



Report on the online discussion on gender, education and employment

United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (now part of UN Women)

Background

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will consider “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” as the priority theme during its fifty-fifth session in 2011. To contribute to preparations for the session, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), now part of UN Women, organized an online discussion on the linkages between women’s and girls’ access to and participation in formal and non-formal education and training, and their equal access to full employment and decent work, from 7 to 20 July 2010.

The online discussion, running simultaneously in English and in French, aimed to stimulate interest in the CSW priority theme; provide a forum for discussion between different stakeholders; identify measures taken and good practices that strengthen the linkages between women’s education and employment; and identify gaps and challenges requiring further action.

To launch the discussion, DAW and UN Radio organized a radio podcast on gender, education and employment with three participants who responded to questions submitted by the general public via the DAW website. A total of 57 questions were received for the podcast, 10 of which were in French. The participants were: **Carolyn Medel-Añonuevo**, Deputy Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, a research institute of UNESCO promoting non-formal education, literacy and adult education in the perspective of lifelong learning; **May Rihani**, Senior Vice President of the Academy for Education Development, a non-profit organization active in more than 150 countries; and **Sakena Yacoobi**, President and Executive Director of the Afghan Institute of Learning, an Afghan women-led NGO serving 350,000 women and children each year .

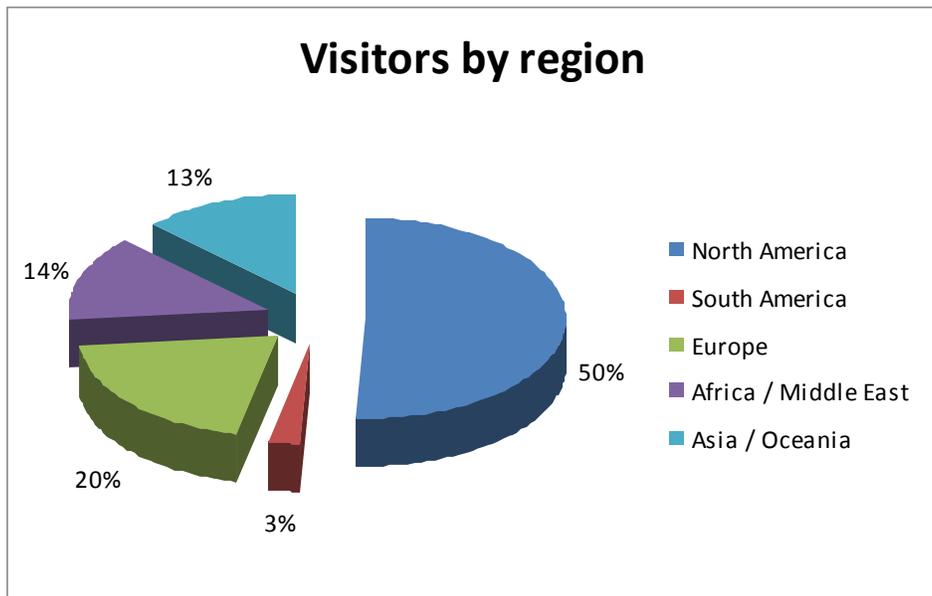
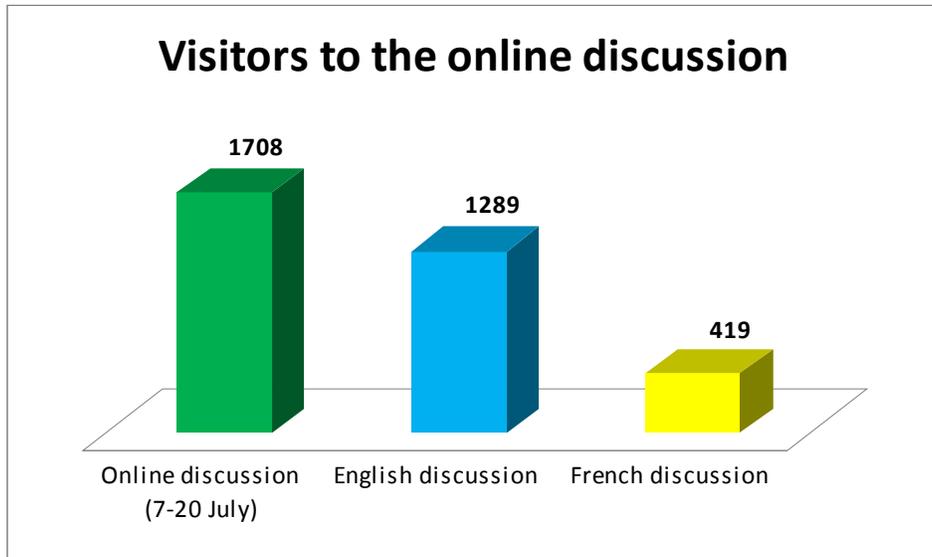
The podcast is available in a full (52 min) and a short version (14 min).

