



The Economic and Social Council's Commission on the Status of Women

Background guide
Submitted for the delegations to the Model United Nations
College of Charleston, 2015

Global Expansion of Female Access to Education

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)¹, established by Council resolution 11(II) of 1946, is primarily tasked with the responsibility of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. The CSW is the main global intergovernmental body dedicated to promoting women's rights and shaping global standards on gender equity.

History of the CSW

In 1996, the United Nations' Economic and Social Council expanded the Commission's mandate by allowing it to monitor and review progress in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Since the Beijing Declaration recognized the inequality between men and women globally, it ensured the enforcement of gender equality to their fullest capacity. The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies implemented the enforcement of quota systems and educational training in developing countries. The Commission adopts multi-year work programs to assess progress and make further recommendations to accelerate the implementation of the Platform for Action. In 2011, the Commission adopted its priority theme: 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.

Background Information

Education is a human right according to the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Despite improvements to school enrollment in many countries, many countries still lag far behind CSW-recommended standards. In 2013, roughly 63 million girls were out of school --- 31 million of primary school age and 32 million of lower secondary school age. Sub-

¹ http://www.unicef.org/education/bege_70640.html

Saharan Africa and South and West Asia are regions with some of the lowest numbers of female enrollment in schools. In South and West Asia, 80 percent of out-of-school girls are unlikely to ever start school compared to 16 percent of out-of-school boys. Additionally, boys are 1.55 times more likely to complete secondary education than girls within this region. Despite previous UN efforts, many countries are not meeting the criteria for the World Bank's Education Millennium Development Goals for the year of 2015.

These goals include the following:

- Achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people
- Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.
- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015
- Achieve universal access to reproductive health. Inadequate funding for family planning is a major failure in fulfilling commitments to improving women's reproductive

According to the World Bank, 30 percent of low- and middle-income countries are off-track or seriously off-track to meet the Millennium Development Goals of universal primary education.² Some countries are significantly more far behind than others.

Countries with Worst Outcomes:

In order for this committee to properly solve this issue, it must first note which countries are lagging farthest behind in educational gender equality:

- In the following countries, women's literacy rate is less than 50 per cent of men's: **Mali, Benin, Yemen, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Guinea, Niger, Chad, and Afghanistan.**³
- In both **Somalia** and **Niger**, the average time that a girl will attend school is 1.3 years.⁴
 - In **Somalia**, women have a 24 percent literacy rate.
 - In **Niger**, 52 percent of females have never attended school. The literacy rate for females is 18 percent, which lags 27 percentage points behind their male counterparts (male literacy rate is 45 percent).
- In **Afghanistan**, three decades of war and religion-based oppression has resulted in an overwhelming number of illiterate women.

² <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/girls-education>

³ <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/international/Ten-Worst-Countries-for-Women.html>

⁴ <http://www.education-inequalities.org/>

- The literacy rate in **Iraq** is now among the lowest in the world, especially for girls, since families fear their daughters will be kidnapped or sexually assaulted if sent to school.
- In **Pakistan**, religious extremists are targeting female politicians, human rights workers, lawyers, and students. Among the the poorest girls in the country, two-thirds have never been to school.⁵ Many girls, such as Malala Yousafzai, have experienced terrorist-related violence while attending school.
- **Saudi Arabian** experience some of the harshest gender-discriminatory laws in the world, which seriously impedes their ability to attend and participate in school.
 - Women are also not allowed to vote in national elections, drive, or interact with men in public.
 - If a Saudi girl is sexually assaulted, she can be-- and often will be-- counter-charged with crimes such as leaving the house without a male companion, being alone with an unrelated man, or becoming pregnant because of the rape.
 - Because sexual assault and harassment is a common occurrence at school for girls in developing countries, failure for the government to deal with this issue fairly is a significant barrier to getting more girls into school.
 - All of these discriminatory policies reflect the country's lack of support for gender equality, which directly translates into their lack of progress for gender equality in education.
- Sub-Saharan African countries such as **Kenya** and **Liberia** experience extremely low outcomes for female education, often because of widespread practices of FGM (female genital mutilation), child marriage, early motherhood, and vulnerability to diseases such as HIV/AIDS.
- Girls in **Nigeria** are often dissuaded from attending school out of fear of kidnapping and violence by insurgent groups.

All of these issues hinder women in these countries from accessing the education and resources they need. Other countries who fail to meet CSW-standards are listed here:

<https://efareport.wordpress.com/2012/11/09/the-bottom-ten-countries-for-female-education/>

Obstacles to Global Gender Equality in Education⁶

Expanding female access to education requires first acknowledging and eliminating the barriers that currently hinder it. These barriers include the following:

- School Fees
 - Families often cannot afford the direct costs of school, so children either do not enroll in school or they drop out. This disproportionately affects female children

⁵ <https://efareport.wordpress.com/2012/11/09/the-bottom-ten-countries-for-female-education/>

⁶ http://www.unicef.org/teachers/girls_ed/BarrierstoGE.pdf

because when parents are given the choice between sending their son or their daughter to school, they usually choose the son. The choice to send sons to school over daughters stems from cultural norms, limited gender roles, and traditional beliefs.

