

**Human  
Rights**

*Correspondence*  
**SCHOOL**

**LESSONS**  
Series 12

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## Women's Human Right to Education

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**Human Rights Correspondence School**

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*A Project of the*



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### Summary

This series of 4 lessons contain background information and exercises which will help to :

- Examine the ways in which women and girls are hindered in accessing and enjoying their right to education, by mechanisms like poverty and gender discrimination
- Understand gender role stereotyping and strategize ways to combat it
- Identify the link between education and human rights
- Examine the role that governments, community leaders, the media and women themselves can play in promoting women's and girls' full access to education
- Strategize ways to promote women's right to education in their community.

# Lesson Series 12: Women's Human Right to Education

## Introduction

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This Series is adapted from “Local Action, Global Change”, (Centre for Women’s Global Leadership and Unifem). The Exercises and background information will enable participants to work towards the following objectives:

- ◆ Examine the ways in which women and girls are hindered in accessing and enjoying their right to education, by mechanisms like poverty and gender discrimination
- ◆ Understand gender role stereotyping and strategize ways to combat it
- ◆ Identify the link between education and human rights
- ◆ Examine the role that governments, community leaders, the media and women themselves can play in promoting women’s and girls’ full access to education
- ◆ Strategize ways to promote women’s right to education in their community.

It consists of 4 lessons:

1. Poverty and Education for Women : Educating for the Needs of Girls and Women

II. Gender Role Stereotyping in Education

III. Education as a Human Right

IV. The Role of Authorities and Strategies to Promote Women's Right to Education

## **LESSON I. POVERTY AND EDUCATION FOR WOMEN**

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### *Catalina's Story*

Catalina is a Guatemalan Indian who is the youngest in a family of six children. Although none of her siblings finished grade school, her father urged her to continue her studies, seeing it as something prestigious and a good business investment. He also did it "as an expression of love," says Catalina. After high school Catalina's family made an extra effort to get money to put her through a college preparatory institute so that she could go to the university. Here, however, Catalina's dissatisfaction with her education began. Institute attendance meant leaving her village, family and friends. Her fees, she knew, drained the resources of her family, and it hurt her knowing that her brothers and sisters worked hard everyday while she studied. At the institute for the first time she began to experience racism. "The teachers and the non-Indian students thought of us as second-class... My preparation was deficient since the teachers in our village school had been poorly prepared. It was hard for me to reach the level of the others."

After leaving the preparatory institute, Catalina found that her father couldn't continue to pay for her studies. On her own, she signed up to study medicine at San Carlos University, where she became aware of how few Indians at the University level and fewer still would ever attain a degree. It was as if, she said, "we Indians are trapped in a huge net and we cannot get out" In order to support her studies, Catalina had to work in a restaurant and open a small business to sell hand-woven blouses made by women in her village. Eventually this pace exhausted her. She

finished the year, but switched from medical school to study secondary education, which required two years less.

After her studies, Catalina taught in village schools where her pupils were forced to speak only Spanish, as their indigenous languages were forbidden, and where, compared to schools in wealthy areas, supplies were almost nonexistent and teacher preparation poor.

Catalina ends her tale reflecting that, while her father had wanted her to study so that she could help her village, "He didn't know what suffering a little knowledge brings with it ... When I am depressed, I think it would be better to be illiterate... .When I am optimistic, I dream that one day all of us will know more than just reading and writing."

(Summary of Catalina's testimony, in Action Guide for Girls' Education, Bay Area Girls' Education Network, 1995)

## **Educating for the needs of Women and girls**

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Around the globe, fewer girls enter primary school than boys. In each successive year of education, fewer and fewer girls remain. Only a fraction of the women in most countries ever reach higher education levels and have a chance of a professional degree.

## **Why do girls drop out?**

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A 1994 study in Africa found these factors:

- ◆ Negative parental attitudes stemming from cultural practices and value systems, including early marriage and childbearing
- ◆ High cost of education, especially in countries forced to cut school expenditures because of structural adjustment programmes

- ◆ Poverty that makes a girl's work essential to family survival
- ◆ Sexual harassment both within and outside the school environment, with resulting parental fears for their daughters' safety and the family's honour
- ◆ Schoolgirl pregnancy
- ◆ Girl-unfriendly pedagogic styles and physical facilities
- ◆ Curriculums that are rigid and irrelevant to girls' experience.

