

HIGH LEVEL PANEL – 5 July 2011

**Underlying causes and Impact on Development of Denying Girls
Access to Secondary Education**

*Co-organized by the International Federation of University Women (IFUW) and the International Planned
Parenthood Federation (IPPF)*

Panelists:

-
- Ms Sigrid KAAG, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Assistant Administrator and Director of the Partnership Bureau, UNDP
 - Werner HAUG, Director Technical Division, UNFPA
 - Ambassador H.E. Md. Abdul HANNAN, Bangladesh
 - Ms Nyaradzayi GUMBONDZVANDA, General Secretary, World YWCA
 - Dr Gill GREER, Director-General, IPPF
 - Ms Marianne HASLEGRAVE, President, IFUW, Moderator
-

The High Level Panel co-organized by the IFUW (International Federation of University Women) and the IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation) in conjunction with ECOSOC's Annual Ministerial Review focused on the underlying causes and impact on development of denying girls access to secondary education.

Access to secondary education for girls: a human right and an economic catalyst

Marianne Haslegrave, moderating, introduced the participants and opened the session by asking the first panellist, Sigrid Kaag, two essential questions: what are the economic reasons why girls do not go to school and how can their access be increased? Ms Kaag, like the speakers who followed, stressed that access to quality secondary education for girls is a human right. Girls are often kept out of school because of time spent on domestic work, and because of their family care roles (for the elderly, younger sisters and brothers, or relatives infected by HIV). Financial barriers such as tuition fees and registration fees, as well as expenditures for uniforms, for books and other materials need to be taken into account. These constitute heavy costs, especially for poor families. When finances are scarce and it comes to choosing whether a boy or a girl goes to school, the choice is usually the boy.

Ms Kaag emphasized that the economic and social benefits of an educated girl should be taken into account, and stressed the negative effect that denying access to school for girls has on a country's development. Research has shown that education, especially girls' education, is one of the strongest catalysts for sustainable growth and is critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The denial of access has a negative economic impact, both for the country and for the family itself. Women tend to suffer from a double burden: gender-based discrimination and poverty, which are mutually reinforcing. Girls' secondary education produces a high return in terms of wage growth. Education can be the trigger to move women out of poverty.

Ms Kaag noted the significant progress being made in primary education, even in countries afflicted by conflicts, but expressed her concerns about the lag in secondary education for girls. She

identified two key issues for reversing this trend: leadership and political will. She noted that it is often difficult to convince national ministers of the need to invest in girls' secondary education. It is hard for many leaders to see where secondary education for girls will lead. It is essential that we create this vision. Efforts need to be made at the community level, including partnerships with the private sector, to involve girls in new ways of learning (e-learning).

Ms Kaag also evoked the importance of assessing, evaluating and measuring progress and achievement. She gave the example of UNDP's new Gender Equality Index, which is tracking the correlation between gender inequality and other inequalities.

Access to secondary education for girls: breaking the cycle of poverty

The next speaker, Werner Haug, focused on the issues of child marriage and early childbirth, which force many girls out of school. He began by pointing out that girls' education benefits society as a whole. He cited recent statistics showing that women with secondary education have on average 1.5 fewer children and that 4.2 million fewer children under age 5 have died in the period 1970-2009 because of increased education for women, particularly those aged 14-15.

To benefit from all the advantages of women's education, women should be enabled to have children only when they want to. Education can contribute to breaking the circle of poverty, as there is a strong and mutually reinforcing relationship between education, health and poverty. Educated girls tend to postpone childbirth, sexual initiation and fully experience their childhoods. To the contrary, girls with no access to school often experience early childbirth and are therefore at risk of maternal mortality. It is morally imperative that we eliminate this lack of basic knowledge through secondary education and reproductive health and sexual education. Access to quality sexual and reproductive health services should therefore be provided. Too often, social taboos, traditions and cultural barriers hinder their availability. He reminded the audience that the aim of the UNFPA is to enable access of girls to education and health services through a multi-sectoral approach. The joint UNFPA-UNICEF Adolescent Girls' Task Force has identified five key areas for action: educating girls, health education, tackling violence, promoting leadership and assuring visibility through measuring.

