



Florida High Schools Model United Nations

FHSMUN 35

UNITED NATIONS ENTITY FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

STATE OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN 2013-2014 – GENDER JUSTICE

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Introduction

The pursuit of gender equality remains a daunting task. Even given recent progress in many areas of the world, women confront discrimination and harassment on a daily basis. Laws and policies that discriminate against women create a climate of disenfranchisement and hostility towards women. Delegates to UNWOMEN must strive to not only accurately assess the current state of the world's women in regards to achieving true gender justice but also the prospects for achieving gender equality by 2015. Indeed, according to the authors of the critical report "2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women", "with the target date of 2015 in sight, it is increasingly clear that progress towards meeting many of the Goals is off-track. Inequality, including gender inequality, is holding back progress and there have been the fewest gains on those Goals that depend the most on women's empowerment..."¹

Scale of the Problem

Former Undersecretary-General and Director General of UNWOMEN Michelle Bachelet, the current President-elect of Chile, notes that there has been considerable progress for women in recent decades, particularly in terms of legislation. "125 countries have outlawed domestic violence, 115 guarantee equal property rights and women's voice in decision-making is stronger than ever before. Today, 28 countries have reached or surpassed the 30 percent mark for women's representation in parliament, putting women in the driving seat to forge further change."² While these developments are undoubtedly positive, several caveats must be highlighted: 1) At least 60 UN member states have not yet outlawed domestic violence; 2) Even in the countries where domestic violence has been outlawed, there remain enormous variations in the legislation and the legal sanctions and punishments for domestic violence; 3) Enforcement of these laws and court sentences remains inconsistent; and 4) Several countries still deny women the right to vote. Furthermore, the rates of domestic violence are chronically underreported because women fear

¹ UNWOMEN, "2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women: In Pursuit of Justice" 2011 p. 14.

² Michelle Bachelet and UNWOMEN, "2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women: In Pursuit of Justice" 2011 p. 3. The full report may be accessed at: <http://progress.unwomen.org/pdfs/EN-Report-Progress.pdf>

that they will not be believed, they often fear reprisal violence from the accused, they lack the financial resources and/or time to navigate their respective societies' legal systems, and many fear that their efforts will forever be in vain and that the violence will not stop.

Battery and sexual violence against women are such frequent crimes that in many instances they do not generate significant headlines or news coverage; the exceptions are the times when women's voices are heeded, perhaps because of their numbers, the presence of male relatives, friends, and allies who seek to redress these problems, or even the presence of local and/or Western media. During the protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt in the spring of 2011, many women were harassed by the Egyptian security forces, including being subjected to "virginity checks."³ By February 2014, at least 62 countries had explicitly outlawed marital rape in their legal codes but there are many countries where marriage itself essentially implies automatic consent⁴; these difficulties are compounded in situations where women and girls are often forced into marriages, particularly in countries where the marriage age for women and girls is well below the age of 18. Sexual violence against women and girls occurring outside of political protests or the home is alarmingly frequent, particularly in areas experiencing armed conflict. Reports of mass rapes in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) generate periodic headlines⁵ and outrage as did reports of systematic rapes in Darfur in western Sudan between 2003-08⁶ and gang rapes in western Pakistan.⁷

In terms of political rights and representation, women continue to make considerable advances in many regions of the world but there is no guarantee that electing female politicians will automatically improve the status of women, nor that women will necessarily vote for female candidates.⁸ With rapid political changes underway in various countries, too, particularly in the Arab world, the political status of women is likely to change in a number of countries and it is far from clear that these changes will necessarily increase or improve women's political representation and/or efficacy. In Egypt, a 2009 quota system that guaranteed 64 out of 518 seats in the People's Assembly to women (approximately 12.4% of all seats) was abolished in the 2011 Egyptian revolution that toppled the Hosni Mubarak regime. While many analysts worry that fewer women will be elected to the Egyptian legislature, the hope is that the 11 women who were ultimately elected to the new 508-seat People's Assembly may be significantly more qualified than some of the previous female legislators who were appointed to satisfy quota requirements; in advance of the 2014 parliamentary elections, women's rights activists have urged the reintroduction of the quotas for at least the next 2 election cycles to enhance the reception by Egyptian civil society of female parliamentarians.⁹

Improving the political status of women further requires that women enjoy full equality in their exercise of civil and political rights. One very positive development in 2011 regarding women's political rights was the announcement in September that Saudi women would be eligible to vote in the next municipal elections in 2015.¹⁰ In 2009, Kuwait's government

³ Jon Leyne, "Egypt's defiant women fear being cast aside" *BBC News* June 19, 2011.

