

**United Nations Commission on the Status of Women  
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**HIGH-LEVEL ROUNDTABLE**

**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**

**WRITTEN STATEMENT\***

by

**BARBARA BAILEY  
Professor, Gender and Education  
CEDAW Committee**

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## **1. Introduction**

Mr. Chair, Distinguished Keynote speaker, Honourable Ministers and representatives of Member States: I am pleased to have an opportunity to contribute to this critical dialogue and from the outset, wish to preface my comments with a reminder that every significant United Nations conference since 1980 that has addressed gender equality and women's empowerment, and more recently the Millennium Development Goals, has pointed to the centrality of education as the vehicle for women's empowerment and as the tool for equipping them to grasp opportunities for their fuller participation in development processes. A major objective of this dialogue, therefore, should be an assessment of the efficacy of this proposition.

Secondly, the concerns of this panel must be referenced to a human rights framework and the obligation of States under CEDAW to ensure the 'equal rights of women with men in the field of education'. Three inter-related rights are summed up in the theme for this panel: 'the right *to* education (access and participation); rights *within* education (free choice, including in science and technology); and, rights *through* education (equality of opportunity beyond school) – the latter going well beyond a consideration of numerical gaps to issues of substantive equality and ways in which patriarchal norms determine gender-based inequalities in the distribution of material resources.

## **2. The situation**

In a nutshell, interventions by the keynote speaker and member countries, point to the following global trends:

1. In spite of regional and/or national variations, women's right *to* education has been largely realised and the most significant inroad has been made at the tertiary level;
2. Women's rights *within* education are yet to be widely realised. Although globally, women are increasingly seizing opportunities for higher education, they continue to pursue stereotypical, feminised fields of study and are under-represented in the more critical science and technology areas and in the technical crafts which have serious implications for future life chances, career paths and employment and earning capacity.
3. Thirdly, women's rights *through* education are far from being realized. Although a direct correspondence cannot be readily established, generally it can be inferred that, globally, women represent the better source of human capital but nonetheless experience lower levels of employment and higher levels of unemployment; are more highly represented as part-time workers; on average earn less than men; are disproportionately represented in vulnerable areas of work and therefore are less exposed to opportunities for experiencing decent work conditions – issues that are consistently raised in the CEDAW constructive dialogue with States parties who are called on to dismantle entrenched stereotypes and structural determinants of these patterns.

In other words, to date, although increased access to education has improved the condition of the lives of women and their children, the potential of education, as presently configured, to make a strategic difference in women's lives, maybe overstated.

## **3. Explanatory Frameworks**

The question is: What accounts for the observed patterns highlighted in this dialogue? I wish to suggest that the feminisation of education at the higher levels is due, in no small measure, to the

international women's movement and the several associated conferences held over the last 4 decades. With their focus on the need for the economic and political empowerment of women within a human rights framework as well as the dismantling of male hegemony, these conferences created **driving forces** which forced Governments and NGOs to move towards strategic goals identified for women's advancement. At the same time, challenges to prevailing gender ideology have resulted in women taking greater control for their sexuality and reproductive health as reflected in reduced fertility rates, thus expanding their capacity to grasp opportunities for education and employment.

The universality of the sex-segregation of fields of study, however, can only be explained in terms of meta- principles of social organisation that are both ideological and structural. These patterns have been frequently linked to socialization processes in the home and school which, whether wittingly or unwittingly, reproduce and maintain a sexual-division-of-labour which defines what is feminine and masculine and is inextricably linked to a public/private dichotomy, with males primarily relegated to the former domain and females to the latter. Rather than being transformative, institutionalised schooling thus becomes an instrument of the state for reproducing the gender order and maintaining male/female, dominant/subordinate and public/private hierarchies.

I therefore proffer that the most fundamental factor accounting for the global anomaly between women's educational attainment and their positioning in the formal, informal and care economies, is the entrenched patriarchal ideology of the private/public-reproductive/productive work dichotomy. Although there have been driving forces pushing women beyond the boundary of the private domain and an acceptance of shifting ideologies about feminine roles and functions, a concomitant shift has not occurred in the ideologies undergirding the construction of masculinity, particularly in relation to the private domain.

The resilience of these systemic patterns is premised on the **male breadwinner** ideology which seems to be so pivotal to the construction of hegemonic masculinity and to male heterosexual identity. The dominant position of males in waged work and income generation, is perpetuated by economies around the world that privilege males; and, based on global trends, I would posit, in many instances, favour males with lower levels of certification for certain jobs and positions over females with higher levels of certification - hence the phenomenon of horizontal and vertical sex-segregation of labour markets around the world. Simply put, certification does not carry the same social currency for males and females. Further, even where both sexes have equal levels of education males are often also privileged.

I would suggest, however, that the traditional male bread-winner paradigm is now under threat. Data show that the phenomenon of the **female-headed household** is increasing around the world so that the male breadwinner ideology is slowly being disrupted. It is obvious, however, that the impetus for change is mainly on the part of women, with men lagging behind and holding on to this seemingly fragile dimension of male identity; and, what cannot be ignored in this discourse, is the resilience of patriarchal systems which continue to serve traditional interest and motive which combine to maintain the *status quo*.

#### 4. The Way Forward

Given the observations and analyses of the global situation in relation to women's access and participation in education and opportunities for employment and decent work, what might be the way forward in terms of protecting and ensuring the rights of women in these spheres? I offer four proposals which, in essence, require a dismantling of patriarchal ideologies and systems.

1. Firstly, the most critical action has to be a **re-engineering of the options and the content of women's education**, particularly at the higher levels. Women, in keeping with cultural norms, opt for training in traditional occupations which are consistent with social expectations, but to which labour markets attach little value or monetary worth. If women's position at the lower end of the market is to be reversed, the distinction between educational attainment *per se* and the subjects in which women gain qualifications is critical. Scientific, technical and managerial qualifications are important for giving women access to high-level jobs.
2. Secondly, the playing field can only be leveled if there is acceptance of the need for **co-responsibility in the household** and a more equitable distribution of the burden of responsibility for the provision of unpaid social reproduction and care in the domestic domain. This has to be achieved through a process of re-socialisation of both sexes since, in many ways, although disadvantaged by outcomes, women, as mothers and teachers, play a critical role in reproducing essentialist ideologies and traditional gender identities.
3. Thirdly, ways in which the structure of opportunity in global economies privilege males and offer opportunities which, in many instances, are based on patronage and ascription rather than merit, have to be challenged and reconstructed to protect the rights of women *through* education.
4. Finally, and most importantly, transformation of systems and structures can only be realized if there is **political will** and governments commit to fulfill obligations under international conventions such as the CEDAW as well as consensus outcome documents such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals – all of which establish standards and call for actions to ensure the rights of women *within* and *through* education; and, their greater access to science, technologies and vocational training thus creating possibilities for their entry into new forms of decent work and the realization of equal pay for work of equal value.

Honourable Ministers, distinguished representatives of Member States, the onus is on you. Evidence from the interactive dialogue between the CEDAW Committee and States parties point to the fact that although there have been some gains in women's right *to* education much is wanting in terms of women's rights *within* and *through* education. I therefore urge you to hold your governments to their obligation to provide the legislative framework and financial and human resources required to protect these rights which are essential if, ultimately, education is to be the vehicle for the social, economic and political empowerment of women and the tool for equipping them to seize opportunities in these spheres and thus make a more direct contribution to national and regional development processes.

Thank you.