UNITED NATIONS ENTITY FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN (UN WOMEN)

Description of the Committee

On July 2, 2010, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) was created. Before UN Women, gender equality initiatives were split between four distinct divisions of the UN, but the UN General Assembly voted to combine these bodies into a single new entity in order to promote cohesion and advancement of women’s empowerment.

UN Women is structured into two functional tiers: normative support and operational activities. The normative support structure is comprised of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and the Commission on the Status of Women. These three components identify goals of UN Women and focuses on a single theme that encompasses gender equality. Contrastingly, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and the Executive Board govern programming and funding.

UN Women pushes for equality between the sexes and for women’s empowerment. It hopes to end discrimination against females while expanding opportunities for women to have a powerful voice in the world. To carry out these goals, UN Women coordinates activities, aids in policymaking and implementation, and enforces accountability of UN bodies and Member States.

TOPIC: GIRLS EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUITY
Introduction

In September 2013, Executive Director of UN Women Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka proclaimed, “Education is one of the founding services that all women and girls need to access in order for us to make a difference.” Girls’ education is step one to creating gender equity, a human right that refers to the equality between men and women.

Why is girls’ education so important? Women have a multiplier effect on society. When women and girls have rights, they contribute back to their families, communities, and countries. When girls are educated, they become empowered and our world becomes better as a result. Investing in girls yields economic benefits, increasing gross domestic product (GDP) and productivity levels. Girls who go to school themselves demonstrate improved health, higher income, and fewer pregnancies over their lifetimes.

But the crucial element of education is often missing. One in five girls will not have access to an education, women are twice as likely as men to be illiterate, and 42% of girls in developing countries are not enrolled in school. Though girls have certainly made gains in schooling and women have gotten closer to having gender equity, there are still improvements to be made – and girls to become educated.

Background of Topic

Every day, 65 million girls of primary or secondary school age worldwide do not go to school. Similarly, 78 million young girls are illiterate. These girls who do not receive a solid education are not only missing prime developmental and academic opportunities, but will one day face an inability to be self-sufficient. They also have higher risks of early marriage, prostitution, and contracting HIV/AIDS. They have a lower chance to be empowered and civically engaged. In this, girls’ lack of education contributes to a broader issue of gender inequity.

Gender inequity has dozens of causes. A handful of these causes include the systematic denial of equal rights to women over time, government policies that do not support females, and cultural norms that devalue girls. Girls’ lack of access to education, though, can be traced to both specific actors as well as issues of poverty and gender violence.

Certain cases can be traced to terrorist organizations. Boko Haram, a militant Islamist organization founded against Western education, was responsible for the abduction of 276 female students from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, Nigeria. The travesty drew international attention with the “Bring Back Our Girls” campaign, but the central claim made by Boko

A Canadian protest against the Boko Haram kidnappings showcases the international attention to “Bring Back Our Girls” and girls’ rights.

Source: Demotix / Jonny White
Haram was that girls should not be in school and rather be married.\textsuperscript{x} In the same vein, the Taliban, another Islamist insurgent group, banned girls older than age eight from attending school in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The international community focused on the Taliban when a Taliban assailant shot Malala Yousafzai, a young proponent for girls’ education.

Poverty is the top barrier preventing girls from having equal access to educational and empowering opportunities. 250 adolescent girls live under conditions of poverty, yet less than two cents from every dollar donated to development funds and charities reach these girls.\textsuperscript{vi} They face risks associated with poverty, including those directly correlated to schooling, like overly expensive school fees. They often lack fulfillment of basic needs, suffering \textit{food insecurity} and increased susceptibility to diseases like HIV/AIDS. Finally, girls who live in impoverished areas tend to also be victim to social norms and traditions that prevent them from achieving. In many poverty-ridden areas, girls are given less value than boys.\textsuperscript{vii} In others, they are subject to child labor. Perhaps the greatest barrier is \textit{early marriage}.

Gender violence and violence in schools also poses a major barrier to girls’ education. Bullying in pervasive worldwide, with students from all regions of the world reporting instances of verbal and physical abuses in school.\textsuperscript{viii} Sexual harassment and sexual abuse are common in many developing regions as well. Certain countries have near-institutionalized norms of sexual abuse toward female students.\textsuperscript{ix} Families often report not wanting to send their daughters into unsafe or inaccessible areas, and girls who are victim to domestic abuse or are impregnated as a result of sexual assault often do not have the opportunity or desire to return to school.

