



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
27 November 2012

Original: English

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-first session

6-15 February 2013

**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:**

**priority theme: promoting empowerment of people
in achieving poverty eradication, social integration
and full employment and decent work for all**

Statement submitted by Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, 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.



Statement

The United Nations defines empowerment as having a sense of self-worth; the right to make choices; access to opportunities and resources; and the capacity to influence social change. Whether understood as referring to structures or as personal agency, the empowerment of people is essential for achieving human-centred development goals.

Considered in these terms, people living in poverty, in particular girls and women, have limited experience of being empowered. According to the Global Poverty Project, women and girls suffer disproportionately from the burden of extreme poverty, representing 70 per cent of the 1 billion who suffer from chronic hunger and malnutrition. They perform two thirds of the world's work and produce more than half of the world's food, yet earn only 10 per cent of the world's income and own less than 1 per cent of the world's property. Women hold only 19 per cent of the world's parliamentary seats.

Girls (0-18), in particular, comprising a seventh of the world's population (United States Census Bureau), suffer multiple disadvantages because of discrimination, violence and exclusion, and as such have limited capacity to control or change their lives. Yet a mounting body of evidence suggests that unlocking the potential of this particular section of the global population is a powerful means of achieving poverty eradication and social integration.

Gender inequity

Gender disparities increase over the life cycle and deepen with puberty. By adolescence many girls have internalized attitudes and behaviours that minimize their capacity to challenge prevailing stereotypes and cultural norms. For instance, they normalize a sense of inferiority and gender inequity, taking it for granted that they are expected to engage in long hours of unpaid work, drop out of school early and ignore their particular social, educational and health needs. Unaware of their basic human rights, girls are often subjected to harmful cultural practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. These damaging practices actually disempower rather than empower girls and women.

Identity

An essential first step towards empowerment is birth registration, bestowing legal identity and recognition of nationality, yet every year, the United Nations Children's Fund notes, nearly 50 million newborns remain unregistered. Children are further empowered when they are provided with a Government-issued identification card. Official documentation facilitates access to education, health care, paid work, inheritance, property ownership and credit. Documentation can also be used as a tool to prevent child marriage, violence, neglect, trafficking, servitude and child labour.

Education

One of the most effective means of empowering a young woman is to enable her to complete her education, because it is now acknowledged that there is a direct relationship between breaking the poverty cycle and the length of time a girl is permitted to stay at school. This has been quantified in a report of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs as an increase of up to 20 per cent in income capacity for

each additional year of primary school and up to 25 per cent for each additional year of secondary school. Furthermore, it has been estimated that an increase of 1 per cent in female secondary school attendance can add 0.3 per cent to a country's annual per capita income growth.

Young women are empowered when both formal and non-formal education are available and easily accessible. Access to technology, such as computers, mobile phones and the Internet, is vital in this regard, as many development agencies realize. Interventions that enable young women to continue learning can prevent early marriage and pregnancy and are therefore important tools in promoting empowerment.

The acquisition of financial literacy and management skills also empowers girls by giving them independence and expanding their choices. Even small steps toward financial inclusion, such as access to bank accounts and credit, can reduce gender inequity.

Work

Work in its many forms is one of the most effective and sustainable paths out of poverty. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, on average, girls and women handle 43 per cent of all farming and virtually all household work in the developing world. Daily they perform tasks that are hidden, undervalued, uncounted and uncompensated, despite their importance to the life of the community. Therefore, an important means of empowerment is to value the work that girls perform in homes and fields; another is to recognize domestic and agricultural work as a legitimate form of economic activity.

In addition to unpaid work, many young women are also engaged in paid employment, often in the informal sector. Communities benefit significantly when young women are financially compensated for their work, because women living in poverty usually invest approximately 90 per cent of their earnings in their families, as stated by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. A larger, more productive workforce, associated with higher levels of female education and paid employment, acts as a catalyst towards achieving the goals of poverty eradication and social integration.

Agents of change

Young women are empowered to act as agents of social change when Governments and local communities address the practices that support discrimination and violence against them. A simple means of initiating this process is to provide safe, inclusive spaces for young people to meet and exchange ideas. Both young women and men benefit from social interaction, where relationships are developed and skills for participation and leadership are acquired and tested. Opportunities to meet, talk, learn, play and participate in decisions that directly affect their lives empower young people to become active citizens in their communities and can eventually lead to changes in attitude and behaviour.

When girls have safe places to meet, access to secondary education, adequate health care, legal protection and opportunities to engage in decision-making, they thrive. A substantial body of research suggests that gender equity and the achievement of other development goals are inseparable. Empowering young women benefits the entire community.

Structures for empowerment

Stable and inclusive political, economic and legal institutions are vital for poverty eradication, a factor that is sometimes overlooked in discussions about empowerment. Without the enabling environment provided by good governance, empowerment in any form cannot even begin.

For instance, freedom from armed conflict is an essential prerequisite for development, together with an infrastructure that provides essential services, such as roads, sanitation, water, safe access to education and health facilities, decent work and political participation. Laws that forbid discrimination against women and girls in relation to legal identity, marriage, property rights, equal pay, personal safety and physical integrity are the bedrock on which genuine empowerment is built.

Research has shown that when countries create an enabling environment their material and social well-being is likely to improve. In contrast, rampant economic, social and political inequality impedes development, poverty eradication and social integration.

Conclusion

Women's well-being has been described as the fuel that drives vibrant, healthy societies. Investing in young women by ensuring their human rights; creating viable educational and employment opportunities; and working to strengthen Government infrastructure pays dividends in terms of achieving poverty eradication, social integration and decent work. Thus, unleashing the power of the millions of young women living in poverty is critical to enhancing the lives not only of individuals but also of communities and nations.

Recommendations

We therefore urge Member States to:

- (a) Uphold and protect the rights of girls and young women;
- (b) Register all newborns and provide them with birth certificates;
- (c) Make the completion of secondary education for girls a priority;
- (d) Provide inclusive community spaces where young women feel safe to speak;
- (e) Recognize domestic and agricultural work as a legitimate form of economic activity;
- (f) Repeal laws that legitimize discrimination against girls and women.

Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Pan Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association, Sisters of Charity Federation, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, The Grail, UNANIMA International, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, World ORT Union and Zonta International.