

SPCCMUN

ECOSOC Chair Report 1

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Topic 1: Improving girls' and women's access to education

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Introduction

In many developing or socially conservative nations, women receive fewer educational opportunities than men or are prohibited from going to school. Alternatively, even if these opportunities exist, socio-economic and security issues prevent many young women from receiving education.

One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set in the year 2000 was to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005”. As of 2014, 90% of children in the developing world are attending primary schools and gender parity is close to being achieved at this level of schooling. However, gender disparities become more prevalent at higher levels of education, and in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East in particular, female inequality in education is still a problem.

A lack of female education has been linked to a range of problems, from high infant mortality rates to lower productivity gains in society. Improving female education need not extend to the university level in many impoverished countries, but can simply target primary and secondary level education and impart literacy, arithmetic skills and basic knowledge such as health and nutrition, all of which bring maximum benefit at a minimum cost, and produce a long-term benefit that directly or indirectly aids future generations, in particular the offspring of these women.

Over the past years, individual countries have launched their own national initiatives towards achieving gender equality in education, often subsidised by the United Nations (UN) or other aid agencies. India has launched the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), which aims to expand educational opportunities to young girls living in poverty across India. The program is funded by the World Bank. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) in India for primary enrollment, as of 2011, is 102.30. Private organisations also exist, such as the Malala Fund, founded by Pakistani education activist and Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, which funds and provides educational programs for girls in Pakistan, Nigeria, Jordan and Yemen.

Gender equality in education remains an issue in the developing world, and much of the progress made in recent years has not spread to secondary education or higher. Furthermore, terrorism and security issues flaring up across the developing world threaten to demolish past efforts. As such, female equality is still one of the goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Definition of Key Terms

GDI: Gender-related Development Index, designed to measure gender equality in different nations.

GPI: Gender Parity Index, a measure of relative access to education between males and females. GPI is generally used to measure equality in education in developing countries or in other regions where female enrollment in schools is significantly below that of males. It is calculated by dividing the total enrolment ratio of girls by that of boys, and gender parity is achieved when the GPI is between 0.97 and 1.03.

SDGs: The abbreviation of Sustainable Development Goals, the successor to the MDGs. The SDGs is currently a proposal for a collection of 17 goals with 169 targets, aiming towards sustainable development. The SDGs were agreed upon during the Rio+20 Conference of 2012.

UNGEI: The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, launched in 2000 to assist in achieving gender equality, particularly in education.

World Bank: UN financial institution, which provides support such as loans and advice to developing nations for programs in a range of areas, such as education, health and infrastructure. The World Bank often works with national governments, commercial banks, NGOs and private sector investors in funding projects.

Important Bodies Involved

India has made huge progress in female education in recent years and has been among the top achievers in education improvement in South-east Asia over the last decade. It is expected to achieve the goal of gender parity in 2015. In a measurement of the political will of governments in tackling educational inequality, India scored highly in the transparency of its education sector. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act was initiated in 2010 to improve the provision of education, and more funds have been devoted to female education.

Nigeria has long since been more backward in female education. As of 2013, the female literacy rate was well below 50% in the northern parts of the country, which were affected by the rise of Boko Haram. Patriarchal practices play a key role in Nigeria's lack of gender equality by giving preference to the education of boys. UNESCO stated that a further \$11 billion every year is needed to reach the 2015 "Education for All" (EFA) goals. The abduction of over 200 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, led to international outrage over the Nigerian government's inability to fight terrorism in the country and ensure the safety of female students.

Pakistan's constitution protects the right to education for all, but progress in education has been minimal. The literacy rate for girls is around 40%. The Pakistani Taliban, which condemns female education, has control over the northwest parts of the country. However, in recent years, foreign pressure on the Pakistani government to place a greater focus on female education has increased in the aftermath of the shooting of Malala Yousafzai.

Saudi Arabia's female education is directed by Wahhabi Islam, the form of Islam practised in the country. Women are allowed to study and go to university, but segregation in education between males and females and the opposition of very conservative clerics within the country have nonetheless hindered the development of female education. A government-funded scholarship program sends thousands of young women to universities overseas to receive higher education. Despite relatively higher rates of female education, women, educated or not, rarely find employment in the nation and are prohibited from leading normal and independent lives in public.

Issues to Consider

i) Infrastructure and software

A lack of proper infrastructure in many countries translates not just into a lack of schools themselves, but problems such as no proper roads, no female latrines and so on. With long distances between schools and homes, families are less willing to send their female offspring to school due to the danger involved, such as sexual harassment, and the perception that girls are weaker than boys. Shortage of school places is another problem, which, along with the lack of female teachers, means girls are again less likely to go to school. Minor issues, such as the lack of female toilets, lead to higher female drop-out rates once girls begin menstruation, or they may simply choose to skip school during menstruation, which affects the quality of their schooling. In terms of software, the lack of proper support for training teachers to practice gender responsive teaching pedagogies that address gender based needs of both girls and boys may affect the effectiveness of school education as a means to empower girls.

ii) Poverty

Poor living conditions in these countries means that young women are taken out of school and forced to work. Schooling has high direct costs — school fees, textbooks, uniforms and the like, and the opportunity cost of going to school instead of working is high, since schooling does not reap immediate benefits. Large households in many places also mean that more mouths need to be fed and more work to be done. Combined with the prejudice against women, this leads to the unfortunate situation where males of the same family are more likely to be allowed to go to school while females stay at home. The situation in many countries also means that women are likely to be married at an early age, making an education given to them useless in their family's eyes, particularly with socially conservative labour markets.

iii) Security and Terrorism

With terrorist groups promoting conservative Islam, Sharia law and the rejection of Western education re-emerging in many countries, schooling for females is becoming more dangerous. Many of these insurgent or established groups specifically target girls going to school, rather than schoolchildren in general. Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram abducted over 200 schoolgirls in the town of Chibok in early 2014, selling many of them to become child brides. Groups such as the Taliban have, at times, banned girls from going to school. Such security risks in these countries makes going to school difficult or even impossible, and have seriously impeded progress in gender equality in schooling.