Yet education resolves this cycle of gender inequity, and everybody benefits when women are educated. When a girl completes secondary schooling, 90\% of her future income is reinvested into her family.\textsuperscript{x} Investing in girls so they complete further education would increase their lifetime earnings to be equal to 1.5\% increases to GDP per year.\textsuperscript{xi} However, a lack of girls’ education leaves these issues room to expand, creating a cycle of gender inequity and continued poverty.

The global fight for women’s rights is longstanding. Attention began to focus on equitable access to education in 1960 when the UN released the \textbf{Convention on Discrimination in Education}. However, the focus on girls grew over the last twenty-five years as the UN directly addressed young women and as studies began to prove the effects of girls’ education. The \textbf{Millennium Development Goals} further kickstarted worldwide efforts to educate girls and empower women.

Such efforts are clearly effective: primary school has \textit{gender parity}. Despite these gains, though, full gender equity has not been achieved anywhere. Globally, the problem of gender inequity in education manifests itself in different ways. The lowest gender parity in education is found in Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia.\textsuperscript{xii} In such areas, girls are not completing primary school at rates comparable to boys, let alone finishing secondary school or pursuing higher education. Yet even in developed nations, where gender parity has largely been achieved, women are still not equally represented in \textbf{STEM fields} and often enter a work force subject to a wage gap and lower earnings. Similarly, some developed states’ classrooms still enforce gender roles and misogynistic language rather than promoting equality and empowerment for all
students.

These issues are due in part because UN bodies and NGOs cannot directly intervene in national policy because of sovereignty concerns. Moreover, there are cultural barriers to ensuring universal girls’ education – some religions and societies do not value girls and do not want to use resources to educate them. Finally, as gender inequity and girls’ education issues are rooted in poverty, until we fix poverty, girls continue to be at risk.

To continue to solve the problem of gender inequity, UN Women ought to address the root causes of why girls are not equally educated. It must combat poverty and gender violence while encouraging girls to stay in school. Moreover, UN Women should focus on providing health and sex education in order to help break cycles of community poverty and empower whole groups of women.

If we continue to fail to provide girls with educational opportunities, the world will see continued gender inequality. To put this into perspective, we can see the loss of any benefits that could come from girls’ education, which total to billions per state per year.

Similarly, for every 10% increase in girls’ enrollment in schools, national birth rates fall by 0.3 children per woman. Girls’ education is responsible for 43% of the decline in malnutrition over a 25-year span from 1970 to 1995.

Girls who go through school are healthier and have healthier children. When girls are not educated, birth rates remain high and population increases are inevitable. They do not contribute back to their families and hunger rates stay high. Consequently, sustainable development and poverty reduction cannot occur without girls’ education.

Past International Action

Though there is no one document that directly addresses girls’ education, several take it into consideration as a human right and foundation for gender equality. The first of such documents was created in 1948, when the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Though the Declaration was written in response to World War II, it codified the UN’s dedication to human rights, of which education is one. Though Article 2 states that freedoms cannot be denied based on sex, girls had very low access to education early on. Likewise, the Convention Against Discrimination in Education, passed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1960, states that education systems cannot discriminate based on race, sex, language, religion, origin, or economic condition. However, the document mainly focused on ending racial and ethnic segregation.

Turning attention back to women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was passed in 1979 by UNGA. The Convention, described as an international bill of rights for women, has been ratified by 180 states. The Convention’s goal is to ensure to women equal rights with men. It holds that women cannot be discriminated against in schooling and calls for ratifying states to take “appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women.”

In schools, these measures include ensuring equal female teacher representation, equal access to participate in athletics, and equal distribution of scholarships.

Ten years later, the UNGA passed the Convention on the Rights of the
**Child**, which pulls focus back onto youths. With 194 participants, of which 192 have ratified the Convention, it is a powerful treaty calling for increased freedoms and liberties for children. Article 28 of the Convention calls for equal access to primary and secondary schooling for all children, but does not specifically focus on girls.

The most recent UN policy regarding girls’ education is 2000’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which directly focus on gender equality in Goal 3, Target 3.A. This goal calls for the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and in all levels of education by 2015. Though these goals will not be fully achieved, the MDGs explain progress made in very recent years as well as the creation of UN Women and rise in UN initiatives and NGO partnerships.

While UN Women sponsors programs like Beijing+20 and He for She that promote girls’ rights and global feminism, it primarily pushes for girls’ education by providing support for national governments. It coordinates partnerships with non-governmental organizations and acts as a sounding board for UN bodies. The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and UNESCO are more directly responsible for girls’ education initiatives.

