

Enhancing Gender Equality in Global Education

by Anna Glass, Matthias Lugand and Petra Szonyegi
ODU United Nations Society

Introduction

2020 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration for action. 2021 is the seventy-fifth anniversary year of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

The CSW is the UN's premier body for setting goals and policies to achieve fully gender equality and address special problems of women everywhere. The CSW is not an operational body—it does not manage programs and it cannot tell its Member States what to do—rather it sets goals and principles to guide all 193 UN Member States.¹

Education is a central element of the UN's highest priorities, the 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is integral to each of the 17 goals.² The goal is specifically emphasized in SDG no. 4, Inclusive and equitable quality education.³ Despite progress toward gender quality in recent years, as many as 48 per cent of girls remain out of school in some regions. Gender gaps in primary and secondary enrolment rates have nearly closed, on average. Yet 15 million girls are not in primary school right now, compared to 10 million boys.⁴

Education is widely regarded as essential for improving women's rights and their contribution to society (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2015). Significant progress toward gender quality in education has been made in recent years, but these accomplishments are fragile. For example, the coronavirus epidemic threatens to undermine much that has been accomplished, by endangering funding, and reinforcing stay-at-home roles.⁵



Meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the UN General Assembly Hall, New York.

The education of women leads to a plethora of positive outcomes for women and their communities. Women who have received a basic education are more likely to get married and have children later in life, which results in healthier pregnancies and reduces the risk of

¹ 'Commission on the Status of Women', *UN Women*, n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>

² UN Women. *Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. New York, UN Women, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs>

³ UN Women. *SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning*

opportunities for all. New York, UN Women, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-4-quality-education>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ UN News. 'Generations of progress for women and girls could be lost to COVID pandemic, UN chief warns', *UN News Centre*, 31 August 2020 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1071372>

domestic violence (Verveer, 2011). Educated women have better nutrition and are more likely to be aware of their human rights and healthcare opportunities. Educating girls results in high rates of return economically as well as socially.

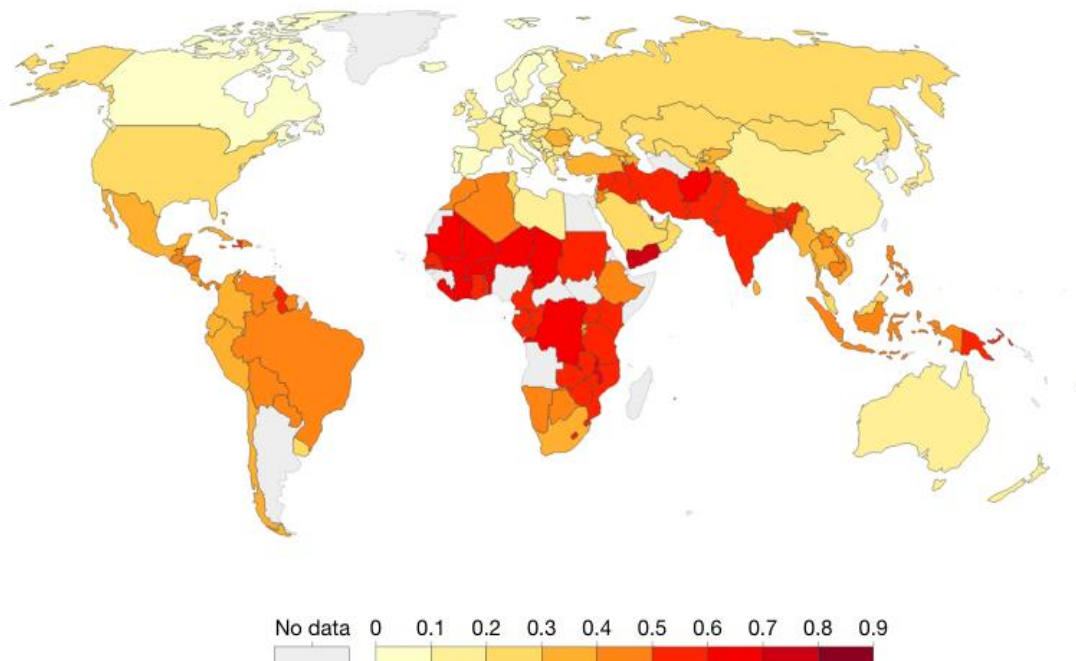
But in international institutions, the issue can be controversial. It runs in traditional views of women's subordination, prominent in many Member States. It also raises difficult issues of

funding, and the unwillingness of many Member States to accept international intrusion into their domestic affairs. For the CSW, the biggest question is how to advance education of women, without antagonizing skeptical interests and views? The CSW traditionally avoids such issues.⁶ But this approach may be obsolete and in need of change.⁷