- Poor classroom curriculum and structure that reinforces gender stereotypes
 - When girls are educated within highly patriarchal societies, the content of their lessons often reinforces gender stereotypes-- this is referred to the “hidden curriculum” of discrimination. Schools in these regions often lack female teachers and/or female role models in curriculum content.
- Girls are at risk for violence, sexual assault or harassment, exploitation, and/or corporal punishment when attending school.
 - Within schools, girls often experience sexual harassment and assault from both teachers and other pupils. This increases the likelihood of non-enrolment, nonattendance and dropping out.
- Traditional household obligations, gender roles and child labor
 - Because of cultural norms and gendered household expectations, families are less likely to send their girls to school. When there is a sick or absent relative within a family, girls are disproportionately affected because they are expected to care for family members more than boys are. Incidents of child labor also disproportionately affects girls because they carry a double burden of unpaid domestic chores and outside employment in order to support family income.⁷ Girls are often expected to devote time to household expectations at the expense of their studies, so they are often caused to be seriously unprepared for class and eventually drop out of school altogether.
- Distance from school
 - Being located far from local school increases the likelihood that children will not enroll or drop out of school. This issue disproportionately affects girls because parents are less likely to allow daughters to attend school if they have to travel long distances. In some countries, boarding facilities are available, but these facilities cater only to boys.
- Child Marriage and Early Motherhood⁸
 - In patriarchal societies, early marriage and motherhood often correlates with the low political, economic, and social status of women, and a lower national priority of girls’ education. Child marriage and early motherhood has statistically been found to reduce girls’ educational attainment. With every year that a girl delays getting married, she increases her years of schooling by 0.22 years, her likelihood

⁷ <http://www.womenthrive.org/blog/child-labor-girls%E2%80%99-education-issue>

⁸ <http://www.plan-uk.org/resources/documents/Breaking-Vows-Early-and-Forced-Marriage-and-Girls-Education/>

of literacy by 5.6 percentage points, and the likelihood of her secondary school completion by 6.5 percentage points.⁹

- Gender-based Violence and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
 - The controversial practice of female genital mutilation is found to have an effect on girls' schooling. In regions of Africa where FGM is prevalent, the practice is part of a ritual that continues over a period of months, so girls are often unable to attend school during this time. After missing school for so long, it is almost impossible for girls to catch up.¹⁰ Additionally, once a girl has undergone FGM, she is considered ready for marriage. Because of cultural expectations surrounding child marriage and early motherhood, this impedes her ability to attend school. FGM ceremonies are often expensive, so parents are unlikely to spend more money to send their daughter to school afterwards. Health problems, pain and trauma after FGM procedures also impact girls' attendance. These issues cause girls to either be absent from or extremely less attentive in class. This leads to poor class performance and high dropout rates among girls.
- Inadequate or discriminatory legislation and policies
 - Many countries either do not have or do not enforce laws to ensure that females have equal rights, and these attitudes often translate into educational outcomes. Countries who have discriminatory policies towards women (ex: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, etc.) are also most likely to have negative outcomes in regards to gender equality in education.
- Poor Quality Environment of Education Facilities
 - Overcrowding, lack of water or sanitation, and violence can cause an increased likelihood of non-attendance, dropping out, and poor achievement. Girls are disproportionately affected because there is often a lack of adequate sanitation facilities in schools for women (no separate bathrooms).
- Lack of access to Health Resources and Sanitary Products
 - Because many girls and women in developing countries often cannot afford or do not have access to effective feminine products, menstruation is a significant barrier to girls attending school. For example, in **Uganda**, girls miss 11 percent of school days due to menstrual-related issues.¹¹ Women in these regions also face setbacks for not having access to contraception or information about delaying childbirth.
- Gender-motivated threats and attacks by terrorist and insurgent groups
 - In 2014, the insurgent group Boko Haram kidnapped over 200 Nigerian school girls-- many of them as young as 12 years old-- and sold many of them into sex-

⁹ <http://blogs.worldbank.org/education/eliminating-child-marriage-boost-girls-education>

¹⁰ <https://www.giz.de/fachexpertise/downloads/giz2011-en-fgm-bildung.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/may/28/menstruation-girls-education-uganda-sanitation>

trafficking rings and forced marriages.¹² Extremist militant groups of this kind often have strong beliefs that women do not have a place in educational facilities, and they should instead be at home looking after their husbands and children. In many developing countries, threats from terrorist and religious extremist groups continues to be a serious threat to female-inclusive educational facilities.

Impacts of Improving Global Gender Equality in Education

According to World Bank, expanding girls' education is a strategic development investment in local and global economic growth. Improving female participation in school and the labor force will translate into a more educated workforce, better allocation of labor, increased productivity, and improved economic development.

Educating women is statistically proven to reduce poverty. Expanded female access to education leads to increased female and child health, fewer unwanted or young marriages and pregnancies, less vulnerability to disease, and increased wages. According to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), if every girl would receive secondary education in sub-Saharan African and South and West Asia, child marriage would fall by 64 percent— from roughly 2.9 million to 1 million. Women who are educated are less likely to marry young and/or against their will, less likely to have unwanted pregnancies, more likely to delay childbirth, and less likely to contract diseases such as HIV and AIDS. Women who are educated have statistically been proven to earn higher wages, since they are more likely to acquire information and skills that lead to increased earning power. According to World Bank, girls who complete secondary education, are 25% more likely to earn higher wages than those who did not complete secondary schooling.

The lack of female participation in education is a worldwide problem that affects society at local, national and international levels. Because our economies and political structures are becoming increasingly globalized, any member state's failure to comply with education standards consequently affects all other member states' prosperity.

Recommendations for Committee Work

In order to successfully combat gender inequality in education, the policies established by this Committee must accomplish the following:

- Outline enforceable standards and measurable outcomes
- Ensure that local governments cooperate with UN standards
- Outline a concrete source of funding for these new education initiatives and programs
- Provide public educational initiatives that incorporate civilians and help gather public support
- Address issue from both political/legal and cultural/societal standpoints
- Ensure the security of educational institutions

¹² <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/24/world/africa/nigeria-kidnapping-answers/>

- Address issues of technology or limited resources that may hinder gender parity
- Address barriers to women's health that may limit female participation in schools

Sources

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