UNICEF uses a holistic approach to promote girls’ education, aiming to increase access and participation in schooling, increase quality of education, and help girls reach “their full potential through quality education.” It works with the World Bank, UNESCO, and other NGOs to provide technical, financial, and policy support for education programs, schools, and countries. UNICEF funds programs and shuttles humanitarian resources to schools and families. Importantly, UNICEF fights for all children’s right to education and regularly releases information on policy intervention strategies. UNICEF is a primary sponsor of the International Day of the Girl Child, a commemorative holiday program to encourage girls’ empowerment, education, and success.

Likewise, UNESCO hopes to increase education capacity-building in Member States by giving governments and schools the tools to help girls achieve. It raises funding and works in conjunction with other agencies to minimize roadblocks to education like gender violence and HIV/AIDS. UNESCO’s commitment to increase access to learning opportunities for all children is seen in its research on how to better universalize education and development of cross-cultural school-based programs.

Moreover, UNICEF and UNESCO work together to power the UN Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI), which has the primary aim to promote girls’ access to quality education. UNGEI maintains a resource database and compilation of partnerships with NGOs, private sector investment firms, governments, schools, and UN bodies. The Initiative focuses on policy support and global activism.
Other intergovernmental organizations that address girls’ education include the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which both compile data about the economic impacts of girls’ education and provide finances to aid in improving school quality.

Additionally, both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) fight against gender inequality, but national initiatives lead to a variety of results. Grants to schools in Yemen failed to produce significant gains in girls’ education, while Ghana’s investment in school facilities yielded modest increases in girls’ enrollment. More developed countries tend to have equal education provisions like the United States’ Title IX, which calls for the equal treatment of women and girls in schools. The European Parliament maintains a Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, which discusses how to promote girls’ schooling. Many states, including the Philippines, Malaysia, and Sweden, have government agencies in direct control of girls’ school enrollment and safety. Regional contracts between many states also have been written to promote general gender equality. However, these programs are not entirely effective: many countries, most in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, still have very low rates of girls’ attendance to school and high rates of school-based gender violence.

Furthermore, numerous NGOs fund and advocate for girls’ education. For example, CARE International, a humanitarian relief organization, works through public advocacy and policy lobbying to promote girls’ equality. CARE cooperates with governments, from door-to-door canvassing to spread information about girls’ education to charging fees to families that keep girls at home. CARE fundraises to pay for girls’ tuition, restore school facilities, and provide books and supplies. Believing that investing in girls launches community development, CARE also provides direct intervention in the form of training teachers and hosting leadership programs for girls and women.

Another NGO, Room to Read, works to foster children’s literacy and girls’ access to learning opportunities. It builds schools, establishes libraries, and distributes books in developing states. Concerning girls specifically, Room to Read provides girls with school supplies, uniforms, and sometimes room and board closer to school. It holds workshops and camps to teach girls leadership and critical thinking skills, as well as works to promote “girl-friendly learning environments” by training teachers, adjusting curricula, building girls’ restrooms, and implementing safety and security measures within existing schools. Currently, there are 28,111 girls enrolled in Room to Read programs. Most have demonstrated increases in literacy rates.

Similarly, Plan International runs campaigns such as Because I am a Girl which serves to raise awareness about girls’ mistreatment and inequality. Plan International trains teachers and updates schools, financially sponsors girls’ tuition and board payments, and releases numerous economic reports that detail the fiscal benefits of
equal education.

The United Nations Foundation also sponsors programs that promote girls’ equality. Its newest initiative, Girl Up, connects girls around world to solve 21st-century issues, including girls’ limited access to education. Additionally, the Girl Effect is a public information campaign that explains how providing girls with scholastic opportunities contributes back to society. It maintains that investing in girls is critical for successful development. Lastly, the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, co-founded by the UN Foundation and the Nike Foundation, provides resources on girls’ rights, empowerment, and abilities. It regularly issues reports and provides tools to teachers, families, and girls themselves, bringing together different actors to push for the rights of girls.

Despite international policies that call for educative equality, UN programs that promote girls’ schooling, and the immense amount of financial and infrastructural support provided by NGOs, girls’ education and gender equity remains a critical issue. Programs and policies are not universally applied, and sovereignty concerns mean that UN bodies need more national government support for resources and implementation. Similarly, cultural norms that demean girls and women are difficult to combat quickly.

Thus, social change must occur so girls can move out of the home. Literacy and elementary schooling must be insured before higher education can be considered. At heart, though, efforts to provide girls with equal education have not been fully effective because eliminating poverty and reducing violence are larger global issues.