⁴ UNWOMEN, "2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women" 2011 p. 17.

⁵ *BBC News*, "DR Congo mass rape: ex-rebels accused in Fizi" June 23, 2011.

⁶ James Read, "Darfur women still face rape risk" *BBC News* April 7, 2008.

⁷ *The New York Times*, "Six Are Arrested in Pakistan Rape" July 3, 2002.

⁸ *The Economist*, "The XX Factor" February 11, 2012.

⁹ *The Economist*, "Now is the time" October 15, 2011.

¹⁰ *BBC News*, "Women in Saudi Arabia to vote and run in elections" September 25, 2011.

¹ Randa el Tahawy, "Egypt rights groups demand quotas for women in parliament" *Al-Arabiya* September 29, 2013.

authorized Kuwaiti women to secure their own passports without first obtaining the consent of their husbands.¹¹

Women's effective participation in education and in the workforce are further critical elements of achieving gender justice. Governments, educators, businesspeople, and other relevant civil society actors need to ensure that laws and admissions and hiring policies do not discriminate against women; there is considerable evidence that in many countries, the recent global recession adversely impacted women to an even greater degree than it did men¹², in part because of significant reductions in public sector workforces that are often more generous to women than the respective private sector workforces.¹³ Women's literacy and graduation rates have risen in many countries but they are frequently well below those of men; furthermore, even when women graduate from high school, college or technical programs, they often face barriers to their employment, including lower pay and fewer benefits, and/or promotion within the workplace, including the metaphorical "glass ceiling." In at least 49 countries, women are prohibited from entering various industries and professions and in 13 countries, women reach mandatory retirement age earlier than their male counterparts.¹⁴ Furthermore, "Globally, 53 percent of working women are employed in vulnerable jobs, as own-account workers or as unpaid workers in family businesses or farms. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, more than 80 percent of women workers are in this kind of employment."¹⁵ Official labor force statistics also frequently underestimate the true vulnerability of women as they do not reflect the vulnerabilities of undocumented workers, refugees, and the millions of women employed, often forcibly, as prostitutes and sex workers. Ensuring that women enjoy the same legal opportunities and protections within the workforce is absolutely essential to achieving gender justice.

Establishing equitable societies that effectively promote gender justice also means ensuring that women enjoy equal property rights and access to capital and credit. As previously mentioned, 115 countries currently guarantee women equal property rights but that means that 78 UN member states do not guarantee equal property rights. Saddam Hussein's tyranny in Iraq was, ironically, generally more benevolent towards women than its Arab and Muslim neighbors, particularly throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. After his overthrow and arrest in 2003, women's inheritance and other civil, economic, and political rights were cast into serious doubt; when constitutional debates reached their apex in the summer of 2005, women feared that inheritance, marriage, and related rights would be severely curtailed, especially in light of the ascent of a number of Iraqi Shia political and religious leaders intent on imposing strict interpretations of *Shar'ia* law.¹⁶ In terms of access to credit, women frequently confront much greater obstacles than men to obtaining loans and financial capital; the *cause célèbre* of microcredit has often been hailed as an avenue for improving women's access to credit in developing societies.¹⁷ While these microcredit institutions are vital to improving access to credit for women, these efforts must be matched by much greater access to loans and credit by the mainstream commercial banking systems and related financial institutions of all countries.

¹¹ *BBC News*, "Kuwaiti women win passport rights" October 21, 2009.

¹² *BBC News*, "Recession threatening to turn back time for women" July 4, 2011.

¹³ *The Economist*, "The cashier and the carpenter" November 26, 2011.

¹⁴ UNWOMEN, "2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women" 2011 p. 28.

¹⁵ UNWOMEN, "2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women" 2011 p. 35.

¹⁶ Caroline Hawley, "Iraqi women fear for their rights" *BBC News* July 25, 2005.

¹⁷ Zubair Ahmed, "India's cotton farmers look to micro credit" *BBC News* January 31, 2007.