*(Girls and African Education: Research and Action to Keep Girls in School, Forum for African Women Educationalists, Nairobi, 1995)*

Most educational systems are designed for students who can attend school all day during the school year for at least 10 consecutive years. In addition families are often required to pay for school fees, books and uniforms. Such systems exclude poor children, especially girls, who often must work alongside their parents for family survival. In cultures where early marriages are customary, girls are usually withdrawn from school before they can achieve literacy or fully develop other skills. The costs of girls dropping out are very high: they become trapped in poverty and powerlessness with few skills and little hope for change.

What is needed worldwide are flexible structures to extend educational opportunities to out-of-school women and girls, especially those such as teenaged mothers, girls at home, the disabled, those living on the streets and those displaced and affected by armed conflict, all of whom receive low priority in national programmes.

### Women face many obstacles to continuing education:

- ◆ Because most women are overworked, few have the leisure to attend training programmes on an extended basis. Educational opportunities need to be close to home and to accommodate their children or work in conjunction with child care programmes.
- ◆ Another obstacle is the opposition of husbands. For example, at a workshop on land reform and women's issues, rural South African women cited abuse from their husbands as a principal fear. The men were antagonistic "because we [women] came here to learn about our rights," and many reported either being forbidden to attend or beaten because they dared to do so. (Hlomelikusasa, Janine Hicks et al. *Women's Rights as Human Rights: A Training Manual, Skills for the Future*, Community Law Centre, Durban, South Africa, 1995).

However, community-based programmes that offer health care and other social services can also provide women of all ages training programmes in literacy and nontraditional vocational skills, as well as gender awareness, legal information and other knowledge that can enable them to assume control of the resources they generate and to understand their options in family life, vocations and social relations. The key to such forms of popular education is flexibility and availability.

### **Exercise 1 : Bringing education to all women**

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**Objective:** To understand the educational needs of out-of-school women and strategize how to meet them

**Time:** 60 minutes

**Materials:** Chart paper and markers or blackboard and chalk

#### **I. List :**

Divide a sheet of chart paper into two columns. Ask the participants to identify categories of out-of-school women and girls in their community who could benefit from education, whether formal or non-formal. How could Catalina (see box above) benefit from non-formal education? Write their answers in the first column labeled “Who Needs Education?” Next to each group, write in the second column labeled “what Kind of Education?” the kinds of learning that the group would wish for or benefit from.

#### **2. Discuss:**

Divide participants into small groups. Ask each group to select a category of women from their list and design a popular education programme for them. Alternatively, the whole group can select one category to work on and then develop the separate parts of the programme in small groups.

Suggest the following guidelines:

- ◆ What are the educational needs of this group of women? Do not limit your thinking to “school subjects” or “school room” settings and hours.

Determine what subjects this model programme will offer How will you know if the women need these subjects? How can you justify these subjects to the women in the community? To their husbands? To the authorities? To possible funders?

- ◆ What methods will you use to make learning relevant and effective for these women?
- ◆ Consider the logistical problems women may have in attending, such as scheduling, transportation, and child care. How can your programme accommodate their needs?
- ◆ Consider the personal problems women may have in attending, such as spousal or parental opposition, fear of embarrassment, self-doubts and community criticism.
- ◆ Are there community organizations with which they might ally themselves to reach and teach out-of-school women?
- ◆ Give your model programme an attractive name and devise a 30 second TV or radio announcement to advertise the programme. What strategies are needed to attract women to the programme?

### **3. Report / Analyze:**

Ask each group to present its radio / television announcement and a spokesperson to describe the model programme her group has developed. Compare these presentations:

- ◆ What were viewed as the most important subjects to teach?
- ◆ What methodologies seemed appropriate for this learning situation?
- ◆ What were the greatest logistic and personal problems?
- ◆ What community resources and strategies did the group identify?

### **4. Discuss:**

- ◆ What is the role of women in bringing these educational opportunities to other women?
- ◆ How will this educational programme further women's human rights?

## LESSON II : GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPING IN EDUCATION

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Access to education alone is not sufficient to fulfill girls' human right to education. Girls and women also may face discrimination in the education system.

