

**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women**

**General discussion on Girls' and Women's Right to Education**

7 July 2014, 10:00 – 13:00  
Conference Room XVI, Palais des Nations, Geneva

***Introduction of the General Recommendation on Girls' and Women's  
Right to Education***

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Chair, CEDAW Working Group

- Madam Chair (Violeta Neubaer, Vice-Chair of the CEDAW Committee)
- Ms. Navi Pillay, High-Commissioner for Human Rights of the OHCHR
- Distinguished representatives of UNICEF and UNESCO
- Distinguished Keynote speakers
- Representatives of the Permanent Missions to the United Nations,
- Members of the CEDAW Committee
- Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

The CEDAW Committee has a strong tradition of developing General Recommendations that provide interpretive guidelines and elaborate norms and standards with which States parties should be compliant, to achieve full implementation of obligations under the respective Article of the Convention.

Soon after joining the Committee and examining information provided by States parties under Article 10, it became evident that the interpretation of provisions under this Article was very narrow. In most instances, information provided focused primarily on the **right to** education and therefore on capacity and access which, often, were not adequately assessed. Information provided by States parties therefore obfuscated the fact that, up to 41M girls worldwide, are denied education at the primary level, resulting in women accounting for nearly two thirds of the world's 780 million people who cannot read; indicative of the fact that, as pointed out by the UNESCO speaker,

we have not only failed to achieve MDG3 but it is also unlikely that better results will be obtained for the newly proposed post-2015 education goal and its targets unless gender is fully integrated in that goal.

More critical is the fact that Periodic Reports are totally silent on ways in which the gender regime of schools, marked as it is by entrenched patriarchal ideologies, practices and structures, shapes the daily experience of girls in school exposing them, as it does, for as many as 10 years, to an environment, which can be physically, emotionally and sexually abusive, thereby denying them enjoyment of their rights **within** the education arena.

A case in point is the gender-based violence that occurs in schools. Violence against women, is a central concern of Article 5 of the CEDAW Convention and GR 19 and is addressed in constructive dialogues with all States parties; and, although sexual abuse of girls at, or on their way to school, is a global phenomenon with reports of some 60M girls affected annually, this issue often remains unreported and only surfaces in the constructive dialogue when raised by the Committee, and even so, only with countries from certain geographical regions.

Schools can be violent spaces and the extent to which schooling is a major contributor to the construction of hegemonic masculinities and submissive femininities, and, a site where a culture of violence is reproduced, in my opinion, is underestimated. My own research on the sexual politics of teacher/student and student/student interactions in co-educational classrooms and ways in which power and control were exerted and negotiated, indicate that many interactions and exchanges, between male teachers and students and female students, passed expected boundaries, and could be categorized as sexual harassment. In fact, I concluded that in those settings, male teachers were nurturing misogynist attitudes in male students thereby producing a new generation of males with the potential to be abusers and perpetrators of gender-based violence in later life.

Further to this, Periodic Reports of State parties take no explicit account of the social currency and value of certification to females, an issue to which Madam Pillay has already alluded. Global trends disclose that, despite often lacking comparable educational attainment to that of females, overall, males are better positioned in the social, economic and political arenas; and, although the Committee consistently raises questions about the lower employment and higher unemployment rates for women compared with men, the horizontal and vertical sex- segregation of the formal labour market, the

gender wage gap, the under-representation of women in decision-making positions in elected bodies and in representational politics; no explicit link is made to the ways in which the sex-segregation of the school curriculum, the content of girls education, didactic pedagogical processes and the reproduction of gender stereotypes through schooling, determine these outcomes, and, deny women enjoyment of their **rights through** education.

Madam Chair, any consideration of women's **rights through education** must be juxtaposed against the fact that every significant United Nations conference since 1985 addressing gender equality, has pointed to the centrality of education as the vehicle for women's empowerment and as the tool for equipping them to grasp opportunities for their fuller participation in development processes. In this transformative paradigm, education is viewed as the means through which the axis of power between the sexes can be shifted to achieve more equitable outcomes for females beyond school; but, I would dare to suggest that this transformation is not as seamless as is proposed.

Improving women's access to education satisfies a basic human right and has produced distinct benefits in reducing fertility, infant and maternal mortality rates and equips women to better care for children, but it has been less

successful in shifting their subordinate position in both the private and public spheres. Rather than challenging patriarchal structures and systems, generally schooling serves to reinforce the social order and maintain sex-based discrimination and societal power structures through the reproduction of the male/female-domination/subordination hierarchy and the reproductive/productive, private/public dichotomies. To date, women's strategic need for empowerment, therefore, has not been addressed in any substantial way through the educational process. It is therefore encouraging to learn that UNICEF's new gender policy addresses these concerns.

If indeed education is to be the vehicle for women's empowerment and for creating a better balance in the distribution of power between the sexes in the home, and, in the social, economic and political spheres, States parties must give greater attention to all dimensions of schooling. The gender regime of schooling must be disrupted and schooling must produce girls who are confident, self-assured and equipped to be independent life-long learners.

The intention of elaborating this GR is to ensure that regional disparities as well as within country inequalities, based on the intersection of sex with other factors of social organization, that prevent women and girls from enjoying rights to, within and through education are addressed, and

ultimately eliminated. The GR, therefore, will intentionally address all three dimensions of the rights to education framework and will also establish clear linkages with other articles of the CEDAW Convention as well as existing GRs that address related concerns. My hope, and that of the Working group and the wider Committee, is that with the elaboration of this GR, every girl and woman in every State that is party to the CEDAW Convention will, in due course, not only claim and enjoy their right **to** education but will also enjoy rights **within** and **through** education and thus be enabled, in all their societies, to enjoy healthy and safe lives and will be so positioned in the social, economic and political spheres that they can make a more direct contribution to national, regional and global development processes.

I invite all here assembled and those who will partner with us in this venture, to help us 'give vision a form and make this vision a reality'.

Thank you.