

Statement
by
Ms. Rachel Mayanja
Assistant Secretary-General
Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
Panel meeting on a success story from Turkey: Snowdrops
Parallel event, CSW 54
New York, 1 March 2010

Excellencies, distinguish delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address you today at what must be one of the first parallel events of this session of the Commission on the Status of Women. How befitting that we should discuss education, one of the most crucial preconditions for the empowerment of women and girls. Education is a fundamental right, and an absolute necessity for women and girls to reach their full potential, both in their personal and professional lives. I thank the Permanent Mission of Turkey to the United Nations and the organizers for inviting me to say a few words.

Not only can education empower women economically – it is estimated that an extra year of schooling increases women’s wages by 10 to 12 per cent – but it also has numerous non-market benefits. Educated women are, for example, more likely to enjoy better health and to participate in family decisions. Studies also demonstrate a positive impact for society as a whole, as women’s education is for instance correlated with lower infant mortality and better knowledge of HIV preventions.

The importance of educating women and girls has been well-recognized at the international level. This is reflected for instance in the Beijing Platform for Action, but also in two important sets of goals, the Education for All goals and the Millennium Development Goals, which each integrate a focus on achieving gender equality in education. Through these goals, world leaders have committed to providing women and girls equal access to education and training.

I am pleased to report that, 15 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, there has been substantial progress in closing the gender gap in education. Over the last decade, access to education has increased globally for girls at all levels, particularly in primary education. In 2007, there were 96 girls for each 100 boys enrolled in first grade, compared with 92 girls in 1999. These figures are more than statistics- they also mark a turning point in the life of each of the girls who a decade ago would never have attended school.

At the secondary level, the gender gap in access has also continued to close, and it has reversed at the tertiary level. While we must be mindful that in many parts of the world, participation in post-primary education remains very restricted, it is significant that globally, there are now 108 women for each 100 men enrolled in university.

Of course, many challenges remain. To name but a few, women continue to account for two-thirds of the adult illiterate population and this ratio has not changed over the past 20 years. Of the 72 million children of primary-school-age who do not go to school, 54 per cent are girls, and they are more likely than their male counterparts never to enroll. These are grim figures, and there are unfortunately many other examples of how much further we have to go.

Yet, the past 15 years have also helped us test solutions to address some of these gaps. For instance, easing the cost of education on families has proven an effective strategy to increase girls' enrolment and retention rates. The results yielded by measures such as abolishing school fees, providing scholarships for girls, or launching school feeding programmes, are now well-documented. To continue to move forward, it is crucial that we replicate and scale up the good practices that have been identified.

That task is not only for Government – everyone can, and should contribute. It is heartening to hear that in Turkey, civil society and the private sector have allied to do just that – to ensure that girls have no less opportunities than boys to access school and complete their education. “Snowdrops” showcases what can be achieved when different stakeholders work in partnership. I hope that it will inspire many others - Governments, United Nations entities, businesses, NGOs, faith-based groups, the media – to forge new alliances and demonstrate how much is possible when we are willing to act together.

- It is possible to close the gender gap in access to education, but it is also possible to do much more.
- It is possible to end sexual violence and abuse at and on the way to school.
- It is possible to free educational content of negative gender stereotypes.
- It is possible to ensure that women's educational gains translate into better employment opportunities

I am convinced that we can all work together to turn this possibility into a reality.

Thank you for your attention