

14th session of the Human Rights Council

Annual full-day discussion on Women's Human Rights

“Empowering Women through Education”

Room XX, Palais des Nations, Geneva

Date and venue

Monday 7 June 2010, 9:00-12:00 and 12:00 to 15:00, Room XX, Palais des Nations

Mandate

In its resolution 6/30, where it reaffirmed the principle of gender equality and the need for the full implementation of the human rights of women, the Human Rights Council decided, among other things, to incorporate “sufficient and adequate time, at minimum an annual full-day meeting, to discuss the human rights of women, including measures that can be adopted by States and other stakeholders, to address human rights violations experienced by women.”

Focus and objectives

The right to education is the entitlement to access free primary education, and to have equality of opportunities to continue with further stages of study. Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. Such education must be inclusive and accessible to all, in law and practice, and no provider of public education may discriminate, including on the grounds of gender.

Yet, too many girls around the world experience disadvantage and discrimination in accessing education and are subjected to violence and other discriminatory treatment that prevent them from accessing education or that occurs while they are in educational environments. Studies however have shown that when women and girls have access to education, their life expectancy increases, the spread of HIV/AIDS and infant mortality rates decrease, the growth and development of a country improves and poverty is reduced.

Many girls reach adulthood without having been able to complete secondary education, and sometimes having not even completed primary education. The CEDAW Committee calls for programs for girls and women who have left school prematurely.

The following issues will be discussed:

- How to ensure that universal education is **available** and **accessible** for women and girls? States have an obligation to guarantee the right to education to everyone, including those who have not been able to exercise this right when they have reached adulthood.
- How to ensure that education is **acceptable** for women and girls and of good **quality**? Education needs to be acceptable in terms of content and adaptable to the changing needs of society. Education also requires adequate infrastructures and educational personnel that will create a safe environment for girls, free from violence and discrimination.
- How violence against women (including in the educational environment) can have a strong impact on women's right to education; and how knowledge and learning can contribute to combating discrimination against women, as well as causes and consequences of violence against women.

- Practices which often prevent women and girls to fully enjoy their human right to education (early marriage, early pregnancy, domestic work, etc.) and what remedies are available.
- How the Human Rights Council can contribute to furthering women's empowerment by focusing its attention on women and girls' access to education.

Opening statement: Ms Kyung-wha Kang, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

Moderator: H.E. Ambassador Alex Van Meeuwen
President of the Human Rights Council

Panelists:

Mr Vernor Muñoz Villalobos, Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Ms Catarina de Albuquerque, Independent Expert on the issue of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation (*Available from 09:00-11:30 only*)

Ms Rashida Manjoo, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences

Ms Susana Villaran De La Puente, Expert member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child – (*Available from 13.00 – 15:00 only*)

Ms Cecilia Baldeh, UNICEF, Chief of Education, Sudan.

Ms Amina Lemrini, member of Morocco's national Advisory Council on Human Rights

Ms Neha Sood, Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, India

Ms Rebecca Winthrop, Fellow and Co-Director of the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution – *TBC*

Format

Presentations by the panelists will be followed by an interactive discussion.

The presentations of the panelists (80 minutes) will be followed by an interactive discussion (4 hours 20 minutes). This discussion will be divided into two slots of 120 minutes each (90 minutes for comments and questions from the floor, followed by 30 minutes for comments and replies by panelists). The interactive debate will be followed by concluding remarks from the moderator.

The modalities of the panel are: 10 minutes for panelists, 3 minutes for Member States and 2 minutes for Observer States, national human rights institutions, international organizations and non-governmental organizations.

Member States, national human rights institutions, international organizations and non-governmental organizations are encouraged to participate and make their contributions to the debate, subject to the modalities and the practice of the Council. In particular, NGO coordination is strongly encouraged to maximize the use of time.

Outcome

A solid overview of: what the universal right to education means for women and girls; the gaps in the achievement of the implementation of the universal right to education when the issue is addressed with a gender neutral lens; how the enjoyment of their right to education empowers women in their enjoyment of all of their other human rights; recommendations on the role the Human Rights Council can continue to play in consolidating an approach to human rights that takes into account the specific needs of women and the specific violations to which they may be subjected.

Background

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) established the universal right to education at its Article 26. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognized “the right of everyone to education” in its article 13. States parties to ICESCR agreed that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (article 13).

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) explicitly established in its Article 10 the obligation for States parties to “take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education.”

Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides that States Parties “recognize the right of the child to education” and that they shall “make primary education compulsory and available free to all”; “encourage the development of different forms of secondary education”; “make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity”; “make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children”; “take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.”

In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action reaffirmed that “education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men. Equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change. Literacy of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and to empowering women to participate in decision-making in society. Investing in formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women, with its exceptionally high social and economic return, has proved to be one of the best means of achieving sustainable development and economic growth that is both sustained and sustainable” (paragraph 69).

The Platform for Action set as strategic objectives to “ensure equal access to education” (B.1); “eradicate illiteracy among women” (B.2); “improve women’s access to vocational training, science and technology, and continuing education” (B.3); “develop non-discriminatory education and training” (B.4); “allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms” (B.5); “promote life-long education and training for girls and women” (B.6).

Today however, millions of women and girls can not read or write; millions of women and girls are illiterate; and of the 130 million out-of-school children, 70 per cent are girls. Uneducated women have no autonomy; they do not know what their rights are and how they can exercise them properly. They cannot access the information they need to take appropriate decisions and cannot participate actively in the political decision-making or assert their civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. They will not have access to better skilled and paid jobs. They have less responsibilities or social influence, and they lack effective remedies to prevent them from being subjected to violence and abuse.