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Focus placed on education as UN women's commission begins annual session



Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro addresses 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women

22 February 2011 – Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro today underscored the importance of education in raising the status of women in society and called for greater investment in measures to ensure gender equality, deploring the fact that two-thirds of illiterate adults across the world are female.

“Investing in women and girls is a force multiplier,” Ms. Migiro [told](#) the opening of the two-week [session](#) of the UN Commission on the Status of Women at UN Headquarters. “Not only is education a key driver of economic growth, it is also a catalyst for empowering women,” she added.

Ms. Migiro pointed out that global commitments to achieving universal primary education and gender parity, at all levels of education, have had a beneficial impact on girls’ school enrolment and retention rates in many countries, but the quality of education has not kept pace, particularly in the developing world.

“Many children leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Girls and women are under-represented in science and technology, education and employment. They are simply not getting the knowledge and skills they need for today’s competitive and changing job market.

“Your discussions at this session can help connect the dots among those key issues affecting women’s prospects and well-being,” said Ms. Migiro.

She said the launch of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) will galvanize worldwide efforts to realize the rights and opportunities of women and girls.

“UN Women will build on the strong foundation of international norms and policies developed by the United Nations over decades. It will provide a strong and unified voice. It will work throughout the United Nations system to strengthen coherence and to ensure accountability,” said Ms. Migiro.

She also encouraged the Commission, a functional body of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), to explore ways to reinforce the new Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health, which aims to save the lives of more than 16 million women and children over the next four years.

Michelle Bachelet, the Executive Director of UN Women, noted that despite progress in the status of women in many fields, women continue to be trafficked, girls are forced to drop out of school to get married and many women and girls lack access to social services.

“Worldwide, there are too few women who are at decision-making tables when peace, trade or climate change agreements are being negotiated,” Ms. Bachelet told members of the Commission.

“The specific and urgent challenges of reaching women – especially in rural areas, in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, is something that we need to hear more about,” she said, referring to the anti-poverty goals world leaders have pledged to achieve by 2015.

“The ways that women are affected by natural disasters, as well as conflict and displacement and the challenges they face gaining access to decision-making in every sector are also important topics for this body,” she said.

Outlining UN Women’s thematic priorities, Ms. Bachelet said the agency will focus on expanding women’s voice, leadership and participation; ending violence against women; strengthening the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda; enhancing women’s economic empowerment; and making gender equality a priority in national, local and sectoral planning and budgeting.

The priority theme of the Commission’s session this year is “Access and participation of women and girls in education, training and, science and technology.”

“Women must be encouraged to have equal access to ICT [information and communications technology] training and education as well as the new employment and entrepreneurial opportunities generated by ICTs,” said Ms. Bachelet. “Women globally are challenging gender stereotypes about ICT users and demanding the right to participate in ICT research and development,” she added.

Lazarous Kapambwe, the President of ECOSOC, spoke out against gender stereotypes in education, which he said led both women and men to segregated careers paths, with adverse consequences for women in economic opportunity and the labour market.

He pointed out that women's participation in the labour force in 2008 was estimated at 52.6 per cent, compared to 77.5 per cent for men. In the 20-24 age group, women continued to lag behind men in labour force participation in all regions, with South Asian recording the greatest gap at 82 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women employed or seeking employment, Mr. Kapambwe said.

“While Governments have primary responsibility for achieving the goals of gender equality and women's empowerment, partnerships and strategic alliances among all stakeholders are key to achieving effective, concrete and measurable results for women and girls,” he said.

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