Possible Solutions

Increasing girls’ access to educational opportunities is the first step in promoting worldwide gender equity. UN Women should develop a comprehensive approach to promoting girls’ education, working with NGOs and existing initiatives to create solid policies and useful, accountable programs. Three sub-issues to address in the fight for girls’ education include getting and keeping girls in school, ending violence against women, and providing civic and health education to reduce cycles of poverty.

Ensuring girls have access to elementary and secondary school is the foremost goal. This access means education needs to be feasible for families: education should be free or very low-cost with flexible hours. Schools should be close to homes and stocked with books, school supplies, and feminine hygiene supplies. Teaching ought to be relevant, taught in local languages by female teachers, and should avoid discrimination in curriculum.

To reduce violence against women, UN Women must work with Member States to strengthen laws against sexual assault. Possible strategies to combat gender violence include coordinating with local governments and NGOs to create safer streets and schools, creating campaigns against harassment, and introducing programs aimed at boys that teach them girls are equal and need to be treated with respect.

Civic and health education is also needed to reduce cycles of poverty and promote girls’ equitable schooling. UN Women should help develop public health education that includes sex education and information about contraception, pregnancy, and HIV/AIDS
prevention. Similarly, it should aim to give girls civic education about their rights and country’s policies in attempt to place value on girls in their communities and families.

UN Women must also address other barriers to girls’ education and gender equity, including general poverty-reduction strategies like microfinancing, supplies funneling, agricultural distribution, and school feeding. UN agencies should innovate ways to stop sex trafficking and early marriage – factors that prevent girls from going to school.

It’s clear that global development depends on women’s empowerment – and women’s empowerment depends on girls’ education. A cohesive resolution on girls’ right to education may be necessary to steer global progress in the correct direction. UN Women should develop strengthened accountability systems for Member States and find out how to best implement awareness campaigns and coordinate with civil society action. Community education and providing general women’s rights support is also necessary. Most importantly, UN Women must remember that providing girls with quality schooling is vital in the pursuit of gender equity and sustainable global development.

Illustrations like the above serve to direct government and the public’s thinking about solving girls’ inequity in education. Source: Global Partnership for Education / Graphic Change

**Current Situation**

In September of 2015, the UNGA unanimously adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) — a set of 17 goals to be achieved by 2030 — and 2016 was the first year of the agenda’s implementation. Included in the initiatives are “Ensure
inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning” (#4) and “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (goal #5), which bring the issues of gender equality and girls' education to the forefront of the UN’s ongoing efforts to better the world through progressive cooperation between nations.\textsuperscript{xxi}

In December of 2016, UN Women released the “CEDAW for Youth,” a youth-friendly version of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women that serves to empower young people to understand and claim their human rights.\textsuperscript{xxii} Just as the original CEDAW has been described as the international bill of rights for women, CEDAW for Youth is an international legal instrument that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas and promotes women’s and girls’ equal rights.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

Also in December of 2016, UN Women and UNESCO released a Global Guidance on Addressing School Related Gender-Based Violence. This set of guidelines and strategies is vital to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, as UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcukva stated: “until School-Related Gender-Based Violence is eliminated in and around schools across the world, many of the ambitious targets set by the global community through the Sustainable Development Goals to provide safe and supportive learning environments, to achieve gender equality and to end violence against women and girls, will not be realized.”\textsuperscript{xxiv}

\textbf{2016 Refugee Crisis}

In 2015, Europe saw a massive increase in the number of refugees, primarily from Syria, crossing over by both land and sea in order to escape violence and conflict. The European Union, while originally welcoming these displaced peoples and working to aid in resettlement, has now become divided on how the crisis should be handled. In 2016, domestic political discord and fear of terrorism threats led several European countries to cut back on aid and cooperation with resettlement efforts.\textsuperscript{xxv}

Women make up almost half of the refugee population and are particularly at risk for sexual abuse, exploitation and gender-based violence.\textsuperscript{xxvi} This crisis is especially harmful to young girls with respect to their access to education: according to the UN foundation “Girl Up,” girls who are not in school are far more likely to be forced into early marriage, human trafficking and child labor.\textsuperscript{xxvii}

A UNHCR report from September of 2016\textsuperscript{xxviii} notes that over half of school-aged refugee children have no access to education, and while the average length of displacement for a refugee is 20 years, refugee children are still five times more likely to be out of school than the global average. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi noted that refugee education “is one of the few opportunities we have to transform and build the next generation so they can change the fortunes of the tens of millions of forcibly displaced people globally.”\textsuperscript{xxix} The UNHCR report emphasizes that Sustainable Development Goal 4, “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning” cannot be realized by 2030 without meeting the education needs of vulnerable populations, including refugees and other forcibly displaced people.
Further Research

Questions to Consider

1. What is your country’s gender distribution in education? Do girls have equal access to primary and secondary schools? Are girls attending institutions of higher education?