Gender Inequality Index from the Human Development Report, 2015

This index covers three dimensions: reproductive health (based on maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates); empowerment (based on proportion of parliamentary seats occupied by females and proportion of adult females aged 25 years and older with at least some secondary education); and economic status (based on labour market participation rates of female and male populations aged 15 years and older). Scores are between 0-1 and higher values indicate higher inequalities.

Our World
in Data



(Ortiz-Ospina, & Roser, 2018)

⁶ For example, see the CSW's 2020 resolution, *Political declaration on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, E/CN.6/2020/L.1. New York: Commission on the Status of Women, 20 March 2020, <https://undocs.org/en/E/CN.6/2020/L.1>

⁷ Dulcie Leimbach, 'Battle lines are drawn on women's rights before #CSW64 even begins', *PassBlue*, 27 February 2020, <https://www.passblue.com/2020/02/27/as-the-un-womens-forum-looms-the-us-and-friends-hack-away-at-certain-rights/>



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Data obtained by the UN Commission on the Status of Women reports that “an extra year of primary school increases girls’ future wages by an estimated 10 to 20 percent, and an extra year of secondary school increases future wages by 15 to 25 percent.”(Verveer, 2011). Quality education for women reduces gender inequality in every respect by increasing the representation of women in the political and economic spheres and teaching values of equality to young children.

For UN Member States, education issues pose tricky issues of standards and sovereignty, and when aid is involved, a difficult gap between donor and recipient countries. All countries seek to improve their educational systems, but many want to maximize their sovereign freedom to make decisions and protect local decision-making. To advocates of international normative principles, however, such national sovereignty often is thin veneer to protect established interests and block change. This is clearly seen among some Non-Aligned Member states especially in parts of the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, but increasingly in government in Europe and North America under the rule of strong-men governments. Many accept or even support reform, but demand it be under their personal control and service their political interests, including aiding favored groups of political supporters.

When aid money is involved, the key question usually is control. Donor governments want all assistance to conform to their standards, eliminate corruption and misuse, and be distributed fairly. But recipient governments often need to maximize their own sovereign control and serve their own political purposes, such as rewarding their supporters. The result can be a stalemate, with donors hesitant to give, and sometimes recipients resistant to accepting. Even aid channeled through independent organizations like the World Bank Group or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is vulnerable to these quarrels. Such practical problems always must be navigated, even by the best-intended plans.

Background

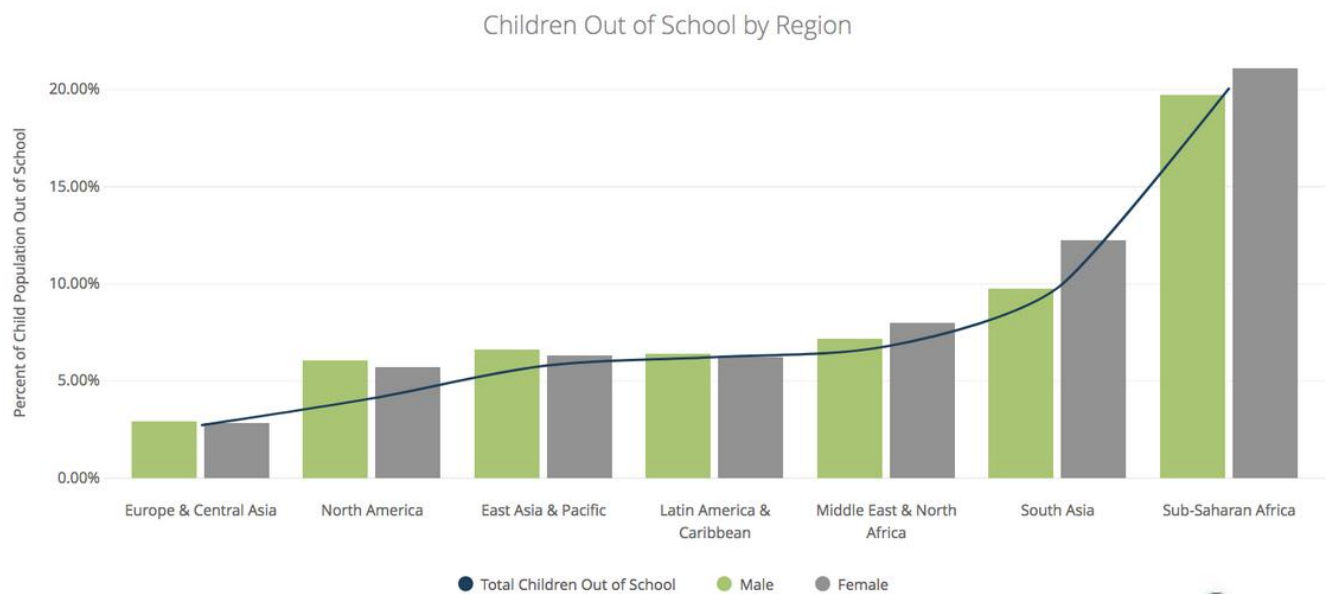
The education of women and girls is a major point of discussion amongst social activists and policy-makers. The Member States of the United Nations have reached a consensus that women’s education is a vital aspect for promoting economic development and enhancing human rights. In 2000, *The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All* established six development goals to be completed by a 2015 deadline (UNESCO, 2017).



