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on Empowering Girls through Education in the EU

Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

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United in diversity

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The European Union has a strong track record of promoting gender equality within employment but less has been explicitly said about gender equality in education and the empowerment of girls through it. Most attention is given to the gap between women's educational attainment and professional development. Whilst indeed fundamental for the empowerment of women, it is also important to understand dynamics between girls' education and their professional choices in the future.

1. Gender equality in education: an overview

Significant progress has been achieved in terms of equal attainment and access; on average, in 2012, 83% of young women reach at least upper secondary school education in the EU, compared to 78% of men. Women also represent 60% of university graduates in the EU. Though maybe less visible, differences between boys and girls are however still present and affect both groups throughout the Member States of the European Union.

Women are highly educated but a gap persists between the level of education of girls and women and their professional development. On average on an OECD level, only 5% of 15 year old girls aim for a career in engineering and computing compared with 18% of boys. In their turn, boys and men are under-represented in arts and humanities and in all areas of study that have a care-relates dimension. Educational choices are gendered or stereotyped, and women are less likely to choose scientific and technological fields of study - leading to the gender segregation of European labour markets.

The European Parliament addressed the subject in its resolution of 2007 on educational discrimination against young women and girls (2006/2135(INI)). The resolution recognises progress made as regards gender equality in education but regrets that the selection of courses of study and specialities remains related to the traditional role of sexes and does as such not offer sufficient possibilities for women to fulfil their potential in professional and public life. In a later resolution of 2012 (2012/2116(INI)), the European Parliament recognised that gender roles are shaped and imposed through a variety of social influences, including in education. According to the resolution, gender stereotypes would be present in study materials and education programmes and conveyed (willingly or not) by teachers.

The most important obstacle for the empowerment of girls through education is the persistence of gender stereotypes. Despite a progress in this sense in the past years, there is still much to be done to “eliminate gender disparities” and, even more, to achieve equality, especially in education.

The importance of gender equality in education extends beyond attainment and access and should also guarantee equal benefits of education over time: girls and boys should be given the appropriate education to pursue their careers in all fields and levels.

To address the above challenges, women and girls are to be empowered with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to reach their full potential, to improve their political and social participation, and to believe in their own capabilities. Education is a key element to close inequalities given its link to higher earnings and employment as well as to better health and longer lives.

Policy recommendations matching these priorities are often related to the strategic objectives

of the Beijing Platform for Action such as the development of non-discriminatory education and training, the improvement of women's access to vocational training and continuing education and the allocation of sufficient resources for and monitoring of the implementation of education reforms. With regards to solutions, the European Parliament, in the two resolutions mentioned above, has emphasised the need to step up in the fight for non-discrimination against women and girls in the field of education and the promotion of stereotype-free access to education.

In most Member States, several policies have been put in place to challenge gendered choices and inequalities in education. The most common goal of gender equality policies is to challenge, and eradicate, traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Policies to combat gender stereotypes may for example include specific actions to instil the notion of gender equality in boys and girls from a very young age whilst acknowledging its existence throughout education. As such, the Rapporteur believes that education should be considered as a tool in itself for challenging gender stereotypes. Gender equality can be included in school curricula of European schools but Member States could also develop gender-specific teaching methods and guidelines. With regards to also reaching other influence-spheres of girls, some governments and schools have aimed to inform parents about gender equality issues and to involve them more closely. Gender mainstreaming of educational policy frameworks is also important for the empowerment of girls through education and some Member states specifically aim for gender-neutral education.

Enhancing the representation of women in decision-making bodies in the education sector could also help break the gender roles mentioned above. Women are more likely than men to care about education and to push for specific policies to enhance gender equality, following the above argument for a different education of girls. But, more importantly, this would help women to become role models for girls and increase the educational aspirations and achievements of these girls.

Specific programmes could be designed to actively encourage girls towards different fields of studies and also to improve their achievement in mathematics and in science, as well as to improve the reading skills of boys. Guidance for further study and career could also be gender-sensitive and specifically addressed at girls, but also at boys. It could reach beyond the education of girls, by also providing additional resources to universities to promote the employment of female researchers and teaching staff and to encourage them to act as role models for young girls whilst also addressing the “masculine environment” mentioned earlier.

2. Textbooks and curriculum

The diagnosis has been made long ago. The Rapporteur would like to underline that this report should not be another diagnosis like the others: it will have to include concrete and specific strategies to change the (still) current state of affairs. The scope of the report should be limited to what we can do practically in terms of textbooks and curriculum (formal, informal and hidden).

Over and above their educational implications, textbooks have economic and ideological implications. It has long been understood that textbooks are a basic vehicle of socialisation, conveying knowledge and values. Textbooks have an impact far beyond the immediate

confines of school and learning. We must consequently take into account the extent of their influence: a textbook is a basic learning tool for pupils and teachers; a tool of negotiation between the various actors involved in its production and use; and an element of communication within families, especially for values communication. The aim is to explore the possibilities of the textbook as a vehicle for gender equality. Textbooks can be powerful triggers for a social change. Not only do they contribute to learning through the dissemination of knowledge, but they also play a role in children's upbringing by directly or indirectly transmitting models of social behaviour, norms and values. Textbooks are therefore a tool for both education and social change.

The Rapporteur would also like to show with her report how gender inequality is constructed in textbooks through their curriculum and to provide those actors involved the necessary tools to revise textbooks or use existing textbooks critically. To create a textbook is in some way equivalent to providing a first reading of the world, to legitimise a given social representation. They have an impact that goes beyond school and learning. They are social change levers and can be exploited as a vehicle for gender equality.

The aim of this report would be to promote the use of textbooks and of the curriculum (formal, informal and hidden) as key tools for achieving the international goals for gender equality. The Rapporteur would like to expose the social implications that are implicitly included in school curriculum, such as the stigmatisation of girls and women in schools through the symbolic power of society and educative agents. The report would look at whether teachers' representations, again regarding curriculum, effectively promote social and cognitive inclusion and equality between girls and boys. She believes it is necessary to reflect on these social functions that may be implicit and explicit in formal and hidden curriculum. The report would also demand the supervision of the aims and subjects of formal school curriculum to guarantee that all pedagogical agents understand in what way these practices involve power relations, including economic ones. The report intends to, as pinned down in the Istanbul Convention, put education on the map as tool against discrimination of women and to ensure the empowering of girls from a primary school level onwards. School curriculum can either emancipate girls or work to the detriment of gender equality.

To move forward from words to action, the Rapporteur believes that the European Parliament should encourage Member States to implement effective strategies, including possible connections for schools with access to European funds to the implementation of these strategies.