



Caring for future generations: Women in leadership positions and the girl child

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Session 1

Empowering the girl child: Providing opportunities and support

Empowering the Girl Child

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Host: Inter-Parliamentary Union

Distinguished delegates and participants,

First I want to express my thanks to the Inter-Parliamentary Union for the invitation and I congratulate women speakers of parliaments all over the world. The opportunity to address you has a special significance for me and for the World YWCA. For 150 years the YWCA is concerned with the empowerment of women and girls and focuses on those who would otherwise drop off the radar screen of world attention. YWCA programmes annually touch the lives of 25 million women and girls in more than 120 countries.

We believe that taking an affirmative action for the empowerment of the girl child is an issue of justice. Archbishop Desmond Tutu captures this for me when he says:

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

The Case for Girls

- Worldwide, of the more than 130 million primary school age children not enrolled in school, nearly 60% are girls.
- Dropping out of school give a girl 90 percent chance of living in poverty as an adult.
- At least one in three girls and women worldwide has been beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime.
- Two million girls and women are subjected to female genital mutilation every year.
- 75% of all new HIV infections (ages 15-24) in Southern Africa are girls.
- 36% of all global marriages are girl child marriages (under 18).
- 70, 000 maternal deaths a year are adolescent girls.
- Households headed by women and girls are the fastest growing segment of the world poor.

There are millions of mind-boggling statistics, which clearly indicate that the benefits of investing in girls far exceed the cost of not doing so. Cascading cost of intergenerational death of girls, illiterate families that translate into vicious cycles of family and community poverty, endless conditions that make women and girls vulnerable are reasons enough for taking an urgent action. I am a strong proponent of the theory that empowerment of children is intrinsically linked to empowerment of their mothers. The connection is more than umbilical. Empowered women often transfer their empowerment to their children, families and whole communities and they begin a virtuous cycle of empowerment. The women's movement has made these connections for a very long time. It is a relief to see the children's movement and specifically UNICEF begin to do the same.

In the YWCA, we know that empowerment is a complex system configured to different degrees by economics, class, race, caste, gender, geography, ethnicity, religion, age, culture, and many other micro and macro factors. Empowerment cannot be perceived as a project for a given period, say one or ten years. It is a life long process. It is a strategy and a goal at the same time. Empowerment can never be one-dimensional. There are several levels and layers that lead to empowerment. Yet we know that when a person's self-consciousness translates into self-confidence and self-respect that is the beginning of her own empowerment. Empowerment begins with self. There are no forests without individual trees. Empowerment begins with an individual and that girl/woman must be named and given flesh and blood and a face. When an individual is empowered, they know what is happening to them and they use their knowledge for their good and for the good of others.

Education and Economic Security

Girl's education is key and must be a priority. Educating one girl is an investment in a family. War, extreme poverty, the AIDS pandemic and other deprivations endanger girls. They may be raped, forced to work in dangerous environments, sold or trafficked. Many girls are forced to stay home and take care of children, the sick and the elderly. Girls are vulnerable when faced with lack of economic opportunities. The more girls that are empowered the more communities will be reached through them. This is not just about the girl child but also about society. An educated mother will have the potential of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and illiteracy and ignorance.

The content of education must impart both academic knowledge and practical skills. Girls will find learning interesting when it includes their experience and life cycles. Support through things like suitable toilets and attention to girls' body changes do a lot to support self-confidence in girls. Positive self-image is the core for success.

The fact that many girls drop out of school due to personal, familial and financial constraints requires that more investment be made in providing the right conditions including free education and support to poor families. (The case for Brazil). Non-formal education channeled through social or religious institutions including youth clubs is essential as an extra space, which includes girls who are not in school. Even those girls who take on early employment can be educated to understand their human rights including fair wages and sexual rights.

Peer education supported through non-formal education institutions has proved to be a successful strategy for youth empowerment. The involvement of community in supporting youth is important. Civic leaders, village elders, religious figures, police, government administrators and other adults are vital but they can also be a problem to girls' empowerment if their behavior towards girls is inappropriate in perpetuating discrimination, harassment, sexual exploitation and stigmatization.

Girls should be exposed to other cultures so that they widen their knowledge and experience beyond their own cultural constraints.

Governments and their partners must scale up effective programmes and mainstream girls' empowerment as an issue of justice.

Budgets and Participation

Decision makers must commit to providing resources for the empowerment of girls. This is not about fixing problems of girls but investing in scaleable solutions.

If you listen and look around activities of governments and civil society, you cannot miss to see great visions and plans for programmes that have the potential to empower women and girls. They aim to improve the conditions so that women and girls can be empowered in their personal as well as public lives. They address education, economics, social and cultural issues, legal and political issues as well as contexts which shape the realities in which women and girls live. Yet there is a big gap between the spelt out visions for empowerment of women and girls and the budgets assigned to them. I would like to suggest that parliaments everywhere examine budgets for women and girls programmes. How much money is specifically devoted to improving the lives of women and girls?

To get even a rough picture, governments should undertake a close look at their own gender budgeting, but also look at private funding of non-profit programmes for women and girls. It would also be interesting to look at foundations and corporate giving programmes and examine their attitudes and practice towards gender and generational giving. Based on the YWCA experience we recommend:

That governments, donors and civil society take a hard look at themselves and their institutions and reinvent themselves as organizations that seek out opportunities to benefit women and girls.

Participation is Power. Girls must be included in finding solutions for their issues. This requires having girl's budgets, seats at the tables and capacity building for effective participation. Leadership development of girls is absolutely essential.

Governments must reinforce collaboration and cooperation with many players including civil society organizations, businesses, religious groups and individuals. All of these actors should be encouraged to invest their resources in the girls.

The Challenge and Opportunity

I believe that the world is made up of two classes of people: the privileged and underprivileged. Those of us in this room must first acknowledge our privilege and power. We must decide today and now if we accept the challenge and opportunity to use our power and privilege to empower our daughters and our sisters and our grandchildren. It is we, the women of the world who can lead girls' empowerment. We qualify and we are equipped to be change agents. Every woman was once a girl child. We can understand, feel, and know what is needed to empower a girl. Our own experience, power and privilege call us to insurmountable accountability. Whether you grew up in a privileged or struggling family/society, it does not matter. What matters is what you can do today and now to affect girls' empowerment. To make girls' education a reality for every girl in every place requires not only our resources and policies, but also our voices and actions. Advocacy for girls should fill the halls of every parliament. But more than that, love, respect and support for girls must be the reality of all our homes, schools and communities. Take time to remember an experience in your own life and the person/people who helped shape your life.

I grew up in an African village and I cannot forget my mother's commitment to waking up every morning and sending us to school well fed and carrying bananas, oranges and sweet potatoes for lunch and snacks. I remember with deep appreciation the woman schoolteacher who championed for us to be excused from hard physical exercises during our menstruation times. I remember those women volunteer leaders from the Kenya Girl Guides and Kenya YWCA who gave up their Saturdays to spend time with us in Brownie and Y teen's clubs respectively. I was unaware of the impact this loving and caring women would have on my consciousness. Yet it is their involvement with me as a girl that gives me understanding and appreciation for my work today with girls and women. A mother, a teacher, a volunteer and the community that supported these events empowered the girl that became this woman, me. You have named your mentors and developers. It is now our turn, you and I and the empowerment of the girl child depends on our collective power and leadership.

Thank you.