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Access to education by gender



Source: World Bank Indicators in Haarthi Sadasivam, Kelly Payne & Mildred Koch,
Data of Women: education and literacy around the world, 8 May 2018

These goals aimed at creating accessible world education and improving literacy with an emphasis on extending these improvements to education for women as well as men. Although these goals were not achieved by the 2015 deadline, UNESCO succeeded in increasing enrollment in primary education by two and a half times in South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Despite improvements in accessibility to primary education, in 2015, the majority of out of school children were girls.

In addition to this, the percentage of out-of-school girls who were likely to never enroll in

school was 11% higher than boys (UNESCO, 2015). Access to resources such as new school buildings and reduced cost of education were less likely to positively affect women because of cultural hostility towards women (UNESCO, 2015). According to estimates from UNESCO, 130 million girls were out of school in 2017 (The World Bank, 2017). In response to this, The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), overseen by UNICEF, and the Global Partnership for Education published the "Guidance for Developing Gender-Responsive Education Sector Plans," in January 2017 in order to inform national governments of the

gender disparity issues within education and the means by which they and the development community could work to analyze these factors and instigate plans for development (World Bank, 2017).

Current Situation

Major actors in the fight for the enhancement of women's education, namely the Education For All (EFA) Steering Committee, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNGEI, and individual state governments have reached a consensus that education for women and girls is key for achieving current Sustainable Development Goals, enforcing human rights, and reducing violence (UNESCO, 2016). The major issues in achieving the goal of universal education for women are:

- **Providing access to education in areas afflicted with conflict, poverty, and clashing cultural values:** Armed conflict remains a primary barrier for the enhancement of education in developing countries, as conflict creates a lack of mobility to and from school as well as a hostile and therefore ineffective learning environment. In conflict-affected areas, the proportion of out-of-school children rose from 30% to 36% from 1999 to 2012 and from 63% to 87% in Arab States (UNESCO, 2015). Studies from the Global Partnership for Education show that women are disproportionately affected by the consequences of conflict because they are at a much higher risk for sexual violence, abduction, and forced marriage (Kimotho, 2017).
- **Counteracting gender-based violence and discrimination in schools:**
 - Gender-based violence in schools discourages women from attending
 - school and reaching their full potential of learning. Gender-based violence in schools is most prominent in regions with male dominated societies and cultural stigmas against educated and financially independent women. Environments that are demoralizing towards women and girls distract female students from learning and achieving their academic goals because they are struggling with the additional burden of combatting hostile students and teachers that favor male students (UNESCO, 2016).
- **Obtaining funding for and reducing the cost of women's education in developing countries:**
 - Many women in developing and conflict-afflicted countries are unable to receive an education because of a lack of financial resources within their families or home countries. Plans for action such as the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All initiatives have encouraged and influenced both government and private donors to invest in education, but the need for increased and sustainable funding remains. The United Nations has emphasized the importance of government spending on education because education encourages innovation in the fields of science and technology, and can ultimately be financially sustainable by all developing countries (UNESCO, 2016). The completion of education unlocks the type of human capital that developing countries desperately need, and extending the same educational opportunities to women fosters even more potential for human development.
- **Ensuring that educational programs have both quality facilities and staff:**