Participation¹

The discussion took place on the DAW website and was freely accessible to all. To post a comment, participants had to register with IntenseDebate, the comment platform used for the discussion. During the two weeks of the discussion, 31 participants contributed a total of 166 posts. Six of these participants wrote in French. The contributors came from all regions of the world. A majority of participants worked in grassroots or national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or as education and gender specialists in UN agencies. Organizations such as the African Women’s Association, the Programme on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, World Vision International or the Educators and Scientists Free Trade Union of Georgia joined in the discussion.

¹ Data on participants were provided by Google Analytics, IntenseDebate, and by the participants themselves.

Many more people followed the discussion: more than 1,700 people from 110 countries visited the pages of the online discussion, most of them multiple times to follow the progress of the discussion. Each viewer stayed an average of five minutes to read the contributions, almost double the average time normally spent on the DAW website.



Summary of the discussion

Why a discussion on gender, education and employment?

Education is a key driver of social change and economic growth, and its importance for achieving gender equality has been well-recognized.² Access to education has increased globally for girls at all levels, and particularly in primary education, over the last decade. According to the 2010 MDG report,³ there were 96 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in primary school, and 95 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in secondary school in 2008, a sizable increase compared to the 1999 ratios of 91 and 88 per 100 boys.

Nevertheless, women's educational attainment does not necessarily translate into improved employment opportunities. Among the 20 to 24 year-old population, women continue to lag behind men in labour force participation in all regions.⁴ Women who find employment, whether in the informal or formal sector, also face many challenges, including over-representation in vulnerable employment and wage differentials.

The online discussion focused on the linkages between women's education and employment, and opened with the following questions:

1. What initiatives exist to combat gender stereotypes in education and increase the representation of girls in male-dominated fields and of boys in female-dominated fields? What impact have these initiatives had?
2. In your country, do girls and boys acquire different skills outside school? If so, what are the implications on women's and men's employment prospects?
3. Does poor quality education have a different impact on girls' and boys' educational attainment and on their future career prospects?
4. In your country, what types of non-formal education and training do women and girls participate in? What employment opportunities do they lead to?
5. What policies can accelerate the integration of the growing number of young educated women into the workforce?
6. What initiatives have proven successful in helping women and girls transition from school/training to work?
7. In your country, among employed people, do women and men have the same access to training opportunities? What impact does such training have on the career progression of women and men?
8. What would be your recommendations to Governments and other stakeholders to strengthen the linkages between women's education and employment?

The following sections summarize the participants' observations.

Formal education and male-dominated fields of study: access issues

All participants, from Nepal to the Democratic Republic of Congo, agreed that significant progress had been made in their respective countries with regard to girls' participation in primary education, but that keeping girls in school beyond the primary level proved difficult. In order to keep girls in school, economic incentives can be offered to girls, their parents, and schools. For instance, vouchers, scholarships and school supplies can be provided, including to encourage girls to study male-dominated subjects. Furthermore, in many countries, the specific needs of girls and women should be addressed by ensuring that girls do not travel long distances from their home to go to secondary school and that the programmes offered are not too time-consuming as girls and young women often have additional responsibilities at home.

² For more on this issue, please see the Report of the Secretary-General on Beijing + 15 at <http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=E/2010/4>

³ See http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2010/MDG_Report_2010_En_low%20res.pdf

⁴ World Bank (2008), Ready for work. [Available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/ReadyforWorkfactsheet.pdf>]

Beyond keeping girls in school, greater efforts should be made to mainstream a gender perspective in education curricula. Textbooks, but also teacher training programmes, should be gender-sensitive and promote gender equality. The efforts of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which organizes training workshops based on its Gender Sensitivity Training Manual (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001376/137604eo.pdf>) in Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia were highlighted; so was the Toolkit for Mainstreaming Gender in Higher Education in Africa (<http://www.aau.org/wghe/gender/toolkit/Tooltik-complete.pdf>) developed by the Association of African Universities and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa.

Participants pointed out that little has been done to increase the representation of girls and women in male-dominated fields, a problem in both developed and developing countries. The existence of role models is particularly crucial, be it women tuk-tuk drivers in Nepal, businesswomen or prominent scientists, in order to show young girls that they can venture out and prosper in a male-dominated field. Similarly, male role models in female-dominated fields are important in order to generate greater respect and recognition for traditionally female work.

Non-formal education: gender stereotypes still prevail

In many countries, skills acquired outside of formal educational institutions by girls and boys conform to gender stereotypes. Boys train to become mechanics, carpenters, masons, cattle-herders, or farmers; while girls either remain in the domestic sphere where they are taught skills that will help them with domestic and care work such as cleaning and cooking, or they train in traditionally female occupations to become, for instance, hairdressers, carpet weavers, masseuses, or seamstresses.

While these skills may help women become self-sufficient, they usually do not lead to a stable and secure income. Self-employed women who manufacture local products are often not able to compete in the global markets. They face obstacles such as a lack of business management and negotiation skills. Boys, on the other hand, may learn such skills through participating in sports, where they learn how to work in a team but also how to lead a team, and how to deal with winning and losing.

