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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”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women

Statement submitted by Mothers’ Union, 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.

* E/CN.6/2008/1.



Statement

Mothers' Union is a Christian membership-based organisation with 3.6 million members across 78 countries. Motivated by their faith, members run grassroots initiatives that support marriage, family life and flourishing relationships within communities. Members also lobby national governments and international bodies on issues encountered in their communities and this statement voices their experiences.

Overview

In 2008, the inequality of women persists in all societies. In failing to address this injustice, women continue to face education, health and social inequalities, physical and sexual violence, harmful cultural practices and other human rights violations. 'Gender equality' is certainly on the political agenda across the world but, in many cases, women have been labelled as a 'special interest group'.

A national budget is the policy instrument that sets out a government's priorities and the financing necessary to carry them out. 'Promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women' is a key international policy priority, as enshrined in Millennium Development Goal 3. Generally, financing to achieve women's equality falls into 2 categories:

- i) Funding initiatives that specifically promote women's equality
- ii) Ensuring that national budgetary decisions promote women's equality and prevent women's inequality

National governments have a responsibility to prioritise women's equality in their budgets. Government financing also ensures sustainability and national ownership of achieving women's equality. In reality, there are financing gaps in many national economies, which are currently plugged by NGOs and the private sector. These groups play an essential role in providing women and communities with sustainable skills in industry, commerce, science, micro-finance and leadership, plus social and health education and services. However, this form of financing is often time-limited and subject to donor conditionalities.

Gender responsive budgeting (GRB) has developed over the last two decades with the aim of ensuring all governmental departments promote women's equality in their spending. It is argued that GRB is an essential tool because no budgeting area is 'gender neutral.' However, the analysis GRB provides needs to be used actively to change budgets and decision making where women's inequality is evident and it has been criticised for not withstanding political whims and fashions.¹

¹ Sharp, Rhonda *Gender Responsive Budgets (GRBs) have a place in financing gender equality and women's empowerment*. UN Division for the Advancement of Women, Expert Group Meeting on financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women, 4 – 7 September 2007.

http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/financing_gender_equality/ExpertPapers/EP.4%20Sharp.pdf

Most importantly, financing initiatives and GRB alone cannot prevent inequality - political will and societal change are also essential.

How does Mothers' Union finance for women's equality and empowerment?

Mothers' Union programmes successfully promote women's equality because their primary focus is upon relationships – and gender equality is about relationships. Women and girls cannot be taken out of their families and empowered in isolation, so Mothers' Union members run programmes that educate women, their families and their communities. Importantly, whilst challenging gender stereotyping, Mothers' Union programmes also affirm the roles of men and boys. In achieving women's equality healthy relationships will be able to flourish; and in sustaining healthy relationships, discrimination has no part.

Much evidence points to education as a key driver in promoting women's equality. Millennium Development Goal 3 uses 'the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education' as the indicator of the empowerment of women. Mothers' Union members in Australia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda and the West Indies have all identified lack of education and illiteracy as major social issues impacting their societies.²

Mothers' Union community-owned programmes demonstrate how education, in its many forms, promotes women's equality and empowerment. The Literacy and Development Programme in Burundi, Malawi and the Sudan provides adults, particularly women, with literacy and numeracy skills. Through participatory group discussions traditional gender roles are challenged and this has been vital in breaking down the inequalities women face. For example, women learners have taken more active roles in leadership and decision making processes and, ultimately, relationships have been improved within their homes and communities.

“We now have more discussions in our homes and are allowed to take part in decision making and in buying things. Before we couldn't ask for money for things. Our husbands took us [as] a people who knew nothing. We now hug our husbands, before we were too scared... there is now a much better relationship between husbands and wives.”

Female learner, Malawi

Girls have also benefitted from the Programme where literacy circles have paid for their secondary school fees and saved them from early marriage.

