

UN Education Event Stresses Girls' Inherent Dignity

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March 15, 2018



New York, United States -- UPF was one of the organizers of an event at the United Nations headquarters titled "Integral Education of Rural Girls and Women."

The program, a UN side event held during the 62nd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), was organized jointly with the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the UN, the Catholic Women's Forum of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and the initiative Education Cannot Wait.

Conference Room 11 at the United Nations was standing-room-only during the March 15, 2018, event. Although many events during the 62nd session of the CSW addressed the importance of education for the advancement of rural girls and women, our event emphasized the inherent value of women and "integral" education.

Archbishop Bernardito Auza, the permanent observer of the Holy See Mission to the United Nations, spoke about the success of the Catholic Church in educating 68 million children, especially girls, in disadvantaged areas around the world. He clarified that quality education should "not only make us smarter but wiser in seeking truth and living in accordance with it." He continued in saying that integral education focuses on the inherent dignity of each human being and creates "genuinely good persons" who are likely to flourish as human beings and contribute positively to society.

Mary Rice Hasson from the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., stated that some good progress has been made in girls' education worldwide. She pointed out that girls need academic and skill-building education; yet there is a problem when education is based on a reductive perspective which equates the worth of women and girls with their ability to contribute economically. Thus, when a rural family is in need of labor, it is often the girls, not the boys, who have to give up their schooling.

"Equal dignity is what gives a girl the right to an education," Ms. Hasson said. "Not because she is useful or can make money for the family. Those are good things, but that is not why she deserves an education."

Ms. Hasson added that a reductive lens can lead to the sexual objectification of girls. Instead, she said, a girl's education should be based on her inalienable dignity and unique gifts as a female. Integral education sees women in alignment with a "deeper purpose of love, where she is in relationship with others, she will change people's lives, is born with the ability to give attention to others" and is "created with room for another" in her ability to bring into the world new life.

Ms. Hasson raised another issue: that parents are less willing to send their daughter to school if they suspect that their own culture and family values will be contradicted by the school's curricula, as was the case in Kenya recently.

Amritpal Sandhu, education and gender advisor at Education Cannot Wait, said that many of the 75 million children in need of education are affected by conflict or climate disasters. Mrs. Sandhu noted that girls in unstable situations are especially at risk, as they are 2.5 times more likely than boys to be out of school; this figure drastically increases to 90 percent for adolescent girls. She called girls' education a neglected issue and recommended advocacy campaigns, gender-responsive curricula, educating teachers,

increasing the engagement of men and boys, and increasing funding. In conclusion, she stated, "We must view education as a life-saving intervention."

Dr. Sakena Yacoobi, founder and CEO of the Afghan Institute of Learning, spoke about the 25 years she has dedicated to educating girls in Afghanistan. Her efforts started while conducting research at a refugee camp in Pakistan. Dr. Yacoobi encountered devastated refugee girls and women having no sense of value or hope. As she knew it was education that had transformed her life and given her "self-power," Dr. Yacoobi determined to train community women as teachers and to set up community schools.



"In the first three months we had seven girls in our school," she said. "But in a year, we had 15,000 students." Since 1995, she has helped educate 10 million Afghans, including during the Taliban regime, when many of her schools were forced to go underground. With great pride for these children, Dr. Yacoobi declared, "I'm glad we had those kids in school, because right now they are the ones running the country."

Realizing that elementary education was not enough for girls, Dr. Yacoobi created learning centers for women of all ages with an accelerated curriculum that provide skills for their employment.

Dr. Yacoobi pointed out the need for integral education, saying: "I knew these girls are going to be mothers of the nation, providing stability. ... Is reading and writing enough? They need quality education. It will be moral, it will be family-respective, an education that really gives them a skill, so they will really be able to provide for themselves."

Dr. Yacoobi remarked that the training of teachers is critical because teachers need to genuinely care about their students and recognize their fundamental dignity and value.

Dr. Timothy Rarick, a professor in the Department of Home and Family at Brigham Young University-Idaho, said that as much as girls need academic education, the most significant education comes from their family relationships and particularly the one a girl has with her father.

Dr. Rarick spoke of the impact of increasing numbers of un-fathered girls. In 1960, one in ten girls in the United States was living without two married biological parents; today that figure is one in three. Research clearly indicates that fatherless girls are at higher risk of poverty, emotional, social, and school problems, depression, substance abuse, and early sexual debut, he said.

The kind of empowerment that girls receive from an engaged father is internal, Dr. Rarick explained. Their self-confidence, ability to make good choices, expectations of being treated respectfully by males, and forward thinking about having a loving family of their own in the future are all strengthened.

Research affirms the unique influence that fathers have on their daughters, he said, stating that this must be recognized for the sake of girls' "real" empowerment. "We need to broaden our lens of girls' empowerment to include the family. If an idea minimizes fathers, it minimizes girls," he said.

In closing, Dr. Rarick spoke lovingly of his own relationship with his daughters. He tearfully read a thank-you note from his young daughter after a father-daughter dance. Many in the audience were tearful also in response to hearing this little girl's heart of gratitude toward her dad.