A strong partnership between educational institutions and companies or manufacturers could lead to better employment prospects for both girls and boys, irrespective of their choice in training. Affirmative action programmes could also help ensure that women access male-dominated fields such as automotive, construction and electrical repairs. Moreover, vocational training and non-formal education should provide a participatory learning environment and gender-sensitive learning materials to develop the capacity of girls and boys to make informed life choices. Skills taught should also include life skills such as setting goals, the importance of personal space for growth, and teamwork. The West Bank and Gaza Strip Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools, launched by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), was provided as an example of institutions teaching such skills (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/i1450e/i1450e01.pdf>).

Poor quality education: a greater impact for girls

Poor quality education has a strong negative impact on both boys' and girls' future career prospects. One participant compared poor quality education to a blunt knife: it never succeeds in cutting anything but wastes energy, and any person using it runs the risk of cutting one's own hand.

However, the impact of poor quality education can be particularly difficult to overcome for girls because of the overall structural inequalities they face. The teacher to student ratio, the state of the school facilities - sanitation, water, benches and desks - and the processes of teaching and learning may have a different bearing of girls' and boys' educational attainment and subsequently on their future career prospects. For instance, in India, the mobility of some girls may be restricted due to cultural constraints: they thus may not have the option, available to boys, to attend a better school that would be located at a greater distance from their homes. While it is important to ensure that all schools provide quality education, Governments can also tackle specific cultural constraints with public campaigns and awareness raising programmes on girls' right to education.

Women in the workforce: a variety of barriers

Participants highlighted structural constraints that prevent educated women from accessing decent work. They pointed to the role of Governments in setting labour standards and enforcing them. Government can ensure that women enter a level-playing field when they join the workforce, by removing obstacles such as differential health insurance premiums for women and men paid by the employer, or by providing loans and subsidies for women entrepreneurs to access credit and start businesses. They can also ensure that sexual harassment is punished. Attention can likewise be paid to women's safety and the prevention of violence against women in public spaces to ensure that women do not run any risk when they go to work. In addition, Governments could set gender parity targets for all levels of employment and cancel subsidies to institutions that exclude women from decision-making positions.

A related issue is that of corruption. While this is not a problem specific to women, it is a real obstacle in some countries for young educated youth that do not have connections to people who can offer them a job.

Once employed, women tend to have equal access to training opportunities, but these opportunities may not offer the flexibility in terms of time and location that some women would require, or may not take into account the constraints faced by women who assume caregiving responsibilities. In addition, access to training does not translate into equal pay or faster promotion.

Some participants highlighted the specific needs of older women for skills to help them adapt to issues such as sensory loss, decreasing mobility, or technological changes. Adopting a lifelong approach to education and training, including with regard to literacy and numeracy programmes, is particularly important in light of societal changes such as ageing populations and changing family structures, which can lengthen a person's working life.

Another impediment to women's labour force participation is the difficulty in pursuing a career while attending to family responsibilities. It is important to provide family planning information and contraception to teenage girls and boys, and women and men, to enable them to make informed decision, and to help employees reconcile work and family by providing adequate childcare and transportation infrastructure, as well as by offering flexible leave arrangements or tax incentives for women to remain in the workplace. Labour and time-saving devices, for instance those related to fuel wood or water collection, have also proved useful in allowing women and girls to invest time in education and employment.

Married women: who makes employment decisions?

The question of marriage and employment was also raised, including in view of the current economic context where it is increasingly in the interest of the family to have both spouses working. Some argued that marriage restricts women's control over their employment choices. In some instances, women are forbidden by their husbands to be gainfully employed after graduation. In many cultures, women are supposed to dutifully follow the advice of their husbands with regards to employment and other matters.

Participants pointed out that education and antidiscrimination laws are not enough to encourage women's employment and that women's empowerment within the household is also necessary.

Recommendations

Participants recommended that Governments:

- Teach girls and boys about their rights as the new generation is the best voice for change
- Perform analyses such as equality impact assessments based on sound sex-disaggregated data to better understand gendered dynamics in the link between education and employment
- Adopt antidiscrimination laws related to recruitment, pregnancy, salary and promotion
- Enforce these laws by requiring businesses and institutions to report on their compliance, and by cancelling subsidies and fining institutions that discriminate against women

- Provide incentives for women to pursue employment, including through:
 - o Universal paid parental leave for both women and men
 - o An adequately-funded system of accessible and affordable childcare
- Promote women's entrepreneurship, including through:
 - o Providing start-up capital for women
 - o Fostering associations of female producers – such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association – www.sewa.org) – to facilitate access to resources, especially land and credit, and to markets
 - o Putting in place affirmative action programmes
 - o Promoting women's access to well-designed agricultural extension services
- Promote gender parity at the political level
- Recognize and value the work done by women at home and improve women's access to labour- and time-saving technologies
- Adopt policies targeting older women to help them update their skills, for instance by developing a lifelong learning approach to education and training

Civil society was encouraged to act as a watchdog, increase awareness of issues related to women's education and employment, and put pressure on Governments to fulfill their commitments.