Turning Promises into Progress:

Gender equality and rights for women and girls - lessons learnt and actions needed

Introduction

2015 represents an important moment for gender equality and women's and girls' rights. It is twenty years since the landmark Beijing Conference on Women and fifteen years since the ground-breaking United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was adopted. In light of these key milestones and as the post-2015 development framework is agreed and implemented, three UK Networks – the Gender and Development Network (GADN), Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), and the Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights Network UK - have come together to assess progress and make recommendations for turning the promises made into progress.

Over the last two decades there have been many new commitments and increasing political rhetoric on gender equality and the realisation of rights for women and girls, but limited real progress in achieving either. In our report, *Turning Promises into Progress*, we conclude that this is, in part, because the underlying causes of gender equality have not been addressed and there was insufficient political will to make the changes needed on the ground.

Every woman and girl experiences discrimination differently, and resources should be particularly focused on those facing multiple discriminations such as on the basis of their income, sexuality, ethnic group or disability. But there are also shared realities, universal themes and common lessons. Most striking is the need to tackling the underlying barriers that perpetuate gender equality and prevent transformative change. Unequal power relations between genders are a fundamental way in which societies are organised; yet failure to recognise these social relationships has led women and girls to be labelled as a 'vulnerable group' to be protected. In this way, the status quo remains unchanged and discriminatory social norms and unjust social and economic structures continue to hinder progress.

Part two of the report looks at progress and challenges across eight areas relevant to gender equality: women, peace and security; violence against women and girls; sexual and reproductive health and rights; political participation and influence; education;

women's economic equality; unpaid care and social norms. While spotlighting specific issues, it is also important to underline the interconnectedness of gender inequality and recognise the underlying causes that impact across issue areas and span political, social, economic, cultural and environmental spheres. The recommendations throughout the report are therefore inter-linked and mutually reinforcing. While the actions are intended to be relevant for all women and girls, specific attention must be given those who are the most marginalised, and who face multiple discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability and marital status. Recommendations made are aimed at the broader international community with relevance primarily to official international institutions and governments but also to civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector. This document is an extract from the report – the issue section on 'Women, Peace and Security'. For the full report please visit www.gadnetwork.org/turning-promises-into-progress or www.gaps-uk.org.uk.

Part two: Section 5

5.   Education

"Education for girls is very important— when an educated girl grows up she can build her family as she wants to. If I was not educated then I would be cheated out of my rights, my rights to my inherited property, but being educated I know my rights, I am empowered. The curriculum is an important part of this — here in Bangladesh the curriculum should focus more on rights for women regarding property, life skills for women and girls, realistic life lessons"
Shadya Sahanarca, teacher in Ambagicha Government Primary School, Bangladesh[1]

5.1   The Issues
Every woman and girl has the right to education. However, girls and young women, especially those from the poorest families, continue to be denied such opportunities.[2] Despite significant progress in gender parity in primary school education, girls remain less likely to complete their education as the pressures of poverty and discrimination take their toll.[3] Girls' lack of reproductive rights can also lead to pregnancy and exclusion from school.

Women should be enabled to benefit from an ongoing acquisition of knowledge and skills, including through formal education and training, throughout their lives. However, gender inequalities in education have meant that many women have been denied access to these opportunities. Two-thirds of the world's people who are illiterate are women,[4] and over 100 million young women living in low and lower-middle-income countries are unable to read a single sentence.[5]

> **Education** is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace…Equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change.[6] Education includes primary, secondary, vocational, and university levels of formal education as well as learning that occurs in informal ways, including volunteer activity, unremunerated work and traditional knowledge.[7]

A lack of access to opportunities for education affects the health, earning potential, status and the choices available to women and girls.[8] The poorest and most marginalised women and girls are particularly affected. For example, girls' disadvantaged position in accessing education has been shown to have a particular impact on the control women and girls have over household income and decision making and the incidence of child marriage and intimate partner violence.[9] It is estimated that if all girls had primary education in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, child marriage would fall by 14 percent and if they had secondary education it would fall by 64 percent.[10] In Pakistan, while only 30 percent of women with no education believe they can have a say over the number of children they have, the share increases to 63 percent among women with lower secondary education.[11] Research has also concluded that each additional year of education can improve women's wages by 10 to 20 percent.[12]

