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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by American Association of University Women, 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

The American Association of University Women presents research on the barrier that women and girls face worldwide in accessing and participating in education, training and science and technology: the lack of access to opportunities in education, training and science and technology and a dearth of support for women in their roles as student mothers and caregivers.

The Millennium Development Goals and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

Millennium Development Goal 3 seeks to “promote gender equity and empower women” including eliminating “gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by no later than 2015”.

Strategic objectives resulting from the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995, include improving “women’s access to vocational training, science and technology, and continuing education” (strategic objective B.3) and developing “non-discriminatory education and training” (strategic objective B.4). Key recommendations include the following actions to be taken by Governments, in cooperation with employers, workers and trade unions, international and non-governmental organizations, including women’s and youth organizations, and educational institutions:

- Diversify vocational and technical training and improve access for and retention of girls and women in education and vocational training in such fields as science, mathematics, engineering, environmental sciences and technology, information technology and high technology, as well as management training
- Remove all barriers to access to formal education for pregnant adolescents and young mothers, and support the provision of childcare and other support services where necessary.

The problem

In the United States of America, a study by our organization undertaken in 2013 on women in community colleges (two-year post-secondary public institutions) found that, while these institutions increase women’s access to post-secondary education and training, women face significant barriers in achieving their educational goals.

First, women still provide a disproportionate share of caregiving, which reduces the likelihood that they will complete their degrees. Second, the majority of degrees earned by women are in traditionally female fields (fields in which women make up 75 per cent or more of workers); far fewer degrees are in education, training and science and technology, limiting their options in finding decent paid work that offers wages sufficient to sustain a family after graduation.

Our report, *Women in Community Colleges: Access to Success*, <http://www.aauw.org/research/women-in-community-colleges/> points out that while women at community colleges represent an important pool of talent in science and technology, they need better support for their roles as mothers and students and in

connecting their education to job opportunities in fields where workers are in high demand.

Women enrol in community colleges primarily to improve their job skills. However, nearly half (45 per cent) of women students do not earn a certificate or associate degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years after first enrolling in a community college. Because the world economy is increasingly knowledge-driven, post-secondary education is becoming a prerequisite for more types of jobs. Ensuring that women can acquire the skills and competencies they need to be competitive in the workplace is an economic imperative.

For the more than 1 million student mothers in the United States who attend community college, family and caregiving responsibilities can present major obstacles to completing their post-secondary education. Our study found that limited access to childcare adversely affects outcomes for student mothers at community colleges. More than two thirds (68 per cent) of student mothers at these colleges reported spending 30 or more hours a week caring for dependants, compared with 42 per cent of student fathers. Time spent caregiving can take time away from homework and studying and make scheduling and commuting to class a challenge. Providing affordable childcare thus emerges as a critical strategy for helping student mothers succeed at community college. Nevertheless, less than half of community colleges in the United States provide on-campus childcare, and those that do typically do not provide sufficient childcare to meet demand.

Community colleges offer a wide range of options for training and education in science and technology. Students can earn certificates or associate degrees in either vocational or academic programmes that typically offer higher wages and better job opportunities than non-science fields. Although women earn the majority of associate degrees and certificates awarded by community colleges, they are concentrated in fields requiring lower skills and paying lower wages.

Some of the most popular programmes for women at community colleges are in health care, care/education of children and cosmetology. Men are more likely than women to pursue education and training as welders, electricians and automotive technicians, jobs that offer hourly wages twice as high, on average, as the wages in fields popular among women (with the exception of health-care jobs). Women's limited participation in (non-health) education, training and science and technology at community colleges reduces the likelihood that their education will bring the desired benefits of increased job opportunities and wages.

Since women are more likely than men to attend community college at some point on the way towards earning a bachelor's degree, limited access to math and science education at community colleges also affects women's representation among holders of bachelor's degrees in education, training, and science and technology.

Our study identified three major obstacles to women entering scientific and technological fields: (a) women are often unaware of opportunities in science and technology early in their community college careers; (b) women may lack experience in or exposure to working with computers and cars, which often makes entering a technology or automotive repair programme, for instance, very intimidating; and (c) gender stereotypes.

Stereotypes about women's abilities in math and science can significantly affect their experiences in community colleges. Even women who enter community

college with strong science and math backgrounds report receiving little encouragement and support to pursue degrees in science and math. Studies suggest that vocational programmes may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes by using assessment tests that are more accurate at predicting men's educational abilities and interests than women's. In fields like welding and auto mechanics, for example, these tests may state that individuals should be physically fit and able to lift heavy objects; women may be advised not to select these fields because it is presumed that they do not possess those characteristics.

Recommendations

Promoting women's access to education and training in science and technology at all education levels is critical in achieving Millennium Development Goal 3. The majority of United States undergraduate women attend community colleges, but these institutions and their students are often excluded from discussions on how to increase women's participation in education, training and science and technology. Increasing women's participation in education, training and science and technology in community colleges will require action on many levels: ensuring that women have the support they need to balance their roles as mothers and students; providing information about opportunities in high-growth science and technology sectors; and creating learning environments that are free of gender stereotypes.

Community colleges need to become more aware of and responsive to the particular needs of women, who make up the majority of students. Specifically, childcare should be a basic student support service similar to academic counselling or tutoring. Government agencies also have a critical role to play by strengthening national and state legislation, improving gendered data collection on educational opportunities and persistence rates at educational institutions, and investing in programmes that help women overcome the obstacles they face in enrolling in community college and persisting through graduation. Existing laws to prevent gender bias and discrimination in education must be enforced consistently across all sectors of tertiary education, in two-year as well as four-year institutions.

Community colleges should:

- Assess student demand for childcare on campus
- Actively market to female students and recruit them into education, training and science and technology
- Ensure that institutional practices such as academic and career counselling do not reinforce stereotypes or promote discrimination against women; and educate staff about occupational segregation, gender bias and the importance of promoting careers in science and technology among women
- Partner with local employers to connect students with available opportunities; local employers can share information with community colleges about the skills they need, job openings and information on wages
- Expose women students pursuing careers in science and technology to successful women in these fields who can serve as role models and mentors

All institutions should:

- Provide on-campus childcare and apply for government funding where and when it exists
- Develop a referral system with off-campus childcare providers to meet student demand if necessary

Governments should:

- Prioritize funding of and investment in programmes that support on-campus childcare facilities
 - Develop and implement policies that link community colleges and four-year institutions to facilitate the process of transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree
 - Strengthen the gender equity provisions in legislation and monitor institutions and hold them accountable for women's and girls' participation in and completion of vocational education programmes in science and technology
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