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Statement submitted by Canadian Federation of University Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

The focus of this statement is “Education as the pivotal implementation tool of the Beijing Platform for Action.” It is submitted by the Canadian Federation of University Women, a self-funded, national organization of over 6,600 women and 94 Clubs located in every province of Canada. Since our foundation in 1919, our members have worked to achieve educational and economic equality and social justice through continuous learning and empowerment.

The preamble to the 2024 Pact for the Future reaffirms that the three pillars of the United Nations—sustainable development, peace and security, and human rights—are equally important, interlinked, and mutually reinforcing. We commend the recognition embedded in the Pact that none of our goals can be achieved without the full, safe, equal, and meaningful participation and representation of all women and girls.

We believe education lies at the nexus of human rights, sustainable development, and all domains within the Beijing Platform for Action. The World Bank Group describes education as a fundamental human right, a powerful driver of development, and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, and peace. They also highlight that education delivers significant economic returns and is critical for fostering equity and inclusion. In this statement, we demonstrate how education, in its broadest sense, can serve as a pivotal tool in addressing all areas of concern outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action.

Women and education

Education has a transformative impact on the lives of individual people, communities, and whole populations, and is a cross-cutting strategy connecting with and accelerating change in each of the other areas of concern. At the same time, a major setback in the delivery of education can engender regression in other areas, as evidenced during the Covid-19 pandemic, when school and office closures negatively impacted both mental and physical health, individual safety, and economic stability.

Today, 119.3 million girls are out of school (UN Women, 2024). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, n.d.) reports that only 49% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education and only 24% in upper secondary education. Those statistics are alarming and demand immediate action from the international community.

Women and health

Experts have long recognized that education is a primary social determinant of health. In 2010, UNESCO reported compelling data showing the direct positive impact of education on wellbeing, health, and economic prosperity. Research by Dai Binh Tran (2021) likewise found higher education levels lead to higher levels of wellbeing.

Education of women has been linked to reduced child and maternal mortality and improved child health, basic to uplifting the lives of women and girls and communities. Sexual and reproductive health curriculum at school is also a powerful tool to improve girls' health by empowering them and giving them agency over their bodies and health choices.

Violence against women

Urgent action is needed to address the global epidemic of violence against women. Education can create economic opportunities that foster independence for women who may be financially reliant on a partner or family members. Research by Abigail Weitzman (2018) found that increasing women's schooling reduced both recent and longer-term probabilities of psychological, physical, and sexual intimate partner violence.

Furthermore, educating boys and men on topics like consent, healthy relationships, and respect for human rights is also key to ending gender-based violence.

Women and armed conflict

The disproportionate effects of armed conflict on the lives of women and children are well documented and profound, with both immediate and long-term consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Women need to be at the peacebuilding table to prevent and resolve conflict, and education is critical to ensuring women's access to those power structures and giving them the tools to advocate for peace and security.

Education for all genders is further essential to foster a culture of peace, justice, and tolerance and to prevent radicalization and fundamentalism. We support explicit global citizen education promoted and designed by UNESCO to teach young people about mutual respect, peace, collaboration, and cultural competence.

Women, poverty, and the economy

Educating women and girls expands their choices and fosters workforce participation and entrepreneurship, contributing to their economic development and that of their countries. Utilizing only about half of a country's human resources makes no financial sense. The UN

Women Gender Snapshot (2024) reveals that the annual global cost of the education skills deficit exceeds \$10 trillion, with sub-Saharan Africa alone facing a cost of \$210 billion, exceeding 10% of its gross domestic product. A study by Plan International and Citi Global Insights (2020) found that for every dollar invested into girls' rights and education, developing nations could yield a return of \$2.80.

In addition to boosting the country's economic development, education is one of the most powerful tools to reduce poverty: UNESCO (2017) estimates 171 million people could escape poverty if all students in low-income countries had basic reading skills, and this could rise to 420 million if all adults completed secondary school.

Women in power and decision-making

Education, particularly in political and civic matters, empowers women with knowledge and skills to engage in political life and move into decision-making roles. This is supported by the research of Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001), who assert that education is an “especially powerful predictor of political participation.” This is as a result of both direct effects, including acquisition of knowledge and skills useful in public debate, and indirect effects, such as benefits of voluntary engagement in extracurricular activities, access to higher-income jobs, and access to networking opportunities.

Women and the media

The gender gap in media, communications, and information technology positions can be addressed by encouraging and funding education for girls and women in these fields. Greater female participation in media decision-making roles can help combat negative

portrayals of women and challenge abuses of power within this increasingly influential sector.

The underrepresentation of women and girls in the development of Artificial Intelligence applications is especially alarming. Women not only need access to the latest information and communication technologies but must also have key roles in the development of emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence algorithms, to avoid technology being dominated by structural gender inequality.

Women and the environment

Educating women and girls is crucial for empowering them to create, lead, and implement climate action initiatives. Climate change impacts women and girls disproportionately, exasperating existing vulnerabilities. According to Kwauk and Braga (2017), girls' education can strengthen climate strategies by advancing girls' reproductive rights, fostering their climate leadership and pro-environmental decision-making, and developing their skills for green jobs. Formal education plays a pivotal role in paving the way for girls' leadership, and women's political empowerment is in turn strongly linked to better environmental outcomes (Kwauk, 2021).

The girl child

Education is a vital tool the girl child can use to become independent, escape poverty, prevent child marriage, and ensure her human rights are respected. It equips a girl with confidence to make informed decisions about her own life and advocate for her rights. According to the World Bank's 2018 report "Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not

Educating Girls,” for every additional year a girl stays in secondary school, her likelihood of marrying as a child decreases by six percentage points.

We must eliminate discrimination against girls in education, skills development, and training, as was acknowledged in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995.

Conclusion

The Canadian Federation of University Women, along with the organizations endorsing this statement, will continue to monitor progress in the areas highlighted in this statement and will continue our collective advocacy as civil society champions for the education of women and girls.

Recommendations

1. Convene a high-level meeting of key stakeholders, mid-way between 2025 and 2030, to identify progress, challenges, and new opportunities presented after the 2022 United Nations Transforming Education Summit.

2. Integrate United Nations agencies and bodies’ educational efforts to accelerate the achievement of quality education and facilitate access to United Nations resources, frameworks, and expertise.

3. Fund young feminist-led education organizations and initiatives.

4. Increase investments in education in crisis zones and fragile states, with a focus on innovative and technology-enabled approaches to education.

5. Encourage and fund the engagement and participation of women and girls in the development and governance of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.

6. Promote the inclusion of global citizenship education from primary to secondary levels of education programming.

Endorsed by:

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