Where We Stand Position Paper: Access to Education and Training

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Position Summary:

- Universal access to safe, inclusive and high-quality education and training for women and girls is a fundamental human right and is crucial to ensure sustainable development, particularly Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education;
- Global cooperation is required to address the challenges associated with access to education and training. Unified actions from Member States, the private sector, NGOs and civil society are necessary to promote gender equality in education and remove systemic barriers facing women and girls.

Where Things Stand:

Access to high-quality education and training throughout the life course transforms lives and communities. Recognised globally by SDG 4 on quality education, the cross-cutting benefits of education on sustainable development and its fundamental role in achieving gender equality are established human rights under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The United Nations Human Rights Council reaffirmed the Human Right to Education in its 41st Session on 11 July 2019.

Educating women and girls goes beyond individual empowerment; it produces better health outcomes, fuels economic growth, and contributes towards stable and peaceful societies. The social and economic imperative to improve access to education and training for all women and girls is evident, with better-educated women and girls contributing to informed healthcare, reduced fertility rates, and healthier children. A 2018 World Bank study underlines the economic impact, revealing that restricted access to 12 years of education for girls globally costs countries USD 15-30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.

Despite progress, recent data reveals persistent disparities in access to education driven by income gaps, gender-based violence, socio-economic barriers, conflict, and climate change. Poverty and education are interconnected, with high poverty levels making education less accessible. Furthermore, even when education is available,

children – especially girls - are often expected to work and earn money rather than attending school.

Regional disparities also persist, particularly in West and Central Africa and South Asia, whilst child marriage compounds the issue, reducing the likelihood of girls completing secondary education. Missing out on education impedes the abilities of children and young people to find safe, paid work – and can make them more vulnerable targets of modern slavery. In 2023, approximately 781 million adults, 66% of whom are women, remain illiterate in terms of reading and writing capabilities, the majority from developing countries. Numeracy is also important, but comparable data at the global level is lacking.

Conflict is increasingly linked to exclusion from education. The statistics of attacks on education in conflict-affected regions underscore the severity of the issue, impacting over 9,000 students and teachers across 85 countries in 2020 and 2021, according to the United Nations. In some countries, girls are being specifically targeted with extreme levels of violence in a bid to dissuade them from attending school.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges to education globally, with a shift to online learning due to school closures. However, the digital divide widens gender disparities, as 52% of women globally lack internet access compared to 42% of men. In low-income countries, only 25% of women have internet access. Recognising the significance of innovation, technology, and education in the digital age is crucial for gender equality. Bridging the gender digital divide is essential for fair representation in tech jobs, managerial roles, and academic careers. The achievement of SDG 4 is dependent on embracing opportunities and challenges presented by technology.

Where things need to go...

Education must be safe, inclusive, of a high quality, and accessible to all.

Safe: Where women and girls have safe access to education, they have the potential to contribute to their communities' social, cultural, political, and economic advancement. Urgent steps must be taken to ensure that all education and training facilities are free from violence, including gender-based violence. Journeys to and from schools and other facilities must also be made safe.

Inclusive: Those who are the furthest behind must be reached as a priority. This requires renewed and increased efforts to reach older women and those who have never attended school, those who come from marginalised or rural communities, women and girls with caring responsibilities, disabilities, and those who are leaving

prisons, state care and other institutions. The educational needs of migrating, refugee and displaced women and girls must be urgently addressed.

High quality: Standard curricula should be set to ensure standardised and quality education at all levels with appropriate and relevant assessment and recognised qualifications.

Accessible to all: Poverty and economic disenfranchisement are not only outcomes of a lack of education, but they are significant factors in preventing millions of women and girls from accessing education and training at all life stages. Education costs should be limited to ensure accessibility given that financial barriers to education remain one of the biggest obstacles to women's and girls' education. Legal and social action must also be taken to prevent child, early and forced marriage which removes girls from schools and is proven to have negative health, economic and social outcomes. Social protection measures for families can ensure that all girls are treated equitably in financing education and training.

Fundamental Action:

- Increased awareness specifically about the importance of education and training for all women and girls (SDG 4) is required;
- All Member States, the private sector, NGOs and civil society should protect and advocate for the human rights of all women and girls – including education - by empowering them to be leaders, experts, and agents of change;
- All Member States should expedite efforts across all sustainable development measures and activities to achieve the full participation of all women and girls in high-quality education and training through a human-rights based approach at whatever life stage they have reached;
- All schools and educational facilities must have safe water and sanitation facilities enabling all women and girls to continue their education safely and with dignity at all stages;
- Safe access must be assured within the education environment itself, including safety from cyber harassment and bullying;
- Transport routes to education facilities must be made safe for all women and girls;

- Scholarships and bursary provisions should be prioritised, in particular for marginalised groups, to ensure education is accessible to all;

- All Member States should embrace gender mainstreaming across all aspects of education and training. Gender mainstreaming should include the institutional measures of gender budgeting and financing for development, supporting and targeting women-specific policies and programmes that address gender discrimination and its impact in education;

- Increase investments in quality education and lifelong learning, and create specific, targeted programmes, including on digital technology and literacy, and science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM) subjects which would enable all women and girls into paid work, education and training;

- Support digital literacy adoption and usage by embracing innovative financing solutions that connect women with technology and educational services at low to no cost;

- All Member States should ratify and honour their obligations under CEDAW, CRC – including by adapting their national laws - and conform to International Labour Organisation standards for vocational training;

- Data collection capacities focused on disaggregated data need to be continually developed to lead to greater understanding of the impact of all girls and women in education, on sustainable development;

- Efforts are required to improve the responsiveness of education systems to the changing needs of communities. High priority should be placed on those at risk of being left behind, including rural and indigenous women and girls, those living through conflict, refugees and internally displaced persons, women with disabilities, and women and girls in care and state institutions; and

- Social and cultural programmes involving men and boys are required to prevent continuing discrimination that devalues women and girls, their abilities, their educational achievements and their economic contributions.

Where Soroptimist International Stands:

Soroptimist International grassroots projects show education and training can transform individuals' lives and their communities. Education is a human right and should be considered a global strategic priority.

Increased efforts must be made to achieve gender equality within formal and non-formal education systems, including vocational training and apprenticeships, as a critical aspect of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Soroptimist International demands that all women and girls have equal and fair access to education and training, insofar that their human right to a safe education is respected, protected and fulfilled in accordance with international human rights law, the Beijing Platform for Action and Conventions including CEDAW and CRC.

Sources:

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