The task is not only at hand; it is in our hands. This is why it is my hope that today's discussion is also the beginning of a renewed and more comprehensive approach to girls and women's rights *through* education.

Thank you very much.