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Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-fifth session

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Agenda item 3 (a)

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

High-level round table on access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work

Chair’s summary

1. On 22 February 2011, the Commission on the Status of Women held a high-level round table on access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work. The interactive high-level round table focused on sharing of national experiences, lessons learned and good practices. A discussion guide provided the framework for the interactive dialogue.

2. The high-level round table was organized in two parallel sessions in order to allow for interaction among the large number of participants. The sessions were chaired by Mr. Garen Nazarian, Chair, Commission on the Status of Women, and Mr. Kazuo Kodama, Deputy Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations. Two keynote speakers opened the discussion, Mr. Fortunato de la Peña, Vice-Chair, Commission on Science and Technology for Development and Undersecretary for Science and Technology, Philippines, and Ms. Josefina Vázquez Mota, member of Parliament and former Minister of Education, Mexico. Invited representatives from the United Nations system, Ms. Barbara Bailey, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and Ms. Jane Hodges, International Labour Organization, and representatives of non-governmental organizations, Ms. Joy Carter, International Federation of University Women, and Ms. Deepali Sood, Plan International, responded and contributed to the interactive

dialogue. Fifty-one Government representatives, two representatives from regional groups and one observer offered interventions at the high-level round table.

3. Many good practices and experiences in respect of how to achieve results geared towards gender equality in education, training, science, technology and employment do exist. There is a need to reinforce, expand and replicate good practices, and use them as the basis for designing and implementing better policies and programmes.

4. Education is a basic human right and a basic human need. The importance of education and training and the role of science and technology in poverty eradication, economic development and growth, and social change, and in catalysing the empowerment of women, have been well established and repeatedly reaffirmed by Governments at key United Nations conferences and meetings. A range of normative and policy commitments are in place, including in human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women¹ and policy instruments such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women,² the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society,³ adopted at the World Summit on the Information Society, the Dakar Framework for Action,⁴ adopted at the World Education Forum, and the Millennium Development Goals. More focused action and investments are needed to ensure that these commitments are translated into concrete results at global, regional and national levels.

5. As a result of increased momentum and political will, demonstrated through the prioritization of and investment in the education sector, and more widespread use of strategies such as gender-sensitive budgeting and planning and targeted policies, many countries have made substantial progress in increasing girls' and young women's access to and completion of primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as in improving female literacy rates. In a number of countries, girls have surpassed boys in both completion rates and academic achievement.

6. Many countries are implementing policies and programmes designed to make education more affordable to the poor, including the elimination of tuition and school fees, conditional cash transfer programmes, child benefit allowances, scholarships, school feeding programmes, and free boarding schools. While many of these financial incentives are available for both girls and boys, more targeted measures, such as scholarships for girls majoring in science and technology subjects, have also been instituted. States have also adopted policies to increase girls' enrolment at tertiary and university levels through quotas, favourable consideration of girls' college applications, scholarships and availability of dormitories. The proximity of education facilities to homes is considered to be a central factor for increasing access and participation of both girls and boys in respect of education.

¹ United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378.

² *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annexes I and II.

³ See document A/60/687.

⁴ See United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Final Report of the World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April 2000* (Paris, 2000).

7. The creation of safe and conducive learning environments is of key importance to improving school attendance of girls. Violence or fear of violence at or on the way to and from school continues to impede girls' access to education and to lead to their dropping out of school. Initiatives to improve learning environments and the safety of girls at and on the way to and from school include the establishment of girls-only dormitories; the provision of infrastructure such as transportation, separate toilets and improved lighting; and the addressing of women's human rights in curricula. Adolescent girls who are pregnant and face discrimination require specific support, and measures are necessary to create an environment where pregnant adolescents and teenage mothers can continue their education and training.

8. In many countries, in particular developing countries, women teachers are overrepresented in lower levels of education and tend to be concentrated in urban schools. Hence, there remains a need to increase the number of women teachers at all levels of education, in particular in rural areas.