UN System Actions

UNWOMEN is typically considered the primary UN agency or body that assesses the relative progress of the world's women, particularly as its creation in December 2010 was the result of the merger of 4 UN bodies: UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW); the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues; and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW). It is vital, though, that delegates to UNWOMEN draw upon the collaborative efforts, including of the UN Commission on the Status of Women as well as the UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality that characterize the UN System, particularly in regards to achieving gender equality and gender justice. As achieving gender equality is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), gender mainstreaming is being incorporated into budgeting processes, policy-making, personnel policies, and even peacekeeping.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) is vital to achieving gender justice and its work includes critical development initiatives and programs designed to empower women to achieve greater economic independence.¹⁸ UNDP's work towards achieving gender justice is also evidenced by its analytical work in preparing the Human Development Index (HDI); in recent years, the UNDP's analysis has included a measure of Gender Inequality. In the 2012 Human Development Gender Inequality Index, Norway, which ranked 1st in the overall HDI, ranked fifth in terms of the least gender inequality and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Niger, which both ranked 186th in overall HDI ranked 144th and 146th, respectively for gender inequality.¹⁹ Dozens of countries as well as the Occupied Palestinian Territory do not currently report statistics for the Gender Inequality Index; one critical development that delegates to UNWOMEN may wish to consider is urging all countries to promptly submit accurate data for inclusion in the next measurement of the Gender Inequality Index.

UNWOMEN's funds, initiatives, and programs are foundational to achieving gender justice. UNWOMEN provides technical assistance and advice to governments, UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society representatives. Furthermore, UNWOMEN provides critical financial assistance through its Fund for Gender Equality (FGE); one particular point of emphasis for UNWOMEN's Fund for Gender Equality grants is to improve the status of women in conflict and post-conflict societies.²⁰ The Fund was established in 2009 through a \$65 million USD donation from the government of Spain and has received further donations from Norway and Mexico.²¹ Increasing voluntary donations from other countries to enhance the financial capacity of the Fund is certainly a valuable consideration for the delegates to UNWOMEN.

¹⁸ UNDP, "Women's Empowerment" 2012. Found at:

<http://www.beta.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/womens-empowerment.html>

¹⁹ UNDP, "Gender Inequality Index" 2012. Found at: <https://data.undp.org/dataset/Table-4-Gender-Inequality-Index/pq34-nwq7>

²⁰ UNWOMEN, "Fund for Gender Equality" 2011. Found at: <http://www.unwomen.org/how-we-work/fund-for-gender-equality/>

²¹ UNWOMEN, "Fund for Gender Equality" 2011.

Conclusion

Achieving gender justice is a complex and lengthy process that must build upon the work of generations and must be reinforced on a daily basis by the work of future generations. Given the requisite political will, addressing the legal barriers to gender justice can be accomplished within months or at most a few years. Changing the mindsets that have contributed to the massive inequalities that continue to plague the world's people, particularly women, will be an ongoing process that will likely take far longer.

Guiding Questions:

What is the current status of women in your country? How has that status changed in recent years? Where does your country rank on the Gender Inequality Index? If your country does not report data for the Gender Inequality Index, does it plan to do so for the next statistical cycle?

How are issues of domestic and sexual violence, including marital rape, handled in your legal system? If domestic violence, including marital rape, have not yet been outlawed by your government, are there any plans to do so soon? What new laws has your country passed in recently to protect women and improve their overall status in society?

How many civil and political rights do women exercise in your country? How well-represented are women in the respective branches and levels of government in your country? Has this representation of and by women increased in recent years?

What is the current employment situation for women in your country? Are women barred from working in certain industries or professions for legal, moral, or political reasons? How equally are women paid and promoted in relation to their male counterparts in your country? Were women more adversely affected by the recent global recession than men in your country?

What is the situation in your country in regards to credit and access to capital for women? How has this situation been affected by the recent global recession?

What are the laws in your country regarding inheritance and marriage rights for women? What is the legal minimum age for marriage in your country?

How might the international community most effectively achieve universal ratification and acceptance of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other relevant international agreements and conventions regarding gender justice?

Does the UN System need to consider hosting a Fifth World Conference on Women in 2015, the twenty year anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women that was hosted in Beijing in 1995?

