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Statement submitted by Voluntary Service Overseas, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

A significant contributing factor to ongoing gender inequality is the lack of decision-making power of women in both the public and private spheres. While much work has been, and is being, done to address gender inequality in political representation through the Millennium Development Goals and other international and national policies, progress has been too slow, too narrow in scope and too uneven in results. Therefore, gender inequality in power and influence remains a barrier to development and the eradication of poverty.

The international process under way to develop a post-2015 development framework provides a significant opportunity to mobilize the political support and partnerships that are needed to address this long-standing inequality of power.

Why women's participation and influence in decision-making is vital

Giving women equal participation in and influence over the decisions that affect their countries, societies and lives is intrinsically and instrumentally important because:

- Women make up half of the world's population; they are not a minority group;
- Women perform two thirds of the world's work and produce 50 per cent of all food, but earn only 10 per cent of world income and own only 1 per cent of world property;
- Women are estimated to account for two thirds of the 1.4 billion people globally who live in extreme poverty.

There is evidence that where women participate and influence decision-making, this leads to more efficient, effective and responsive decisions for women; helps progress towards gender equality; and helps transform the deep-rooted social norms and attitudes that act as barriers.

Achievements and limitations of the Millennium Development Goals

The current Millennium Development Goals framework contains a stand-alone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment (goal 3), broken down into a single target focused on eliminating gender disparity in education, with three accompanying indicators. The inclusion of this goal has been important in establishing gender equality as a critical area of development policy and practice, providing a hook for advocacy work and stimulating investment.

However, goal 3 also has a number of weaknesses. It has been criticized for focusing only on the symptoms of gender inequality rather than its root causes. In terms of its ability to promote transformative change in women's participation and influence in public and political life, indicator 3.3 on parliamentary representation of women has been useful in providing a picture of the rate of increase in national politics. However, an indicator that measures only the proportion of females to males in national parliaments is insufficient.

Firstly, while national representation is important, participation and influence in decision-making at local levels are equally significant. Secondly, it does not provide any insights into whether those women who are participating are able to participate meaningfully and exert any influence over decisions that are made.

Merely being elected to parliament does not necessarily lead to the ability to meaningfully influence decision-making or aid gender-sensitive policymaking. Thirdly, while it recognizes the importance of formal parliamentary politics, it does not cover women's wider engagement in public life, for example as leaders within schools or as health professionals. Finally, indicator 3.3 is limited by not having a correlative target.

Opportunities in the post-2015 framework

It is vital that the goals, targets and indicators within the post-2015 framework drive action on the most critical issues perpetuating gender inequality. We support a twin-track approach that would see a specific, stand-alone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment as well as the mainstreaming of a gender focus within targets across the framework. Such an approach is needed to address the structural inequalities that persist for women and girls, while inspiring the necessary political will, resources and national ownership to generate sustainable and effective action on gender equality.

We would like to see the post-2015 framework tackle one of the most egregious and persistent symptoms of gender inequality around the world: the lack of decision-making power of women compared to men. Its inclusion, if done correctly, will serve as a catalyst in fostering the political will and resources needed to achieve the long-term empowerment of women and gender equality.

But the post-2015 framework must also address the weaknesses identified in the current goal framework, and go further, if it is to deliver truly transformative shifts in the balance of power between women and men. We have carried out a comprehensive review of current measurement frameworks that exist in the field of political participation and influence, and reviewed lessons learned from work on programmes relevant to the theme of women's participation. We suggest that the post-2015 framework can best tackle discriminatory social norms and promote meaningful and sustainable shifts in the balance of power between women and men if it is designed according to the following guidelines:

Goal: To empower women and girls and achieve gender equality

Target: Eliminate discrimination against, and increase the participation and influence of, women at all levels of public and political life

Indicators:

1. Proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament, local government and traditional governance structures compared to men; proportion of those seats held at a leadership, ministerial or cabinet level; and proportion of seats occupied by women from low-income households and marginalized groups.
2. Perception among female politicians of the level of impact they have on decision-making at the various levels of government.
3. Public attitudes towards women as leaders in public and political life.
4. Number of women's rights organizations working on gender equality and women's empowerment in a country and these organizations' perception of progress made regarding women's ability to assume leadership positions in public and political life.

