

CONCEPT NOTE

High-Level Thematic Debate

Advancing Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls for a Transformative Post-2015 Development Agenda

6 March 2015

Introduction

The UN and the international community have made significant progress in advancing gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, including through international standards such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and relevant instruments of specialized agencies. Progress has also been marked by the political commitments contained in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the outcome of their reviews, the Millennium Development Goals, and other internationally agreed development goals, as well as institutional arrangements such as the establishment of UN Women.

2015 marks twenty years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Through efforts at the national, regional and global level, there has been steady progress towards areas that include eliminating gender disparity in primary school attendance; access to sexual and reproductive health-care services; an increase in the number of women in national parliaments in some regions; and an increase in women's labour market participation.

However, as Member States and other stakeholders engage in formulating the Post-2015 Development Agenda, it must be acknowledged that gender inequalities still remain deeply entrenched in many societies. Discrimination in law and in practice persists. Violence against women and girls remains at alarmingly high levels across all regions. Women's lack of access to and control over resources and assets and their disproportionate share of unpaid care work impacts on their ability to participate as full and equal economic actors and beneficiaries. Fewer than half of women have jobs compared to almost four-fifths of men, and a significant gender pay gap persists. Women are more likely than men to have low-paid, undervalued, and vulnerable jobs, with limited or no social protection. Women remain significantly under-represented in decision-making at all levels. Notwithstanding the significant achievements in reaching gender parity in primary and secondary education, gender inequality remains in terms of

access, learning environments, completion rates, learning outcomes and future job opportunities.

The overall questions that the High-level thematic debate will address are, what actions should be taken to target the underlying causes of gender inequality and what laws, policies and programmes should be devised to provide for women's political empowerment, and their access to productive resources and quality education - thus empowering women and girls to fully realize their potential to engage in, contribute to and benefit from sustainable development.

Background

In "The Future We Want," the Outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20), Heads of State and Government and high representatives recognized that "although progress on gender equality has been made in some areas, the potential of women to engage in, contribute to and benefit from sustainable development as leaders, participants and agents of change has not been fully realized owing to, *inter alia*, persistent social, economic, and political inequalities." Leaders also reaffirmed their "commitments to ensure women's equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy, society and political decision making."

Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women is essential for effective action on all aspects of sustainable development in the context of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the specific goals and targets that are to be adopted. Urgent action is needed to empower women and girls, ensuring that they have equal opportunities to benefit from development and remove the barriers that prevent them from being full participants in all spheres of society. Going forward, it will be necessary to draw on the lessons learned from the Beijing+20 and the ICPD Beyond 2014 reviews and forge strong links with the negotiations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

The proposal of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contains a stand-alone goal on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (goal 5). The overall aim should be to attain transformative gender equality, women's and girls' rights and empowerment with goals and targets that promote, among other things, women's and girls' education, equal access to basic services, land and other resources, economic opportunities, health care, including sexual and reproductive health, political participation, and decision-making, including in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, among others.

This thematic debate will focus primarily on two aspects of promoting gender equality and empowerment of women that are important for their contribution to sustainable development - women's economic and political empowerment and their access to quality education.

Evidence shows that greater access to and control over productive resources and expanded economic opportunities for women will lead to, inter alia, greater food security, improved lives, strengthened communities, increased investments for households including in education, food and housing. In turn, these all further contribute to poverty reduction and strengthened economies. Policies that increase women's access to decent work, including women's access to a wider range of occupations, and to equal pay for work of equal value, are essential. Women also need to have an equal voice at work, including through trade union representation and collective bargaining coverage.

The number of women holding political office worldwide remains very low. Such deficit is largely influenced by social norms and beliefs regarding gender roles. Increasing information, knowledge and space to challenge these norms and practices can help shift perceptions and increase the likelihood of women actuating political aspirations. It is equally important to accelerate measures to increase women's participation and leadership in other decision-making fora including the judiciary, media, private and public sector institutions, and in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Quality education and training, that does not reinforce gender stereotypes, is a key driver of economic growth and social inclusion as well as a critical enabler for achieving gender equality. Quality education and training has been recognized as a sine qua non for women to enter the labour force and have access to a wider range of jobs. Progress on reducing child mortality is strongly linked to the mother's access to basic education and secondary education completion empowers women to have a voice and make informed choices about their lives. Removing the obstacles to girls' and women's quality education, training and life-long learning would be catalytic for breaking the cycle of poverty and activating their full potential. Moving forward, Governments and the international community will need to focus on ensuring quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for women and girls' including through monitoring and evaluating progress and removing the barriers that impede girls' and women's access to and participation in formal and non-formal education at all levels.

The two interactive panel discussions will be devoted to these components of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

Objective

The main objective of the High-level thematic debate is to provide an opportunity for participants to address challenges related to promoting gender equality and empowerment of women and girls as well as to share good practices and experiences focusing on:

- i. Measures to achieve gender equality and women's economic and political empowerment at all levels.
- ii. Increasing access to and completion of quality education as one of the most effective tools for empowering women and girls.

Format

The Thematic debate will be a one-day event consisting of an opening session, two interactive panel discussions and a closing session.

The opening session of the High-level thematic debate will commemorate the 2015 United Nations Observance of International Women's Day, under the slogan: "*Empower women, Empower humanity. Picture it.*" The commemoration will celebrate achievements, identify gaps and challenges, reaffirm political will and commitment, contribute to social mobilization, awareness-raising and revitalized public debate to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and advance gender equality worldwide.

The theme of the morning panel discussion will be: *Women's economic and political empowerment, including access to decent work, and control over economic and productive resources and active participation in governance and decision-making.*

Some questions to guide the panel discussion are as follows:

1. What are some of the most successful and transformative strategies and policies that resulted in clear advances for women's rights and women's economic and political empowerment?
2. What are the most effective ways to change social norms, beliefs and practices regarding gender roles that contribute to the significant under-representation of women in decision-making at all levels?
3. How can employers' and workers' organizations empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community, and what benefits do they derive from gender equality and women's empowerment?

The theme of the afternoon panel discussion will be: *Access to quality education and skills development as tools for empowerment of women and girls.*

Some questions to guide the panel discussion are as follows:

1. What policies and programmes support women's access to decent work?
2. How can Governments develop education and training systems that are more responsive to demand in the labour market today and facilitate lifelong learning opportunities for girls and women? What measures have been taken to increase women's entrepreneurship?
3. What are the success stories in achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education and what further actions are needed to close the remaining gender gap in access to, and completion of secondary education as well as to achieve gender equality in education? What are some related actions that, although not directly linked to education, have increased girls' access to education?
4. What initiatives exist to combat gender stereotypes in education and training, and increase the representation of girls in male-dominated fields and boys in female-dominated fields? What impact have these initiatives had and what specific recommendations could be made to successfully remove gender stereotypes in curricula, textbooks, but also through teacher training and mentoring?

To foster an interactive debate, participants are encouraged to make brief interventions, not exceeding two minutes. Complete statements can be submitted to the PaperSmart portal.

Participation

Member States will be invited to participate at the highest level. Representatives of UN agencies and entities, international financial institutions, regional development banks, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders will also be invited to attend at the highest level possible.

Outcome

The outcome will be a President's summary which will be circulated to all Member States and stakeholders. Participants are invited to make specific expressions of commitment in support of gender equality and women's empowerment. These could take the form of announcements of legislation, policies, programmes or various other initiatives to be captured in the meeting summary.