9. Despite progress made across regions in access to education, inequalities based on class, income and rural and urban differences persist. Enhanced attention should be given to the situation, needs and priorities of specific groups, such as indigenous women, women in rural areas and women with disabilities, which often comprise the majority of girls out of school and women without or with only limited levels of education. Special attention also needs to be paid to the education and training needs of refugee and migrant women. Global development goals and commitments would not be reached without specific action to reach and ensure the inclusion of these groups in global and national initiatives, such as the Education for All Fast Track Initiative.

10. Participants recognized, however, that expanding access to education is not enough: the quality and relevance of education must be improved, in response to shifting societal demands. Poor-quality education has become a major concern, as many children leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills, and lack the knowledge and skills relevant for today's competitive job market. Investment in quality education should be intensified by prioritizing the professional development of teachers, improving learning conditions and revising curricula.

11. Quality education also needs to include efforts to address gender stereotypes, which continue to permeate society, perpetuate discrimination against women and contribute to steering women and men into segregated study and career paths, with a disadvantageous impact on women's economic prospects. To promote necessary societal change and open up new opportunities for women in non-traditional as well as emerging sectors — for example, science, technology, engineering, mathematics and the green economy — such stereotypes need to be tackled systematically. This will require a better understanding of the root causes of these stereotypes and of the role played by socialization processes, including those of teachers and parents, in their perpetuation. Good practices and promising initiatives to address stereotypes include revision of educational materials; efforts to sensitize parents, teachers and other educational personnel to gender-equality issues; and measures to expose both girls and boys to role models in non-traditional fields, such as female engineers and male kindergarten teachers. Job search training, guidance and career counselling have also been effective.

12. As the world economy is increasingly knowledge-driven, an educated workforce able to apply existing technology and to develop new science and

technology is critical. Ensuring that women can acquire the necessary skills and competencies is an economic imperative. There is therefore an urgent need to prioritize targeted measures designed to introduce girls to, and increase their interest in, math, science and technology at an early age. Innovative training initiatives to strengthen capacity in teaching math, science and technology in creative and participatory ways do exist, and include the granting of awards and scholarships to students in the fields of science and technology; the establishment of women's colleges offering specializations in science and technology; and special programmes to promote the engagement of women in engineering.

13. In some countries, the number of women in decision-making positions, including in universities, parliaments, Governments and the judiciary, as well as in the private sector, has increased. Universities have established advisory boards and taken other steps to monitor and promote gender parity in institutions of higher education, including improving the recruitment, promotion and retention of female professors, and advancing women's participation in managerial and leadership positions. Financial incentives have been provided to encourage universities to appoint more women to professorship positions. However, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions and the glass ceiling has not yet been shattered. Greater efforts are needed to ensure the achievement of gender parity among decision makers, including in academies of science, funding institutions, academia and the public and private educational and science and technology sectors.

14. Despite their important progress in the area of education, women continue to experience difficulties in finding decent work. Education in itself is not sufficient when women and girls seek to gain access to decent work. The disconnect between women's education and their job opportunities calls for targeted public policies to ensure a better transition from education to decent work and full employment. Increasing women's access to and control over financial resources and stronger action to promote equal pay for work of equal value are necessary.

15. Other means of strengthening the link between education gains and decent employment include action to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities and better work-life balance through measures such as flexible working hours and access to high-quality childcare. Measures such as preschool education, access to childcare after school hours, specific programmes targeted at single mothers and extended hours of operation of public services also help parents better balance family and work responsibilities. In some countries, private companies receive certification when they meet standards on workplace policies promoting the equality between women and men.

16. Persisting unequal sharing of responsibilities in the private and public spheres between women and men remains a challenge. While there is impetus for change, current efforts target mostly girls and women. In many societies, the male breadwinner model continues to prevail. Further efforts, particularly targeted at boys and men, are needed to challenge the entrenched stereotypic perceptions of the division of labour as being between a male breadwinner and a female caretaker and to deepen the understanding of the need for equal sharing of parenting and caregiving responsibilities between women and men.