The implementation of the framework must integrate data collection in such a way as to respond effectively to women's needs. This in itself requires resources, political commitment and recognition that the individual/body collecting information, and the means of collection, has the potential to perpetuate or modify power structures within our societies.

Review theme: Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work

While there has been significant progress in improving girls' and women's access to education over the last two decades, many girls and women, particularly the most marginalized, continue to be deprived of their basic right to education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, there are still 31 million girls of primary school age out of school, 17 million of whom are expected never to enter school.

Research we have undertaken in Cameroon, Ghana, Nepal and Rwanda suggests that the barriers preventing women and girls from participating in education, training and science, identified at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2011, are still prevalent. While the Governments in the sample countries have adopted a policy of free universal primary education, budget constraints and a lack of funding have impeded policy implementation. In Cameroon and Ghana, most parents reported paying a fee towards teachers' salaries and school infrastructure.

In all four countries, stakeholders reported that parents in rural areas keep their daughters out of school to act as childminders for their younger siblings during harvesting periods. Boys, on the other hand, continue to attend school, keeping up with the curriculum, which gives them an unfair advantage in exams. There is still a clear gender dimension to the allocation of scarce family resources: boys are still being given preference by their parents when it comes to "informal fees" and other costs, such as travel, school uniforms, notebooks and pens.

Why we need a multisectoral approach

Problems relating to menstruation, early marriage, early pregnancy and childcare, violence in schools, domestic responsibilities, perceived low returns from poor-quality education, a gender-insensitive curriculum, lack of water and sanitation facilities in schools and household chores keep girls from attending or performing well at school. These barriers are diverse but interconnected. Drawing on our 50 years of experience of working in education, we call on policymakers and development partners to consider a multisectoral approach to addressing gender inequality in education.

Lack of adequate washing and sanitary facilities prevent girls from going to school during menstruation; consequently, girls miss many hours of teaching and learning compared to boys. Our research also highlighted the lack of gender-sensitive teaching: sometimes male teachers do not understand why girls need to leave the classroom and refuse them permission to leave, making girls feel uncomfortable and less likely to want to come to school when their period is due.

One in three girls in the developing world is married by the age of 18. Early marriage was cited as one of the main reasons why girls at the lower secondary level are likely to drop out of school in our four sample countries. For example, while the government policy in Rwanda is that a girl who conceives should remain in school until she is no longer able to attend, in practice the default response from the school is to advise the pregnant girl to leave school and live with her family until after her child is born. Girls who manage to return to school after childbirth are often forced to repeat the entire year, as there is no system in place for them to catch up on the lessons they have missed.

Achieving gender equality in teaching and education management

A growing body of evidence demonstrates a strong relationship between the presence of female teachers and the attendance and performance of girls in school, particularly in rural areas where gender disparities in education are high. Participants in the focus group discussions in Ghana, Cameroon and Rwanda told us that female teachers served as role models for girls' participation in education. For instance, female teachers in Rwanda take on the role of counsellors for the girls, looking after them during their menstrual periods, providing them with counselling, ensuring that they have access to sanitary pads and showing the girls how to use them. Female secondary students also reported that the presence of female teachers made parents feel more comfortable about sending their daughters to school.

Our research in Cameroon and Rwanda identified significant barriers to women's advancement and promotion in education, including deeply engrained attitudes, roles and behaviours and a lack of clear and consistent definitions of gender equality within the policy dialogue. In both countries, female teachers tended to be concentrated in the lower grades that also paid lower salaries. Women who did hold management positions, such as Head Teacher or District Education Officer, were greatly outnumbered by their male counterparts. This may be due to a lack of attention to gender balance on the part of recruiters, or it may be that potential female applicants are reluctant to continue their studies in order to be eligible for secondary teaching posts or to apply for management positions, for example because they feel that they would not be able to manage their domestic and childcare responsibilities along with the extra demands of a higher position.

The findings demonstrate that affirmative policies such as financial assistance, leadership and mentoring schemes, and childcare for female teachers wishing to upgrade their qualifications and take up leadership positions help ensure the presence of positive female and male role models for both students and teachers.