For example:

- schools, special programmes and training programmes open only to boys and men;
- higher paid, higher status teaching positions open only to male educators;
- testing methods biased in favour of boys (e.g., questions that reflect the interests and vocabulary of most boys).

In most parts of the world, female teachers predominate at the primary level, yet women are generally underrepresented in higher status, decision-making posts in education, especially at universities. Not only do female students need positive role models, but female teachers may also be better able to address the needs of female students.

School programmes can be one of the primary vehicles for reinforcing gender role stereotyping, the expected roles of men and women that society imposes from infancy onward. School books often portray boys as big, brave, active, adventurous and clever people who take action as leaders, explorers and inventors; girls, on the other hand, are small, modest, sensitive, cautious and beautiful, playing traditional reproductive and care-giving roles. The stereotypes of boys in some countries encourage boys to study the sciences, while the stereotypes of girls make them fearful of subjects, like math and science, that they perceive as being too difficult for them, thus reinforcing girls' sense of inadequacy.

However, properly designed school programmes could reverse the sex-role stereotyping and combat discrimination against girls and women. The 1995 *Beijing Platform for Action* explicitly recognizes the importance of combating gender role stereotyping:

“The creation of an educational and social environment...where educational resources promote non-stereotyped images of women and men would be effective in the elimination of the causes of discrimination against women and inequalities between women and men” (*Beijing Platform for Action. ch. 4, B.69*).

But many teachers are not themselves conscious of the discrimination that women as a group face, and because they do not perceive it they are not able to challenge damaging stereotypes in educational material,

career options available to girls, and school environments that may discriminate.

From early childhood girls are socialized to accept the ideology of male supremacy that makes them prey to a range of discriminatory practices. Thus women and girls are not only ill-equipped to identify or confront the injustices to which they are subjected, but lacking any alternative models of behaviour, they actually reinforce and pass on to their children cultural values that are harmful to women. For this reason women need powerful social, cultural and economic support to develop a sense of self-worth and encouragement to transmit this sense of women's value to the succeeding generation.

### **Exercise II: Gender role stereotyping**

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**Objective:** To examine gender role stereotyping in education and the community

**Time:** 45 minutes

**Materials:** Sample textbooks

#### **I. Role- Play:**

Read aloud the following scenario:

You have a small daughter who is just beginning to learn how to read in school. When you are helping her with her school work you notice that her book is about a boy and his sister. One story tells about the boy's hike in the mountains and his discovery of a secret treasure. The next tells about the girl's trip to her grandmother's house in the village where she learns how to cook.

Ask the participants to do the following.

- ◆ Discuss what this story tells us about male and female behaviour.
- ◆ Role-play how they would discuss these stories with their daughters.
- ◆ Role-play how they would discuss these stories with the teacher or school principal.

**2. Discuss:**

Ask participants to remember some of their elementary school teachers, texts and activities. What ideas about gender roles did they reflect?

**3. Analyze:**

In advance, obtain or ask women to bring in sample textbooks used in local schools.

Ask the participants to review them and answer these questions:

- ◆ Identify the male and female roles depicted in the textbooks. Could they be changed to present more choices for male and female behaviour? If so, how?
- ◆ Count the number of pictures of males and females in any section. Compare the ways male and females are depicted.
- ◆ If one of the books is an anthology of stories or poems, compare the number of male and female authors. The number of male or female protagonists.
- ◆ Especially note the math and science texts. Are girls pictured at all? Are they actively engaged or watching boys perform experiments or manipulate equipment? Note the word problems: Does the subject matter include material familiar to girls as well as boys?

**4. Discuss:**

Ask these questions about gender stereotyping:

- ◆ Were you aware of stereotyping in textbooks when you were at school?
- ◆ How can education be used to combat gender role stereotyping?
- ◆ What can women do to make these changes at both the local and national levels?

## LESSON III : EDUCATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

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The right to education is recognized in many national, regional and international laws:

- ◆ Signatories to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) must “recognize the right of the child to education,” including “primary education compulsory and available free to all, secondary education available and accessible to every child,” and “higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity” (Article 28).
- ◆ The *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) similarly recognizes “the right of everyone to education,” stating that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and sense of its dignity” (Article 13).
- ◆ The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) prohibits discrimination in education: “States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights within the field of education” (Article 10).