“Now we don't keep any girls from school. We all have to look after orphans and we also send them to school. We know the importance of girls to have an education.”

Female learner, Malawi

² Responses to questionnaire sent to Mothers' Union Provincial Presidents and Workers worldwide, August 2007.

The Family Life Programme mobilises community groups by actively promoting income generation, leadership roles for women, awareness of widows' rights, women's inheritance and land rights, and education of the girl child. The Programme also challenges pre-conceived ideas of gender roles and the low importance placed on educating females. The Programme demonstrates that inequalities can be broken down and the status of women improved through a small financial investment in mobilising communities and establishing forums for discussion.

“Before I was not committed to work but the Family Life Programme has taught me lots of things... I talked with my wife and children and we shared ideas ... We planted grass for our cow, built an improved stove in the kitchen. Built terraces and dug trenches. There is now a big change because the soil is not getting eroded like before. Now my children go to school whereas before they would only sometimes go. We sit around the table to eat and talk together as a family.”

Steven, Sebei

Mothers' Union recommendations

Sufficient funding is not currently given to achieving women's equality, although the evidence is that such investment is affordable³. Financing should be directed in the following ways:

1. Financing for Millennium Development Goal 3

1.1 Governments must commit finances to achieve MDG3 if they have not already.

1.2 However, blanket financing of formal education alone does not automatically achieve women's equality. Saudi Arabia, for example, spends 6.5% GDP on education⁴ but is ranked 61st out of 177 in the gender empowerment measure (GEM) rank⁵. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in comparison spends 5.5% GDP on education⁶ yet ranks 16th in the GEM measure.⁷

2. Financing for community-owned social education and sustainable skills training

2.1 In light of point 1, financing should be committed to community education that provides both i) social education e.g. 'gender awareness' and health education; and ii) sustainable skills training.

³ Grown, C., Bahadur, C., Handbury, J. and Elson, D *The Financial Requirements of achieving Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*. The Levy Economic Institute of Bard College, paper prepared for the World Bank, August 2006.

⁴ http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_SAU.html.

⁵ <http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/279.html>.

⁶ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/TIM/m002002/edspendrev2006.pdf>.

⁷ As 5.

2.2 Education must benefit both females and males of all ages to create change in communities.

2.3 Financing and resourcing need to come from both i) national governments, to ensure sustainability; and ii) those delivering programmes and sharing their expertise to ensure they are recognised as key stakeholders. However, funders and programme deliverers need to determine conditions of funding in partnership to ensure that they are realistic and not burdensome.

2.4 It is estimated that governments need to spend on average US\$11 per capita to fund overall gender equality interventions⁸ and Mothers' Union recommends that governments put a high proportion of this into social education and sustainable skills training.

3. Financing for gender responsive budgeting (GRB) and using it actively to prevent the inequalities it identifies

3.1 Governments should implement GRB to ensure that their national infrastructures enable women and girls to access education and training with ease, for example by providing appropriate sanitation facilities at schools and ensuring physical safety for girls on their journeys to and from school. GRB must be used to guide policy formation as well as being a measuring tool.

3.2 GRB should be implemented (if not already) in countries where MDG 3 has already been achieved but women's equality has not, for example in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where girls out-perform boys in primary and secondary education and are over-represented in tertiary education⁹ but women's equality has not been fully achieved, particularly in pay levels and leadership roles. Australia, however, provides a good working example - it has employed GRB over the last 2 decades (to varying degrees of success¹⁰) and is rated 3rd in the GEM ranking. Governments also need to invest in producing gender-disaggregated statistics on education as another measuring tool of inequality.

3.3 Women's equality in the developed world tends to be measured by pay levels, economic position and representation in leadership roles (although these categories apply across the whole world) and governments must continue to address these inequalities.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000716/SFR10_2007v1.pdf.

¹⁰ Sharp, Rhonda *Gender Responsive Budgets (GRBs) have a place in financing gender equality and women's empowerment*.