

**Fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women  
Emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of  
women or equality between women and men**

**Panel discussion:**

**“Engaging young women and men, girls and boys, to advance gender equality”**

Tuesday, 6 March 2012, 10 am – 1 pm

**ISSUES PAPER**

**I. Introduction**

In accordance with its methods of work (ECOSOC resolution 2006/9), at each annual session the Commission on the Status of Women identifies an emerging issue requiring increased attention for consideration, taking into account developments at the global and regional levels as well as planned activities within the United Nations. At its fifty-sixth session, the Commission will consider “Engaging young women and men, girls and boys, to advance gender equality” as the emerging issue through an interactive panel discussion.

**II. Background**

Young women and men have a critical role in the elimination of discrimination against women and in shaping a future where gender equality for all women and girls, men and boys, everywhere, is realized. The role and engagement of both women and men, including young people, in achieving gender equality is highlighted in global normative and policy frameworks. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) calls on States parties to take all appropriate measures to “modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women” (article 5 a).

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 based its action recommendations on the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. The outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly of 2000 stressed the need to encourage dialogue among youth between and among developed and developing countries and to increase research on men’s and boys’ roles and stereotyping of girls and boys. It emphasized that men must take joint responsibility with women for the promotion of gender equality.

In 2004, the Commission adopted the first-ever framework on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. It recognized that everyone benefits from gender equality and that the negative impacts of gender inequality are borne by society as a whole. It further emphasized that men and boys, through taking responsibility themselves and working jointly in partnership with women and girls, are essential to the achievement of gender equality.

International commitments on gender equality have addressed the role of youth in promoting gender equality only to a limited degree. Similarly, international policy instruments on youth and development, such as the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, have generally addressed gender equality from a limited perspective on young women.

The recent “International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding” (August 2010-11) reiterated that the full and effective participation of young people and youth-led organizations is key to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### **III. Critical issues**

Worldwide, there are 1.2 billion youth between the ages of 15 to 24 and 1.85 billion under age 14, together accounting for 44 per cent of the global population.<sup>1</sup> As the world is facing many interconnected challenges including financial, economic, energy, security, environmental and other challenges, young women and men represent a huge – and largely untapped – resource as agents of change for advancing gender equality, peace, development and human rights. Nevertheless, despite the power of their numbers, young people are often not involved in decisions that affect their lives and they are often considered as beneficiaries rather than as actors and partners in development efforts. Similarly, their potential contribution to the promotion of gender equality is often under-utilized.

Current global trends and developments in the economic, political and social spheres have led to high unemployment among young people, dissatisfaction with prevailing institutions and systems of governance, limited prospects for the future, and exclusion from decision-making processes. This situation has inspired young women and men to find different channels to voice their opinions and demand their rights, from establishing youth organizations to demonstrating in the streets to organizing and utilizing tools such as social media to leverage their power.

Gender inequality in education is visible in areas such as lack of access to and availability of gender-sensitive educational infrastructure, materials and training programmes;<sup>2</sup> high dropout rates amongst secondary school aged girls;<sup>3</sup> and over-representation of women in tertiary education in humanities and social sciences and their significant under-representation in science, technology and engineering.<sup>4</sup> Educational gains do not fully translate into progress in employment among young women and men,<sup>5</sup> leaving young people frustrated as they search for transitions from school into full employment and decent work for all.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Population Division. *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*. New York, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. *Fact Sheet: Youth and Education*. New York, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. *Fact Sheet: Youth and Education*. New York, 2010; UNESCO. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011*. Paris, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2011*. New York, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. *Fact Sheet: Youth and Education*. New York, 2010; Agreed conclusions 2011 on “Access and participation of women and girls in education, training and science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work”.

