



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
13 December 2017

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-second session

12–23 March 2018

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Mision Mujer AC, 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

Education, the cross cutting issue in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Case study: Axios Program

“Education is essential for women to attain gender equality and become leaders of change. At the same time, educated women benefit entire societies. They make substantial contributions to flourishing economies and the improved health, nutrition and education of their families.” (UN Women, 2015).

The Sustainable Development Agenda recognizes that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are essential for development, however in order for development efforts to be effective, education should be addressed as the cross cutting issue to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Equitable access to quality education is fundamental to achieve all the development goals, from ending poverty and hunger, ensuring healthy lives and promoting economic growth, to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

Even though education and gender equality have been addressed through goals and programmes in the last decades, work remains to be done in terms of education in rural settings. The issue of gender inequality in education is still evident, particularly for young women and girls in rural or impoverished areas, since it comprises early marriages, girls’ pregnancies, gender violence, among other issues such as the need to assist the family instead of learning practical skills, which will enable their empowerment and foster a more sustainable development and lifestyle.

Nicola Grinstead (2015) stated that “empowerment is about being able to reach your full potential”, in this sense we propose the view of education as the means for empowering women and girls. This approach views education as the most important tool for the development of any country, in which rural women and girls have the opportunity to overcome the challenges of gender inequality and therefore reach their full potential.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that education should be adapted to different settings. Regarding this, there is a consensus in which education and its practical application needs to be reassessed, refocused and redefined (Grinstead, 2015). This means that in order to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, we must change the way we think about education. In this regard, reassessing education means that it should be more than just the access to primary education, but the continuous opportunity to attend school into further years (Grinstead, 2015). The reassessment of education should reach both rural and urban settings, and both women and men, as it empowers them and gives them the equal opportunity to develop life-long skills.

According to Grinstead (2015), refocusing education means that education should be in line with the current global development and with the present-day challenges that people face in the 21st century. Some examples include addressing social issues such as bullying, self-esteem, leadership, masculinity crisis, lack of values and the importance of a definition of a life-plan, among many other things. Additionally, Grinstead (2015) seeks to redefine education, since it usually focuses on formal education programs and neglects the other aspects such as informal and non-formal opportunities. This translates into the lack of appropriate educational

programs for rural settings, as the school-based approach rarely adapts to those surroundings. A redefined education program in rural settings should address the demands and challenges that young women and girls face in their daily lives.

Besides seeking to reassess, refocus and redefine education, it becomes crucial to emphasise that the issues of gender equality and women's empowerment must not be approached from a single point of view, but rather from both, a male and a female perspective. The main reason for this approach is that "gender equality is not just a women's issues, it is a development issue" (Tembon & Fort, 2008). It is therefore essential to use education as a cross cutting issue, in which educational programs, especially in rural settings, include a more integrated gender perspective aimed at girls and boys, and women and men.

Against this backdrop, gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls can be achieved through policies and programs that recognize the value of developing not just cognitive but also social and emotional skills. Mexico is an example of how the implementation of models that integrate psycho-educational programmes which focus on developing life skills, have provided important tools to overcome the challenges that women and girls face at both rural and urban contexts. An example of good practice in Guadalajara, Mexico in terms of an integrated approach to education is the Program Axios. This Program has over 18 years of experience using an integrated model that prevents gender inequality and psychosocial risks — such as teenage pregnancy, addiction, suicide, school dropout, gender violence and bullying. The Program mainly focuses on the development of life skills, which empowers and provides socio-emotional support to young women and girls, as well as young men and boys, through the basic secondary education in public schools from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Therefore, Axios supports the approach of promoting the development of education programs focused on developing life skills that will empower and encourage the individual capabilities of women and girls at different life stages and at different contexts. In this regard, women and girls will develop their full potential in the long term, by not only having a positive impact on their lives, but on their communities as well, thereby promoting an inclusive social change in current and future generations.

Another approach that the Program Axios uses to address the issues of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls is made through the youth-led platform called MYL, Mexican Young Leaders. This platform has worked this past year in creating local alliances which different non-governmental and grass roots organizations that work both in urban and rural settings. They work through the promotion of the development agenda by working together towards achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals. So far, the platform has created alliances to work with 5 different organizations, targeting Goals, 2, 4, 8, 10 and 12. They have worked with projects and activities that address migration issues, sustainable consumption and production of cleaning supplies in rural communities, as well as equitable education and the promotion of a sustainable lifestyle. In addition, through these alliances the platform has worked mainly in the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals in both urban and rural setting, in the reduction of inequalities among the targeted communities and in the empowerment of its members.

To conclude, it is imperative to view education as the opportunity for rural women and girls to reach their full potential. Education programs must be focused on a more integrated gender perspective, one that is also adapted to the needs of rural settings, since it will help overcome the challenges of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

References

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