- Education becomes meaningful when it is entirely obtainable and of quality. In order to create programs that effectively grant women economic independence, the programs must have access to facilities and staff that will prepare them with the necessary skills to enter the labor force. Quality education and actively involved teachers help develop an environment that facilitates critical thinking and relevant hard and soft skills. The goal of an education is to significantly apply it to the adult world, and a quality education comes in conjunction with quality facilities and staff (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2015).

United Nations Actions and Resolution

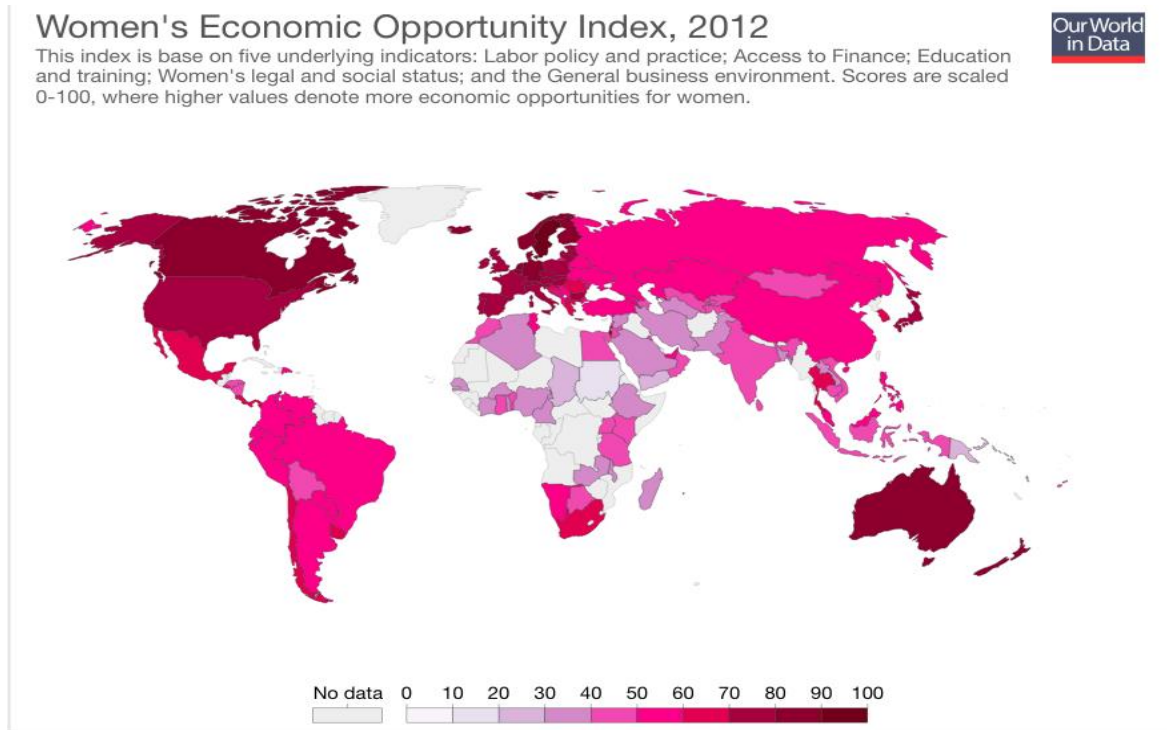
The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 was introduced and adopted by 184 of the UNESCO Member states in November, 2015. It calls for global support of the development of education for women in the form of financial and political support. The Incheon Declaration suggests that Member States allocate “efficiently at least 4 – 6% of Gross Domestic Product and/or at least 15 – 20% of total public expenditure to education.” (UNESCO, 2016). In addition to the financial support of women’s education, the declaration shows support for the collaboration of UN partners in order to efficiently and sustainably implement educational programs that each Member State can implement within the framework of current strategies and regional entities (UNESCO, 2016).

United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a leading partner of Education for All (EFA). UNGEI conducts its operations based on four main tenets that declare that their efforts contribute to:

1. An enhanced focus on marginalized and excluded groups;
2. The reduction/elimination of school-related gender-based violence;
3. Improved learning outcomes for girls; and
4. An increased number of girls transitioning to secondary education and accessing post-primary opportunities.” (UNGEI, 2008).