Access to decent work is critical to a young person's development and transition to independence. The financial and economic crises, however, have aggravated the challenge of youth unemployment. Globally, the rates of unemployment of youth are significantly higher than those among adults in all regions. Employment patterns among young people also show significant gender-based differences. Young women are more likely to work in the informal economy and receive lower pay than men. In 2010, young women experienced much higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts in North Africa, Middle East, and Latin America and the Caribbean, whereas in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and Europe and developed countries, young men fared worse than young women.<sup>6</sup>

Youth unemployment and underemployment is costly to society in terms of lost human and productive potential. It threatens to trap youth in long-term poverty and undermines their trust in the political and economic system. Policy measures to address unemployment have focused on training and job-search assistance programmes. More promising are measures that address income and job security and expand job opportunities for youth as well as address the challenges of youth in the informal sector by improving working conditions and expanding social protection coverage.<sup>7</sup>

Young women and men require space to participate in decision-making and in politics, as a matter of human rights, and as a means for ensuring that their hopes and expectations for their future are addressed. Young people often face obstacles due to lack of openness by political processes, biased perceptions of their experience and capacity, and lack of sensitivity to their demands. Legal provisions setting minimum age limits for public office also can be an obstacle. Parliaments, local councils, political parties and youth organizations have particular responsibilities to create access and opportunities for young people to contribute to public life in a meaningful way. Measures can include improving young people's understanding of political processes, introducing youth quota, enabling young people's candidatures for political office, inclusion of young people in consultation processes in policy and lawmaking. Post-conflict periods and situations of political transition provide special opportunities for involving young people in political processes and in shaping new institutions and policies.

Gender stereotypes come at a cost for both young women and men as they limit "appropriate" roles for them. Young women who are seen as "caregivers" and young men who are expected to be "breadwinners" may lose out on opportunities in the labour market and in their family lives. Young people hold the key for social and attitudinal change that tackles discriminatory attitudes and gender stereotypes which perpetuate discrimination against women and stereotypic roles of men and women. There are many examples of young women and men mobilizing for a culture of non-discrimination and gender equality. For example, the engagement of boys and young men in violence prevention, including violence against women and girls, is widely recognized as a change maker for gender equality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ILO. *Global Employment Trends for Youth: 2011 Update*. Geneva, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> E/CN.5/2012/8

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women. "Good practices in combating and eliminating violence against women," cited in UNIFEM *Gender equality now. Accelerating the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals*. New York, 2009.

The current generation of young people is better positioned and has greater opportunities compared to previous ones, especially in areas such as education, commitment to their individual and collective development, use of new information and communication technologies, participation in social groups, and interest in contributing to dialogue and decision-making on matters that concern them. Their power and potential to make decisions over their day-to-day activities and their future has been largely untapped, but holds the key to addressing the current complex challenges, be they political participation, employment, sustainable development, the spread of HIV, or the pandemic of violence and conflict.

#### **IV. Format and outcome of the interactive panel**

A panel of five young women and men will make introductory presentations of 8 to 10 minutes to speak about their experiences and challenges, and to provide good practice examples for the promotion of gender equality. Representatives of Member States, United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations will be encouraged to share specific challenges, experiences and innovative approaches for strengthening the role of young people in the promotion of gender equality, and/or respond to the panellists' presentations. Interventions from the floor will be limited to three minutes. A moderator's summary of the interactive dialogue will be prepared and posted on the website of UN-Women. The panel discussion will also be available via live webcast.

#### **V. Issues for consideration in the discussion**

The Commission has the opportunity to highlight key elements that will give new impetus to the engagement of young women and men, girls and boys in promoting gender equality, and to strengthen their involvement as actors and beneficiaries of change in all aspects of development and at all levels. The discussion could include the following points:

- To what extent do young women and men promote gender equality in their countries when they demand social, political and economic changes?
- How do they make their voices heard and participate in processes that affect their lives? What are the key issues they are advocating for? How do young people organize and mobilize for advancing gender equality?
- What are the obstacles that hinder young women and men from participating in decision-making processes and efforts to advance gender equality?
- What are examples of good practices for tackling stereotypes about the roles of young women and men?
- How can the Commission on the Status of Women integrate good practices on this issue in its overall work, and be a catalyst for increasing attention to the engagement of young women and men in intergovernmental processes?