

Women and the right to education

Human rights obligations and global political commitments

The norms and principles of gender equality and non-discrimination are at the core of all fundamental human rights treaties. International human rights law prohibits discrimination against women in the area of education.

- In accordance with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “(e)veryone has the right to education”.
 - Article 3 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights requires States parties to undertake “to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights” set forth in that treaty, including the right to education.
 - Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides “the right of everyone to education. “ To this end, “primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all”. Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational secondary education, and higher education, on the basis of capacity, shall be made generally and equally accessible to all, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.
 - Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides, inter alia, that States Parties shall “(m)ake primary education compulsory and available free to all”, “(m)ake higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means”, and “(t)ake measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.”
 - Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, details a number of measures which should be taken to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education.
 - UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education also bans discrimination in education on the basis of sex, referring to all types and levels of education, and includes access to education, the standard and quality of education, and the conditions under which it is given.
 - The Beijing Platform of Action of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 recognized education as a basic human right and an essential tool for achieving more equal relations between women and men. States committed to ensuring a number of strategic objectives, including: equal access to education, the closing of the gender gap in primary and secondary education, and development of non-discriminatory education and training by developing and using curriculums, textbooks and teaching aids free of sex-stereotyping.
 - Millennium Development Goal 2 calls for universal primary education. MDG 3 to “Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women”, has as one of its targets: “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015”.
-

The right to education is the entitlement to access free primary education, and to have equal opportunities to continue with further study. Such education must be inclusive and accessible to girls and boys, women and men, in law and in practice.

Education is not only a right in itself, but is also the surest way to empower individuals to enjoy all of their human rights. Education paves the way out of poverty and disempowerment, and opens up access to participation in society and in political decision-making.

Women and girls have historically suffered discrimination in the area of education, and continue to do so in many places of the world. Progress has been made in narrowing gender gaps in education over the past decade, in particular at the primary level. However, girls' secondary school enrolment has increased at a much slower rate, and is widening in some regions. The largest disparities are found in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, Central Asia and the Arab States. Within countries, significant inequalities can be found related to language, ethnicity or social status.

According to official UN statistics, of the estimated 72 million children who are not in school, girls are the majority. Girls are less likely than boys to be in school, and more likely than boys never to enroll. In contrast in terms of grade repetition, boys are more likely than girls to repeat primary grades in most countries where such data exists.

These trends deepen as children progress through the education system. Social, cultural and economic factors interact to weaken the chances of girls completing primary school and making the transition to lower secondary education. One immediate legacy is the high levels of illiteracy among young and adult women. Of the 759 million adults who cannot read or write, the vast majority, close to 70 per cent, are women – a trend that has remained stable the last ten years.

The realization of the right to education is essential to women being able to enjoy the full range of human rights. Women's exclusion from education and participation intersect with other problems, such as discriminatory patterns in ownership and exploitation of land, inheritance and maternal mortality and morbidity and the feminization of poverty.

"We must be mindful of the advantages that education has given us, and unite to address women's unequal status which persists in all parts of the world, both in their professional and private lives." –

Ms. Navanethem Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Keynote speech of October 2010: "2010 – a milestone or a millstone in advancing women's participation in research?"