United Nations Commission on the Status of Women Fifty-fifth session 22 February – 4 March 2011 New York

INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

Key policy initiatives and capacity-building on gender mainstreaming: focus on education and training

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO DECENT WORK*

by

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^{*}The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

Limited access to decent work has been identified as a major impediment for the advancement of women in many parts of the world and hinders the possibility for women to live as dignified human beings enjoying equal rights with men. Despite the growth of labour force participation of women and the intensifying opportunities for women to enter into remunerated work and to become economically independent, it is more and more evident that access to 'decent work' is becoming a serious issue world over, especially in the developing world. This paper focuses on deficiencies in skills training as a vital factor that hinder the access to decent work and looks at the possibilities of developing skills training as a tool for the promotion of women's entry into decent work via formal and non-formal training. It also discusses the barriers for achieving this objective and the strategies that could be adopted in promoting the process of skills training and young women's employability deriving evidence from the Sri Lankan situation.

The Definition of Concepts

The main concepts employed in the paper are 'Decent Work' and 'Skills Development' both of which has been widely discussed and debated over the years. The terms have many different interpretations based on the value judgments that could be made with regard to both these terms. The concepts have a high social cultural value rather than an economic one and would be highly contextual in their meanings. It is not the intention of the paper to deal with the conceptual ambiguities of the terms. As stated below, the paper takes into account the ILO definitions of the terms, which are universally accepted in understanding and assessing the levels of access to work and the conditions of work.

Decent Work

"Decent work" is a concept that was first introduced in 1999, in the Report of the Director-General to the International Labour Conference meeting in its 87th Session. The report stated that the primary goal of ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, within conditions that provide them freedom, equality, security and human dignity (ILO, 1999, p. 3).

The report in elaborating the conceptual meaning of the term decent work as it applies to the world of work today discusses four components of the concept that need to be taken into account: creating employment, guaranteeing workers' rights, extending so, s[world]) T whiandu and de

ability of the workers to present their views, to facilitate discussions and to negotiate in work-related matters (ILO, 1999; Ghai, 2003).

The 2001 report of the Director-General of ILO further elaborates the concepts of Decent Work in addressing the global challenge of the dearth of decent work delineating a broad and highly practical range of issues that need to draw the concern of those dealing with the issue of decent work which finely articulated the continuing mission of ILO within the new concept. He writes,

Skills in the context of women's entry to decent work could be defined as those facets that give an individual the ability to perform in a specific manner, making choices that help them to live productive and rewarding lives catering to improve their quality of life.

Formal and Non-Formal Training as a Tool for Full Employment

Despite the rapid increase of women's labour force participation it has been noted that it is universally lower than men's. One of the major reasons is the nature of female labour force, which is often marked by disadvantageous features including lack of training, skills, access, opportunities etc. produced by the social cultural contexts catering to existing gender disparities. The male-female differential in labour force participation is clearly visible in the South Asian and Pacific regions and lower in advancing and developed economies with certain internal specificities. The most remarkable feature in the gender disparities of labour force participation perhaps could be the sector of employment where much of the female labour force in the developing part of the world concentrates in low-skilled, low-income generating economic activities including part-time and casual work, creating a significant gap between the quality of employment between men and women. A discernible portion of female population seems to be underemployed. The proportion of young females who are neither in school nor in labour force is considerably higher than the proportion of those for males (World Bank, 2006). Lack of opportunities and skills for employment compels

schools during childhood, adolescence and early youth together with the informal training in the family and community during these years are essential in skills development (Knudsen, 2004). Therefore, the investment and efforts taken for continuing education up to secondary and tertiary levels could equip a young person with many skills essential for the labour market today. Recent evidence shows that the education, which lacks skills training, is one of the biggest challenges for full employment. In Sri Lanka unemployment rates among young women with secondary or higher education have been considerably high over the years than among those with no schooling (Census and Statistics, 1946 -2009, Jayaweera, 2002, 2010). The question of 'compatibility of education' with the qualifications leaves more educated behind, especially women, due to the nature of education they receive which lacks not only the technology-based skills but also basic skills. In Sri Lanka, enrolment of women in engineering courses in universities and vocational education institutions has been respectively 25 per cent and less than 20 per cent (Jayaweera, 2010) despite the high enrolment of women in senior secondary education (56 per cent) and university education (53 per cent) during the last four decades, contributing to the high incidence of female unemployment which approximately doubles those of men (Jayaweera, 2010).

Growing concerns on quality and relevance of education are related to the opportunities produced by the global market economies. Education without formal or non-formal training in basic and technological skills does not equip young men and women with the competencies necessary for the global economies. A large number of firms in developing countries have identified inadequate skills of the employees as a major impediment for their regular functioning (World Bank, 2006). Universal primary or even secondary or tertiary education, which is deficient in the requirements of the labour market thus, does not seem to give the returns expected from those levels of education. High rates of school dropouts on the other hand at various levels, primary or secondary, do not provide the opportunity for those children to enhance their innate skills, which they obtained in the early childhood. In a global employment scenario where different forms of skills beyond basic skills are required, those who have developed fewer skills will inevitably be in a disadvantaged position.

Synergy between the training and requirements of the employment markets is a fast growing issue which negatively impacts the workforce in many developing countries, especially women. Thinking and behavioral skills have become essential for the current employment market, both state-owned and in the private sector as in many countries in the developing world public and private business ventures need to compete with each other for their survival and development. This is a highly visible phenomenon in the banking and industrial sector. Moreover, advanced skills such as the problem solving ability or vocational skills also have become indispensable in the industrial sector. Computer literacy has become a basic requirement for many jobs and an association of higher wage premiums has been identified with it (Autor, Katz, and Krueger, 1998). Development of as many skills as possible including soft skills seems to make an individual more advantageous over the others in order to have access to decent employment. Furthermore, continuous involvement in skilled jobs has been identified as a contributing factor for development of human capital. A relationship has been established between experiences gained in skilled jobs and increase in adult reading comprehension and nonverbal cognitive abilities (World Bank, 2006). Worldwide statistics

and data confirm that those who have developed skills through education and training are less vulnerable for exploitation in

School enrolment has increased worldwide as a result of the implementation of programmes to achieve Millennium Development Goals, however, early dropout rate is still an issue. Absence of schools or opportunities after primary education due to less affordability, distance to school, lack of encouragement or less motivation for learning, poor teaching, poor school environments early employment, health reasons (HIV/AIDS and other health issues), early marriage and pregnancy and displacements influence the early dropout rates. Girls are particularly left behind as they would be most vulnerable in this scenario (World Bank, 2006). In many of the low-income countries, access to education is low in remote, disaster and conflict-affected, poor and backward areas, particularly affecting women's education. What is most significant however is that due to the nature of education they receive, women will not have opportunities to gain or develop skills which are needed not only to accessace buearl(ple)-enten v

- 3. Take steps to increase family and peer support for women's education
- 4. Make more information available through raising awareness among women helping them to make better choices
- 5. Take steps to encourage women's entry into vocational training through more publicity, recognition and facilities including scholarships etc.

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