



UNESCO's Priority Gender Equality Action Plan 2014–2021

In preparation for the Impact Congress on gender equality, we look at some of the most important aspects of the UNESCO action plan designed to tackle this significant issue

Since 2008 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has made gender equality on a global scale a priority. For UNESCO, 'gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men'. In 2014 the UNESCO Priority Gender Equality Action Plan (2014–2021) (GEAP II) was published, in which the organisation makes a promise to the world about how it will address gender inequality.

Across the world women continue to suffer deeply from being treated unequally to men and this has a significant flow-on effect to the four pillars of sustainable development. There is certainly not a simple answer; women still have less access than men to some of the most basic resources and also to employment opportunities. According to UNESCO, two-thirds of the world's 792 million illiterate adults are women. This issue crosses geographic borders and socioeconomic divides; it is rampant and knows no boundaries. Administrator of the UN Development Programme and chair of the UN Development Group Helen Clark observed on International Women's Day 2016

that gender equality is not only a right; it is also needed for a just and peaceful world: 'It's not a choice, but an imperative: failing to address gender inequalities and discrimination against women will make it impossible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.'

AT THE HEART OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Gender equality supports sustainable development through recognising the significant time and knowledge that women contribute towards these efforts. In 2014 the UN undertook a world survey on how gender equality relates to sustainable development and the role of women in this development. This report concluded that gender equality is a non-negotiable component of any policy, programme or activity relating to sustainable development: 'Any development pathway will only be sustainable if it enhances women's capabilities, respects and protects their rights and reduces and redistributes their unpaid care work.'

The approach UNESCO is taking to deliver tangible actions is two-pronged. It is working on ensuring that all concerns of both women and men are considered in the UN programmes and activities 'in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and that inequality is not perpetuated'. In addition, gender-specific programming will be implemented where central UN activities are already being supported and developed to give power to women, for example the L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science programme.

KEY ACTIVITY AREAS

GEAP II identifies some key actions to be taken globally. One of these is targeting research initiatives. It is hoped that data gaps can be plugged by approaching data collection in new ways, particularly for those forms of gender equality that UNESCO has an interest in. The organisation is particularly keen to support centres of excellence for research into gender equality issues. Preventing violence towards women is another target area. The levels of violence against women are disturbing and have a significant impact on society. The World Health Organization's latest figures state that 35 per cent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime and this is a major obstacle to achieving gender equality. The intent of the GEAP II is to promote social change about violence towards women and girls.

Whilst the Inter-Parliamentary Union reported that in 2013 the average representation of women in parliaments is nearly 22 per cent, UNESCO believes that women still do not have fair representation in leadership and decision-making processes around the world. It is believed that ultimately this leads to many of the inequalities for women persisting. It is for this reason that developing women's leadership capacity and training through targeted programmes is seen as a key focus area for GEAP II. The final key action is designed to address how stereotypes undermine gender equality. A particular focus for GEAP II is to look at the stereotypes promoted by media, as well as those used in educational resources, and analyse the best ways to change these into more positive ones.

TOOLS TO ACHIEVE DESIRED OUTCOMES

UNESCO has five major programmes which will be used as the channels to progress these actions towards the transformation sought. These are Education, Natural Sciences, Social & Human Sciences, Cultural, and Communication & Information. There are still tens of millions of girls worldwide who are not in school. In order to reduce gender gaps in literacy GEAP II will utilise the Education programme activities to target a number of areas, including gender assessment of education policies, promotion of life skills education, delivery of comprehensive sexuality education, and working with teachers to develop gender-sensitive teaching methods. The Natural Sciences programme will be used to promote positive role models for women, support networks of women scientists, and foster engagement of

women in high-level decision making on science policy. Young men and women will be educated about gender equality through the Social & Human Sciences programme. These activities will focus on eliminating gender-based violence and reducing the gender discrimination currently seen in the sports industry, as well as utilising the UNESCO youth programme to promote the approaches to gender equality. GEAP II aims to use the channels available through the Cultural programme to increase recognition of women's role in, and contribution to, culture. One of the proposals is a multimedia initiative to help kick off new research, support data collection and activate networks. In order to address the way gender stereotypes are promoted by the media, the Communication & Information programme will prepare a number of special tools. These include developing mobile applications with training materials on gender equality through the 'Girls Mobile Initiative', preparing appropriate media policies, and coordinating global partnerships through the Global Alliance on Media and Gender. It is hoped that through all of these different activities and initiatives UNESCO will be able to further policy debate and advocate for achieving gender equality around the world.

EUROPE'S PLATFORM FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Whilst some people see gender inequality as an issue for less developed or developing countries, this issue is also a major challenge for securing Europe's future. There continue to be significant challenges for Europe in terms of balanced representation of men and women in decision making, as well as in careers and pay. Carlos Moedas, European Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, observed in a speech last year about women in science, research and innovation that even through Europe passed its Directive on equal pay 40 years ago, women are still struggling for equality in careers and in representation in parliament and corporations: 'We need to correct these imbalances. We need female leadership and entrepreneurship at all levels of politics, business and science. Europe needs women to be able to reach their potential.'

Through the EU Horizon 2020 funding gender equality is being addressed. The EU is looking at three areas to target using this funding and collaboration with Member States: equality for men and women in their work; balance in decision making; and improved gender dimension in research outcomes. Moedas sees this as being absolutely critical to pursuing and achieving equal rights across Europe: 'European research and innovation only stands to benefit from equal rights, equal careers and the equal participation of both women and men.' The not-for-profit European Platform of Women Scientists is attempting to right this imbalance by being a voice for thousands of women scientists in the debate about European science direction and research policy.