UNGEI encourages the formation of partnerships between developed and developing countries in the United Nations to foster a collective effort towards the enhancement of women’s education (UNGEI, 2008).

The Muscat Agreement, a result of the 2014 Global Education for All meeting in Muscat, Oman acknowledged the unlikelihood of the completion of the EFA and MDG goals by the 2015 deadline and assured that educational development priorities would be reevaluated to reflect the current economic climate. The Muscat Agreement placed an emphasis on utilizing women’s education as a tool for reducing poverty and discrimination by generating opportunities to create economically inclusive societies. It successfully defined post-2015 development goals for education and promoted further resolution by influencing the path of the 2015 Incheon Declaration. The Muscat Agreement outlined a total of 7 targets to be met by a 2030 deadline that would ultimately “Ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030” (UNGEI, 2008).



(Ortiz-Ospina, & Roser, 2018).

The United Nations can encourage partnerships between Member States and promote the goals of published resolutions as well as recommend proposals for action. Only the Security Council can make statements that Member States are obligated to follow. Resolutions from the United Nations cannot directly infringe on cultural values within Member States, which presents the problem of combatting discriminatory policies against women without creating social or political outrage.

Special issues for the Commission on the Status of Women involve the tricky relationship between setting global principles and demanding global action. Traditionally, the CSW only focuses on shaping international norms and principles.⁸ It does not call for specific action by specific countries. But this approach is widely criticized and may be in need of revision, if its Member States agree.

Country and Bloc Positions

Asia/ Pacific Islands - Asia and the Pacific Islands recognize and support the data suggesting a strong correlation between gender equality and social and economic development (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2015). In 2015, the United Nations Economic and Social

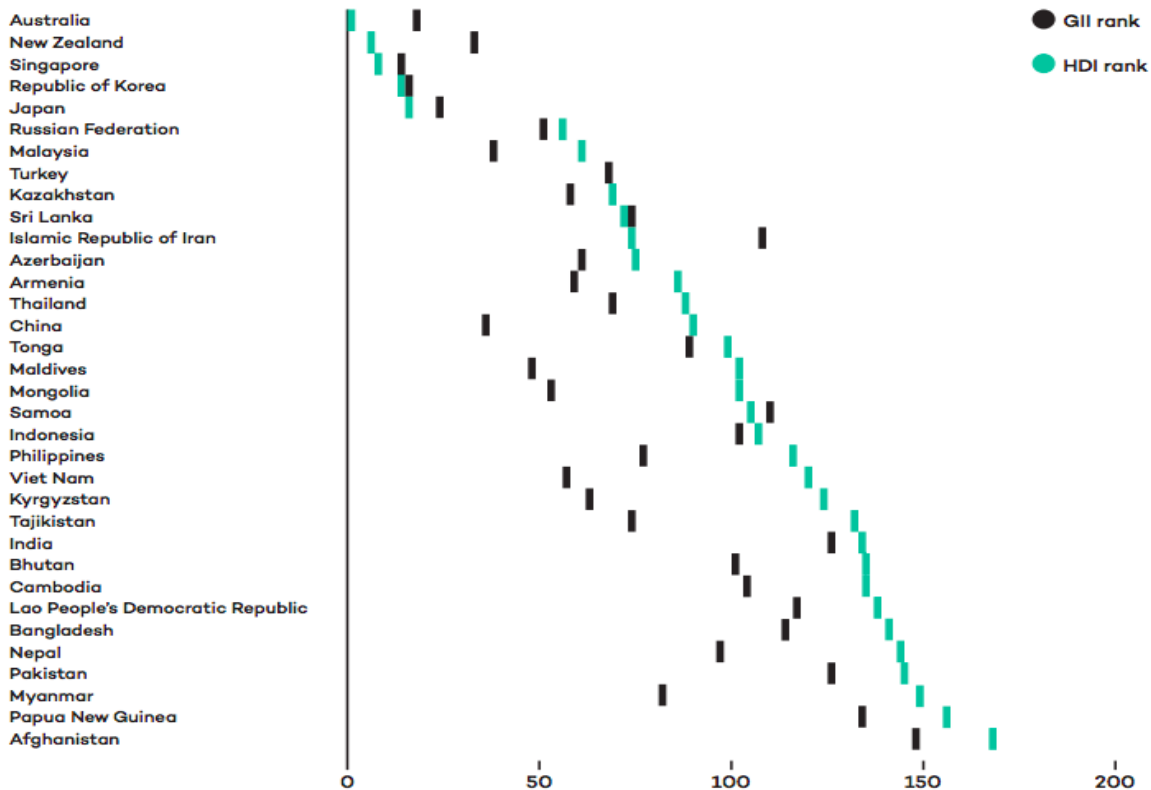
Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) published the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in partnership with the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. The Beijing Declaration outlined plans to ensure equal access to educational opportunities within the region by enforcing legislation on gender