Access to secondary education for girls: signs of success in Bangladesh

H.E. Abdul Hannan, Ambassador of Bangladesh, reported on the progress that has been made in his country. Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world and suffering from several national disasters, Bangladesh has made significant progress, especially regarding the education of girls. He noted that the enrolment in the primary level is approaching 100%, and that girls are now outnumbering boys at the primary and secondary levels. The secondary level is especially critical, since at this age, girls are often required to help their family and to do domestic work. The aim of Bangladesh is to have one educated girl in every family to enlighten the whole family. This progress has been made thanks to a national full education programme launched 15 years ago. The strategy for bringing girls into school that has been most successful is paying small cash allowances. Also, Bangladesh is providing free education and free textbooks. Cooperation with the private sector has been introduced. He emphasized, however, that the need for resources is great. He underlined that funding received is being properly used and their impact is being made visible, so the donators know exactly to what purpose it applies. He concluded by quoting Napoleon: "Give me a good mother; I'll give you a good nation."

Access to secondary education for girls: Links between education and health

Dr Gill Greer, Director-General of IPPF, noted that there is a clear link between education and health. She presented some stark facts and figures showing how young people, especially girls, are vulnerable and at risk of HIV infection. Currently there are 33 million people living with HIV and 3,000 people are infected daily; yet only one out of three 14-25 year-olds receives the education necessary to protect themselves from infection and has accurate knowledge of HIV transmission; only 17% use methods to protect themselves. She stressed the importance of both general education and sexuality and reproductive health education.

She expressed concern over the ongoing violence to which women and girls are subjected, as well as girls' high secondary school dropout rates due to pregnancy and HIV. She noted that in South Africa, a girl is as likely to be raped as she is to learn how to read. Through education, girls gain knowledge, self-esteem and negotiation power. She insisted that school should not only be accessible, but should also be safe and noted that there is a widespread desire for education, but that the costs of schooling (fees, transport, books, and uniforms) are often too high. She cited the success in Malawi of cash transfers of 5 dollars a month given to girls to encourage them to attend school.

Dr Greer showed a short documentary, [“Girls Decide: Halimah’s Journey, Indonesia”](#), one of a series produced by IPPF. The film shares the true story of a young girl who gets pregnant and is expelled from her school. She did not use protection, because she thought a girl couldn’t get pregnant the first time.

Access to secondary education for girls: social, cultural and financial barriers

Ms Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda began her presentation by saying that we must start with an understanding of who are the girls we are talking about. Some are girls who have never been to school, but want an education. Some have started the primary level, but could not continue because the secondary school was too far away and getting there was not safe. For these girls, education remains merely a dream. We must also understand the full range of factors responsible for the lack of education, from social and cultural to financial. There is a strong link between poverty and lack of access, with household income often determinant. We need to understand the decision-making process involved – who makes the decisions about who goes to school, to which schools, and what courses will be followed at the secondary level. More needs to be done about stereotyping in secondary curricula.

She stressed that it is not just a question of access, but also of the quality of the education and that we also need to take informal education into account. It is not just a question of women knowing how to sign a paper, they want a place in the decision making process, they want access to decent work. They need education that will make these possible. She shared a recent example of young women leaders unable to get visas to attend a World YWCA conference in Switzerland, because they have not had access to education or work. Even fully funded, they were denied visas because they were unable to produce bank statements – discrimination based on poverty.

Ms. Gumbonzvanda reiterated that education is a right, not an option. Exclusion, the lack of access to secondary education infringes on the rights of girls, limiting their potential and opportunities and leaving them vulnerable. They are denied the knowledge needed to become

informed global citizens. More girls need to have access to school and they should remain there through the full educational cycle. With much so much attention going to the gains being made at the primary level; we need to lobby for greater emphasis on access to quality secondary education for girls. We also need to be working to see how CEDAW and the Universal Periodic Review process can be better used. She closed by confiding that she was the last of 11 children, but the first one to attend secondary school.

Question and Answer Session

Toward the end of the session, time was provided for audience questions. Among the issues raised was the question of whether a bottom up approach could be more effective, as the main hurdles to girls' access to school are at the level of their parents and the community. The response of the panellists was that a two-way approach is needed - both bottom-up and top-down. A long-term vision is needed, one that takes both formal and informal education into account. Work is needed at the level of parents and the community, but the role of governments and the international community in creating incentives and fiscal reform is also very important.

Morgane Desoutter and Györgyi Blahó
IFUW Interns
July 2011