A lost generation of female schoolchildren has potentially detrimental consequences for future generations by reinforcing the mindset that women are not supposed to go to school and depleting the ranks of female schoolteachers. The economic costs of terrorism also means less money is funneled into education, and more security is required around schools — virtually impossible in

many countries. As such, without cracking down on terrorist groups which are endangering security in these nations and undermining governmental efforts to provide better schooling, gender parity will remain a distant goal.

iv) Socio-economic benefits

Without education, women are less likely to enter the workforce and should they do so, they are paid less and are less productive even if there is no external societal prejudice. According to a study conducted by the UNGEI, providing an extra year's schooling to girls increases their wages by 10-20%. The World Bank estimates that 0.4-0.9% of the difference in GDP growth between nations is due to gender disparity in education. Increasing female education, in particular, is generally aimed at those living in poverty. As such, investing in female education can help to reduce income disparity in society as a whole.

Educated women are less likely to be abused domestically and are more able to care for their children. Schooling in many developing nations provides women with information about health for both themselves and their children. Infant and child mortality rates tend to be lower. Educated mothers are more likely to send their children, male or female, to school, which brings positive long-term societal benefits. Furthermore, schooling helps to advance notions of gender equality and can increase the political participation (i.e. voting) of women. By stressing the practical benefits of equality for women, more support could be galvanised.

v) Religion and Culture

Many places where female education is backward are predominantly Muslim countries. In the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan, quasi-religious laws are enforced to keep girls out of schools. While that does not mean all Muslim countries ban female education, these countries tend to be more socially conservative, and have more rigid interpretations of the religion. In Yemen, mixed-sex education and male teachers instructing female students is opposed. In Jordan, although enrolment is high, girls drop out in secondary school for early marriage. The stereotypes in many of these nations, that men go out and work and women stay at home and raise children, means that education is far less valued for girls.

In essence, cultural perceptions and practices such as early marriage tend to prevent female education from reaching a high level. Nonetheless, most countries do allow both boys and girls to go to school, and more often, it is local perception and familial prejudice that hinder educational progress. Curricula specifically set for one gender – such as domestic-oriented and less academically rigorous courses for girls – at the national and local levels is also a problem, particularly if materials taught in school serve to explicitly or implicitly promote gender inequality. Such modes of schooling negate many of the benefits of girls' education, and are often associated with promoting local culture, beliefs and ideology, and also form a self-perpetuating cycle of gender bias.

Questions for Debate

Should policies to improve women's education be drafted by international bodies or by local governments?

Global initiatives for female education may help to set targets and goals for development, but global policies may be too general and fail to succeed in all countries, as there are individual problems specific to each country and nuances to the social or cultural outlook. However, policies led by national or even local governments may not meet international standards, and despite the differences in situation from place to place, there is common ground between different nations in terms of solutions.

How can practical problems in improving education be overcome?

As mentioned above, there are many practical obstacles to achieving gender parity in education. International funding is one way of getting round these obstacles, but there are still issues such as corruption, lack of trained professionals and intricacies such as directing the flow of money towards suitable targets. Moreover, not all countries allow international organisations or NGOs to make private investments not conducted through the government.

Some possible solutions to these problems include funding and expanding the training of female teachers, or at the very least, teachers who are willing and able to teach female students well and treat them equally to their male counterparts. Policies of gender-based affirmative action at university level may also help, by providing more educational opportunities for women whilst taking into account the challenges they have faced at previous stages of education.

What are some ideological conflicts between governments and local citizens in these countries?

Although national governments may have the political will to improve the situation in their countries, not least to attract more investment and improve international reputation, locals' opinions may differ from their governments. In many places, although educated "elites" are more socially liberal, middle- and lower-class citizens tend to be more conservative in their outlook, and are predominantly less educated. In many ways, changing public mentality is essential to reforming education.

How should this issue be tackled post-2015 in the SDGs?

The MDGs have made female education a priority, but is the issue already solved? Should it still be a global focus and is it still a key part of economic and social development? Are there any specific areas which are lacking in terms of female education? For post-2015 progress in gender parity in education, a more focused scope may be preferable, so as to concentrate on issues that are not yet solved, such as public mentality and increasing security. Female education does not have to be a standalone issue to be tackled, and by allowing girls to go to school, many side benefits can also be attained.

Further readings

GPI in primary level enrolment

<http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/SeriesDetail.aspx?srid=611>

Our Africa -- Women

<http://www.our-africa.org/women>

Right to Education Project

<http://www.right-to-education.org/issue-page/marginalised-groups/girls-women>

UNGEI website

<http://www.ungei.org/>

UN MDG Fact sheet

http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Goal_3_fs.pdf

UN Population Fund -- gender equality

<http://www.unfpa.org/gender-equality>

Women and Islam

<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2510>

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