2. What are concrete steps your country has taken to encourage girls to stay in school?

3. Has your country signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Convention Against Discrimination in Education? Has it followed through on implementing policy and submitting reports as required by such documents?

4. Are there any national initiatives in place to encourage women’s empowerment? Does your country have partnered NGO initiatives?

5. What are new national or international programs that UN Women could create to encourage girls and young women to stay in school?

6. What is the best way to make sure that countries are accountable for implementing policies and programs?

7. What else needs to be done to insure girls are educated and to promote gender equality?

Research Guide

1. This Gender Equity Fact Sheet provides a brief overview of Millennium Development Goal #3, to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women: http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Goal_3_fs.pdf

2. The UN Women website links to other resources and provides policy context: http://www.unwomen.org/en

3. The UNGEI website similarly provides a bank of resources, non-governmental organizations, and infinitives related to girls’ education: http://www.ungei.org/

4. On the organization’s YouTube page, infographic Girl Effect videos illustrate the powerful impact of girls’ education on communities: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJwLFDt3OrJkU6cQih4tw


Terms and Concepts

**Normative support:** Policy and law making, coalition building, coming up with a mission or ideas, and directing the path of a body.

**Operational activities:** Funding, programming, and day-to-day activities of a body.

**Gender equity:** Total equality between men and women that respects individual or gender differences and allows for both sexes to be empowered and valuable in society.

**Multiplier effect:** When the benefits or payoffs of an investment are significantly larger than the original cost or payment.

**Gender parity:** In this case, gender parity is when there will be equal numbers of girls and boys with access to education. It is a measure of the ratio of enrollment of boys and girls in different levels of school per country, and does not necessarily imply that the country has gender equity.

**Women’s empowerment:** According to the UN, this has five components: women’s self-worth, the right to have and make choices, the right to have access to opportunities and resources, the right to power their own lives, and the ability to influence social change.

**Capacity building:** Increasing the abilities of governments, organizations, communities, schools, or other institutions and individuals to effectively deal with the issues facing them. Capacity building is often administrative, such as setting up better communication systems or training workers in leadership and management. It encourages sustainable development by teaching skills and enhancing capabilities.

**Gender violence:** Sometimes called violence against women or gender-based violence, gender violence is any violent action directed at someone based on their gender. This includes rape, sexual assault, relationship or domestic violence, vocal or physical sexual harassment, stalking, trafficking, forced prostitution, genital mutilation, and infanticide. Gender violence is more often than not directed at women and girls.

**Accountability:** Taking responsibility for one’s actions and ensuring that proper consequences, either good or bad, are dispensed based on those actions. In this case, an accountability system checks if Member States are fulfilling policy requirements.

**Sovereignty:** The authority a national government has over a state. Being sovereign means that outside actors – NGOs, international bodies, individuals – cannot force the state to abide by regulations or take action.

**Millennium Development Goals:** A large-scale UN initiative, MDGs are eight goals that intend to increase sustainable development and reduce poverty by 2015.

**STEM fields:** Science, technology, engineering, and mathematical studies or subjects.

**Wage gap:** The wage gap, or gender pay gap, refers to the fact that men generally make more than women for the same work. For example, in the United States, the wage gap is 23 cents because women make 77 cents to every man’s earned dollar.

**Food insecurity:** Limited or uncertain access to nutritious, safe foods.
Early marriage: Also known as child marriage, is any marriage of children below age eighteen.

Convention on Discrimination in Education: An international treaty, adopted by UNESCO in 1960, aimed at eliminating racial and ethnic segregation in education.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: An international human rights document, adopted in 1948 by the UNGA, which stands as an early statement of a truly international commitment to promoting human rights.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW): An international human rights treaty, adopted in 1979 by the UNGA, aimed at promoting gender equality and eliminating discrimination against women in all forms, including political, economic, cultural, social, and religious.

Convention on the Rights of the Child: The most widely adopted and quickly ratified international human rights treaty in history, this 1989 treaty establishes a set of inalienable rights for all children, entitling them the rights to survival, protection from abuse, and to participate in social and cultural life.

References


xiv Smith & Haddad (1999). Explaining Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries: a cross-country analysis. IFPRI Food Consumption and Nutrition Division Discussion.