What does the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) Say?	- Ensure equal access to education - Eradicate illiteracy among women - Improve women's access to vocational training, science, technology, and continuing education - Develop non-discriminatory education and training - Allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reform - Promote lifelong education and training for girls and women[13]

5.2   What's happened in the last 20 years?

Recognition and impetus for action

Since the Education for All movement and the setting of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, there has been deliberate action at the global and national levels to reform school systems and to increase the enrolment of both boys and girls in primary schools.[14] For example, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) launched in 2000 is a partnership of organisations committed to accelerating action on girls' education.[15] Commitments have also been reflected in a number of international frameworks (see below) including the MDGs. Research revealed that MDG 3 had provided a form of externally driven legitimacy to developing a focus on gender in

education work.[16] The Dakar framework for Action: Education for All represents the most significant international political commitment towards promoting education of women and girls. It contains concrete actions adopted by the participants at the World Education Forum in 2000 which specifically relate to girls' education and women's literacy (see box below).

In recent years, many organisations have emerged to champion girl's education, and an evidence base in support of the benefits has developed. These benefits, ranging from improved health outcomes for children, lower maternal mortality and increased economic opportunities for women, are now widely recognised.

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International Frameworks on Education

Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to education".

In Article 7 of the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) participants in the World Education Forum committed to concrete goals including (ii) ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality; (iv) achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women; and (v) eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.[17]

Article 10 of UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) urges countries to ensure that women have the same opportunities as men in all aspects of education and training. The Convention on the Rights of the Child also includes the right to education for all children (articles 28 and 29).

MDG 2 focuses on universal primary education - for girls and boys alike to complete a full course of primary schooling. The specific target for MDG3 reflects the commitments in both the *BPfA* and *Education for All* to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education.

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Progress on primary education

The number of out-of-school girls at primary school level has dropped from 58.9 million in 2000 to 30.7 million in 2012. During this same period, the share of girls that make up the out-of school population has decreased from 58 to 53 percent. [18]

However, progress has been uneven across countries and large gender inequalities remain. Only 60 percent of countries had achieved parity in primary education in 2011 and only 38 percent of countries had achieved parity in secondary education.[19] Among low-income countries, just 20 percent had achieved gender parity at the primary level, 10 percent at the lower secondary level and 8 percent at the upper secondary level.[20]

The 7 million more girls out of school than boys is disproportionately concentrated in a handful of countries including Somalia, Afghanistan, Togo, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[21] Further, progress has plateaued since 2008 which may have been due, in part, to the global recession and associated decreased funding.[22] In 2001, there were 14.4 million more girls out of school at primary age than boys. In 2008, this figure dropped to 4.1 million, but between 2008 and 2011 progress halted.[23] Girls who suffer from multiple forms of discrimination are also more likely to be excluded from education, with inherited disadvantages such as poverty, ethnicity, or living in a rural area or a slum more likely to keep girls out of school than boys.[24] At current trends, the poorest girls in sub-Saharan Africa will not achieve universal primary completion until 2086.[25] Disabled girls also face multiple barriers to accessing education and it is estimated that only 42 percent of disabled girls complete primary school.[26]

Higher education
Gender disparities become more prevalent at higher levels of education with barriers to education tending to increase at the secondary and tertiary levels. Adolescent girls face multiple barriers to accessing quality education due to a range of factors such as violence, social norms which do not value girls' education, child, early and forced marriage and domestic responsibilities. There are 34 million female adolescents out of school missing out on the chance to learn vital skills for work.[27] Regardless of wealth or location of the household, girls of lower secondary age are more likely to be out of school than boys.[28] In sub-Saharan Africa, the gender gap in secondary enrolment widened between 2000 and 2006, with the gender enrolment ratio falling from 82 to 80 girls for every boy in secondary school.[29] The gender gap is further exacerbated at tertiary levels of education in developing countries.

Disappointing progress on women's literacy
Reflecting years of poor education quality and unmet learning needs, 493 million women are illiterate, accounting for almost two-thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate adults.[30] Over recent years, women's literacy has barely progressed at all and has attracted very little investment.[31] Marginalised women are particularly affected. For example, women with disabilities are rarely reached by adult literacy campaigns and their rates of literacy are extremely low.[32]

5.3   Challenges and ways forward
Much of the donor discourse on girls' education has focused on enrolment. Yet, there are a number of areas which present key challenges for girls' and women's access, attendance and achievement at school and which require action to tackle the underlying structures which are crucial to opening up educational opportunities for women and girls.