⁸ 'Outcomes', New York: Commission on the Status of Women, 2020,
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/outcomes>

equality and the enhancement of women's education in order to ameliorate their economic status. The Asia and the Pacific region agrees that in order to implement successful programs for women's education, UN Member States must

work to eradicate poverty and combat violence against women in educational settings and at home (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2015).

FIGURE 2
2013 HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX AND GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX RANKINGS FOR COUNTRIES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC.



Source: (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2015).

China - China has stated that enhancing women's education is the foundation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and achieving world goals of justice and equality. In 1990, the State Council created the National Working Committee on Children and Women in efforts to enhance the development of women and children through education, alleviation of poverty, and prevention of violence. China's compulsory education

programs has eliminated the gender gap in primary education and greatly narrowed the gender gap in all higher levels of education (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2015). In the CSW China is increasingly assertive, especially to challenge action that would weaken the authority of the Chinese Communist Party over the society. Any precedent that might weaken national sovereignty is likely to be viewed septicly.⁹

⁹ China. 2015. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *Gender equality*

and women's development in China. China Legal Information Center, 2015,

European Union - The European Union is strongly in favor of the prioritization of enhancing women's education and hopes to put an emphasis on removing obstacles preventing gender equality in education such as legislation, social bias, and gender stereotyping. The European Union firmly states that gender equality is an essential step towards inclusive and sustainable development.¹⁰ The EU is highly supportive, and often willing to finance action.¹¹

Latin America/ Caribbean - In Latin America, initiatives to enhance women's education have been made with the primary goal of expanding and improving the workforce by equipping women with the education needed to compete in the global labor force. The region is working to create flexible job options for educated women with existing obligations of childcare and other household responsibilities (Azevedo, & Cord, 2012). Additionally, Latin American and the Caribbean have made progress by utilizing technology in order to enhance education and economic participation. However, the region still faces challenges in increasing the quality of their educational programs and preventing violence against women (Mora, 2015). Latin American and Caribbean countries are a major force in the CSW, encouraging advancement of women's rights. But some—especially those where the Catholic or Pentecostal churches are powerful forces—are skeptical about changing traditional gender roles. they can be skeptical

North Africa/ Middle East - North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) region has received support from the World Bank Group in order to facilitate education in the region. The 22 Ministers of Education in the region endorsed the Doha Declaration on Education Quality in 2010 and as a response the region partnered with

the World Bank Group to create the Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality (ARAIEQ). In the CSW MENA countries, like much of Africa, is skeptical, wary of being targeted unfairly. They support action, so long as it remains fully under their sovereign national control.

Russia - Russia has made successful efforts to close the gender gap in education. As of 2017 the Russian Federation achieved equal enrollment in primary education for both males and females and is continuing to narrow the gender gap in secondary and post-secondary education. Currently, there are a higher percentage of women in Russia enrolled in tertiary education than men. The Russian Federation has created policies to enhance women's education within the Russian Federation (Russian Federation, 2000). In the CSW, Russia is outspoken, often trying to lead action in a way that supports its larger foreign policy and national security goals, such as reducing the influence of the European Union and United States.

Sub-Saharan Africa - Sub-Saharan Africa has faced difficulties in extending educational opportunities to women and girls mainly due to hostility shown towards women in school environments, poor conditions in schools, and fiscal crises within the region (The World Bank Group, 1996). The Africa Technical Department published a report analyzing and providing possible solutions to these issues. The primary concerns of the Sub-Saharan African region are lowering the cost of school enrollment and supplies and creating a more favorable environment to promote the learning and development of women (The World Bank Group, 1996). In the CSW, Sub-Saharan African

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/chinalic/2015-11/30/content_22596236.htm

¹⁰ European Commission, 2018. Human rights and democratic governance: gender equality. *International Cooperation and development*. https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sectors/human-rights-and-governance/gender_en

¹¹ Amy Lieberman, 'Can advocates maintain momentum without UN's largest women's rights gathering?' *Devex*, 5 March 2020, <https://www.devex.com/news/can-advocates-maintain-momentum-without-un-s-largest-women-s-rights-gathering-96696>

states usually are very supportive, but funding issue are a serious problem for them.