17. Measures to expand women's entrepreneurial opportunities and skills remain inadequate. There is a need to provide training for women in business skills, including the development and finalization of business plans and operations. Public

policies should foster a sound entrepreneurial culture and help ensure that the mainstream financial sector better responds and caters to women's interests, needs and priorities.

18. Experiences from several developing countries show that information and communication technologies (ICT), including mobile phones, can have a transformational impact on poverty eradication efforts and women's socio-economic empowerment. ICT can provide families with access to a wide range of information about social services, including provision of health care and medication, and care of infants and children. ICT can also facilitate and promote the prevention of violence against women and girls, provide access to mobile banking, improve entrepreneurial opportunities through e-commerce, provide adolescent girls with access to information on sexual and reproductive health, and offer literacy training to women and girls. Effective use of ICT in distance and online learning has also been documented. In some countries, the Internet is perceived by girls as an important tool for expanding their horizons beyond their families and the communities in which they reside. Yet, millions of women and girls worldwide, especially those living in poverty and in rural areas, have insufficient or no access to ICT, including mobile phones. The potential impact of science and technology, including ICT, on women's activities should be further examined and efforts undertaken to ensure that women can have better access to and use of new technologies for economic and social purposes.

19. In many of the areas discussed, more detailed research, and better-disaggregated and comparable data and analyses are needed to explore and further clarify the underlying causes of inequalities, including differences in dropout and completion rates, low school attendance and low participation by sex in certain subjects or fields of study, and the relationship between paid and unpaid work and access to decent work. National capacities in these areas should be strengthened in order to ensure the formulation of the appropriate policy responses needed to address such inequalities. Promising initiatives to improve capacity in data collection and analysis include more detailed questions on education and employment in national surveys and censuses, improved monitoring and evaluation of programmes and projects, and initiatives to collect and share good practices.

Recommendations

20. Based on experience and good practice, participants recommended a range of actions to increase the access and participation of women and girls in respect of education, training, science and technology, and to promote women's equal access to full employment and decent work, including:

- Improving the quality and relevance of education and training to ensure the employability of women, including in non-traditional sectors such as science and technology
- Encouraging girls' interest in math, science and technology and combating gender stereotypes, including by exposing girls and boys to female role models; recruiting female science teachers and professors; equipping teachers with gender-sensitive teaching methods, curricula and material; and sensitizing parents, teachers and other educational personnel to gender-equality issues

- Creating safe environments for girls at and on the way to and from school, including by providing safe transportation and infrastructure and conducting comprehensive violence-prevention activities
- Expanding the use of gender-responsive budgeting, and increasing public and private investments in the education system through the use of innovative forms of partnerships and financing
- Supporting the transition of girls and women from education to full employment and decent work, including through provision of career counselling, job search support services, internships and mentorship programmes
- Fostering women's entry into the business sector by providing them with access to and ownership of economic and financial resources, and capacity-building opportunities in business management skills, market intelligence and information technology, and networking and information-sharing
- Promoting women's effective participation in decision-making and leadership positions, including in the fields of science and technology
- Facilitating the reconciliation of family and work life, including through flexible and family-friendly work policies; the reduction of unpaid care work through investments in public infrastructure (for example, energy, water and sanitation); and the redistribution of unpaid care work between women and men, as well as between the household and the public and private sectors, through the provision of accessible and affordable care services and after-school programmes
- Providing women and girls, especially those living in poverty, and in remote and rural areas, with access to information and communication technologies including mobile technology and the Internet
- Improving the collection, analysis and use of sex- and age-disaggregated and comparable data on all aspects of women's access to and participation in education, training, science and technology and decent work, so as to better inform policymaking, taking into account the many factors that intersect with gender, including social class, ethnicity and disability, and residence in rural and urban areas
- Monitoring and evaluating the impact on women and girls of all science, technology and innovation policies and programmes.