Violence against girls in schools

There is growing recognition that violence against girls or the fear of violence – both while travelling to, and at school - is a barrier to education for millions of girls.[33] It can take many forms including sexual harassment, intimidation, teasing, abuse, assault and rape, corporal punishment, bullying, verbal and psychological abuse and the use of students for free labour, and can be perpetrated by other students, teachers, other school employees, bus and taxi drivers and community members. The issue affects girls across all countries, and will also be an issue for adult women attending educational courses. Factors such as poverty, conflict and travelling long distances to school expose girls to a greater risk of violence. WHO estimates that 150 million girls are sexually assaulted each year, with many of these acts occurring at or on the way to school.[34]

Effective national laws, policies and programmes can empower schools, communities, parents and children jointly to confront the violence against girls in schools. There is a growing consensus that key solutions include recruiting more female teachers, school codes of conduct that address violence in schools, challenging prejudice and fundamentalism in the wider community, creating safe and empowering spaces for girls, empowering women to engage in school governing bodies, and creating confidential reporting mechanisms with links to the support services and the justice sector.

Barriers to enrolling, attending and achieving at school

In addition to violence against girls in schools, there are a number of other substantial barriers to the enrolment, attendance and achievement of female students. The interaction between gender and poverty is a potent source of exclusion. When families have limited resources, boys are often given preference over girls for school attendance. This is further exacerbated in times of disaster and household economic shocks.[35] The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work borne by girls, which is compounded in poor households, also impacts on their ability to access education as well as impacting on time for study and achievement at school (see Part two: Section 7 on Care).[36] A girl with disability faces double discrimination and is even less likely to attend school, and more likely to drop out.[37]

Social norms frequently perpetuate the idea that girls' education is not valuable due to son preference within households or due to the fact that education for boys is seen as resulting in greater returns.[38] For example, with the labour market rewarding boys' schooling more than girls' or social norms meaning that a girl's income enriches her in-laws rather than her parents.[39] Education is also often seen as less relevant for girls given their unpaid care roles (see Part two: Section 8 on Social Norms). These expectations can be internalised by girls who do have the opportunity to access education and can impact on their performance. [40]

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) provision for the specific needs of girls in school is important. Adolescent girls require access to menstrual hygiene facilities in school. Girls often have to stay at home if they are unable to manage menstruation safely or with dignity. This affects their academic performance and many girls drop out of school permanently.[41] Furthermore, girls' time burden associated with fetching water or finding a safe place to defecate in the open is reduced with the provision of WASH facilities.

Pregnancy and child, early and forced marriage have a significant impact on a girl's opportunity to complete her education. The lack of sexual health education and dearth of contraceptive options mean that many girls lack the knowledge to prevent unwanted pregnancies. When teenage pregnancy occurs, discriminatory social norms and responses such as early marriage frequently prevent pregnant girls from completing their studies.[42] Child marriage also pushes girls out of education at the same time, but remaining in education acts as the best means for protecting girls against child marriage.[43]

Education initiatives need to take into account the multiple barriers which impact on girls' access to and achievement in school. The needs and experiences of the poorest and most marginalised girls must be prioritised. An integrated framework for action, which focuses on the availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of education for girls is crucial.[44]

Gender-sensitive education

Putting emphasis on the enrolment of girls in schools has obscured the impact of gendered power relations within schools on the quality of education.[45] Curriculums are often not gender-sensitive and can perpetuate unequal social norms. Skills such as problem-solving, life skills, questioning or debate which might help to interrogate discriminatory attitudes towards girls or develop their leadership skills and confidence are also not typically promoted.[46]

The challenges girls face accessing or completing their education can be compounded by a shortage of female teachers to provide role models for students[47] together with a lack of qualified teachers to ensure high quality education.[48] Worldwide, girls who already face disadvantage are much less likely to be taught by good teachers and there is a shortage of female teachers in disadvantaged areas and particularly in countries with wide gender disparity in enrolment.[49] Both male and female teachers must recognise that their own attitudes and expectations in relation to gender will impact on the learning experiences of boys and girls.