United States will see dramatic policy shifts in the CSW. Under president Trump, the US emphasis was on discouraging abortion around the world, and reducing attention to issues of

contraception. Under President Trump, any issue of gender—including education—would be related to US priorities on abortion. Sexual Reproductive and Health Rights, or SRHR, was a problem to be contained. That is likely to change under President Biden.¹²

Proposals for Action

For many Member States, any debate in the CSW turns on Sexual Reproductive and Health Rights, or SRHR. For conservative governments or countries where conservative religious leaders have large sway, SRHR connotes abortion. Progress on any issue in the CSW is likely to be tried to agree to stop abortion and avoid promoting contraception. For abortion rights and contraception proponents, it covers a sweeping category of rights that allow women to control their own bodies.¹³

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Among major options under consideration:

Implement information and communication technologies to promote more accessible global education: An increasing demand in the global economy for technology-based professions and research calls for the implementation of technology into basic education. Aside from the necessity to include technology in school curriculum to teach desired skills to young children, information and communication technologies provide increased access to quality education in areas where transportation and violence in schools remain an issue.

¹² Dulcie Leimbach, *Battle Lines Are Drawn on Women's Rights Before #CSW64 Even Begins*, *PassBlue*, 27 February 2020, <https://www.passblue.com/2020/02/27/as-the-un->

[womens-forum-looms-the-us-and-friends-hack-away-at-certain-rights/](https://www.passblue.com/2020/02/27/as-the-un-womens-forum-looms-the-us-and-friends-hack-away-at-certain-rights/)

¹³ *Ibid.*

Sustain funding for women's education

programs: Although women's education has proven to yield the highest rate of return of any investment in the developing world, sustainability of educational programs creates the most effective development. In order for educational programs to reach peak value, the United Nations Member States must acquire and maintain a collective system of funding for education. UN declarations have proposed a multifaceted method of funding that involves both government and private investors (Verveer, 2011).

Reduce violence against women and counteract the social barriers that currently prevent women's education:

in areas with established schools, the barriers for women's education lie in discrimination and gender-based violence. Women's education in developing countries is plagued with violence and discrimination that reduces the quality of education that women receive as well as prevents their completion of education. Women are more likely to be victims of violent and gender-based crimes, especially in regions affected by conflict (Kimotho, 2017). Furthermore, within families with limited financial resources in areas where education is costly, sons are often prioritized over daughters in the attainment of education. Tragically, the few girls who are fortunate enough to go to school may face discrimination and hostility from peers and teachers due to their gender.

Reject gender-specific initiatives. Especially for conservative societies, gender-specific policy is sensitive, threatening not just foreign influence, but unwanted interference in local authority

structures, often patriarchal. Conservative societies will make gender-specific educational initiatives contingent on other measures to assure they do not threaten social stability. This may include demands that foreign funding, from donor governments, be channeled exclusively through host country institutions, with supervision by parliament, the national education ministry, or religious authorities.

Preventing the limited progress to be reverted by the COVID-19 pandemic:

With lockdowns in place throughout the world due to COVID-19 safety procedures, many women and girls are struggling to continue their paths to education and development. The advancements already made from multilateral organizations are slowing down but can be resolved by stressing the importance of current resolutions that are aimed to protect women and girls in education, economic, and cultural fields to ensure their safety and rights. Hence, it is necessary to enforce and reiterate all actions and resolutions presented and enacted by the members of this body to continue to the goal of achieving the standard of living for women.

Encourage further study of these issues. When an UN body is unable to make progress, ordering a study of is a favorite way to show action, without committing to anything. Studies also are a favorite of Member States opposed to action, trying to delay. There still are problems to overcome. Sensitive issue include it mandate (which issues it is to cover and what kind of findings and conclusions it should stress), how to choose officials or experts for the body, when it reports, and how it is funded.

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