Gender-sensitive curriculums should be developed and more female teachers must be recruited, especially in rural areas and at secondary levels and provided with incentives, such as safe housing, to work in disadvantaged areas.[50]

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Comprehensive sexuality education aims to provide clear, well-informed, and scientifically-grounded sexuality education to enable young people to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights and to make informed choices about their sexuality, health and relationships (see Part two: Section 3 on SRHR).[51] Rather than leading to an increase in sexual activity, it has been demonstrated that comprehensive sexuality education can lead to a delay in sexual intercourse, reduce the frequency of sex and unprotected intercourse, decrease the number of sexual partners and lead to an increase in the use of condoms and other contraceptives.[52] However, in many countries access to necessary information about sexuality and sexual and reproductive health services is restricted. Attitudes and laws often stifle the discussion of sexuality, and subjects such as contraception, abortion and sexual diversity are frequently taboo.[53] A number of studies carried out in the African region reveal that almost half of those who received sexual education received no information on key topics such as contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy and the right to refuse sex.[54]

Countries and governments must commit to enacting and implementing laws to allow universal access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education through well-designed modes of delivery. Evidence has shown successful implementation is possible even in very conservative environments.[55]

Adult literacy

A focus on formal adult education and informal educational opportunities for women, and particularly marginalised women, is also frequently overlooked. Women should be enabled to benefit from an ongoing acquisition of knowledge and skills. In 2012, 781 million adults and 126 million youth worldwide lacked basic reading and writing skills, with women accounting for more than 60 percent of both the illiterate adult and youth populations.[56]

Specific programmes must be implemented to address women's literacy and open educational opportunities for women especially those who were not able to access education previously.

Financing Education for all

High quality, free, public education must be guaranteed for all, without discrimination.[57] To achieve this, access to post-primary education for girls, including non-formal education opportunities, must be strengthened while meeting commitments to universal primary education. As well as being disaggregated by gender, data on access to education needs to be disaggregated by poverty level, location and ethnicity within countries to reflect the experiences of the most marginalised girls.

Over the last decade the privatisation of education, through mechanisms such as the promotion of low-fee private schools, state financing of privately managed schools and the encouragement of philanthropic, religious and NGO schools, has changed the education landscape in many developing countries.[58] Low cost private schools are being increasingly promoted by international actors and donors. However, evidence suggests that this trend towards privatisation can have a very harmful effect on girls' education.[59] Fees are often a significant proportion of household income, so parents have to choose which child to send to school, with girls typically missing out.[60] For example, in Ghana, the poorest families have to use 40 percent of their household income just to send one child to a 'low-fee' school.[61]

Aid to education remains relatively low[62] and the Global Partnership for Education, the only multilateral financing institution for education, is still lacking adequate donor support. Significantly, countries with the largest gender gaps (such as Cambodia and Pakistan) often spend a low proportion of their domestic budgets on education.[63]

It is essential that governments invest in gender-sensitive education systems, facilities and teachers in order to provide access to quality education for all children. States should prioritise the introduction of free public education of high quality and guarantee education to all without discrimination. States should ensure that a sufficient proportion of the national budget is allocated to education financing including improving the quality of education.[64]

5.4 Recommendations

International institutions/governments should:

1. Take action to address violence against women and girls in and out of schools (see Part two: Section 2 on VAWG).

2. Design education initiatives to take into account the multiple barriers which impact on girls' access to and achievement in school at all levels of education, prioritising the needs and experiences of the poorest and most marginalised girls.

3. Provide sufficient funding for high quality free public education and guarantee education to all without discrimination.

4. Implement teacher policies which ensure teachers are motivated and have decent working conditions; that sufficient female teachers are recruited and in senior positions; and that female teachers serve as role models for children in the most disadvantaged and rural areas.

5. Implement specific programmes to address women's literacy and open educational opportunities for women, especially those who were not able to access education previously.

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Gender and Development Network (GADN)

GADN brings together over 100 expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues.

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Registered charity no. 1140272

Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (GAPS)

GAPS is the UK's only Women, Peace and Security civil society network. We are an expert membership organisation with 17 members who encompass a range of development, human rights, women's rights, humanitarian and peacebuilding NGOs.

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The UK Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Network

The UK SRHR Network brings together over fifty NGOs and academic institutions and individuals from across the UK international development sector, in order to promote the centrality of SRHR in development policies and programmes.

UKSRHR Network, c/o Aoife Nic Charthaigh, Plan UK

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