Obstacles to education may prevent women from exercising other human rights:

- ◆ *Political participation and voting* : Illiterate women may be unable to understand the process and/or what the political parties stand for; illiterate women are far less likely to be candidates for office or to be active in political parties, especially at high levels.
- ◆ *Health Care*: Illiterate women may be less able to learn about where to access health care
- ◆ *Employment*: Illiterate women may be unable to apply for skilled jobs: they cannot read information about potential positions or fill out a job application.
- ◆ *Legal capacity and property ownership and right to contract*: Illiterate women cannot read contracts or the papers needed to buy or sell property or to manage a business.
- ◆ *Nondiscrimination and equality*: In many societies, disabled, migrant and racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among the poor unemployed and illiterate; thus a lack of educational opportunities for women and girls perpetuates inequalities and discrimination in these groups.

### ***The Beijing Platform for Action and Education***

The *Beijing Platform for Action*, a statement of intentions on the part of government representatives at the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing, 1995, recognized education as a basic human right and an essential tool for achieving more equal relations between women and men. It recommended investing in formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women as one of the best means of achieving economic growth and development that is both sustained and sustainable.

The *Platform for Action* proposes these strategic objectives:

- ◆ Ensure equal access to education
- ◆ Ensure the completion of primary education by at least 80% of children, with special emphasis on girls, by the year 2000
- ◆ Close the gender gap in primary and secondary education by the year 2005 and achieve universal primary education in all countries before the year 2015
- ◆ Reduce the female illiteracy rate, especially among rural, migrant refugee, internally displaced and disabled women to at least half the 1990 level
- ◆ Eradicate illiteracy among women worldwide
- ◆ Improve women's access to vocational training, science and technology and continuing education
- ◆ Develop non-discriminatory education and training by developing and using curriculums, textbooks and teaching aids free of sex-stereotyping for all levels of education
- ◆ Allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms
- ◆ Maintain or increase funding levels for education in structural adjustment and economic recovery programmes
- ◆ Promote lifelong education and training for girls and women, and create flexible educational programmes to meet their needs.

### **Exercise III : Defining women's human right to education**

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**Objective:**

- To develop a law to protect women's human right to education.
- To assess the protection of women's education included in CEDAW

**Time:** 60 minutes

**Materials:** Chart paper and markers;      copies of Article 10, CEDAW

**Write, Read, Discuss:**

**Step 1:** Divide the participants into small groups to write their own law that would protect women's human right to education. The law should be as specific as possible. Should this be international law? National or local law? All three?

**Step 2:** Distribute and read the provisions in Article 10 of CEDAW which relates to education,

**Step 3:** Ask the groups to compare their new law to Article 10 of CEDAW

- ◆ How are they the same
- ◆ Would they now change their law? If so, how?
- ◆ What changes or additions would they recommend

**Step 4:** Ask Groups to present their laws. Discuss:

- ◆ In what ways would the government need to change? How can women influence this change?
- ◆ In what ways could the government support and enforce your law?
- ◆ In what ways do religion, culture, tradition, custom and habit currently limit the rights contained in your law? In what way would these things need to change? How can you influence that change?
- ◆ In what ways do religion, culture, tradition, custom and habit currently support and enforce your law?

- ◆ In what ways do you and/or your family limit the rights contained in your law?
- ◆ In what ways would you and/or your family need to change? Are such changes possible?

**Step 5:** Discuss what it would really take for these new laws and/or CEDAW to become a reality in this community. Strategize actions that individuals and groups might take to make this happen. List the strategies that the majority can agree upon.

## **LESSON IV : THE ROLE OF AUTHORITIES AND STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO EDUCATION**

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Governments and social, cultural and community institutions can greatly affect the education of women and girls. As with other human rights, authorities can act directly and indirectly influencing the media and using both culture and tradition to mould decisions and to sanction female students who do not comply. Governments have specific obligations: to open school doors to girls and women, to promote women's literacy and to provide equal educational opportunities for both male and female students. However beyond this initial step of access and equal opportunity governments can also play a role in promoting education as a tool for advancing equality, for breaking down discriminatory practices and for promoting positive images of women and girls.

Traditional and cultural practices need not present a roadblock to access to education for women and girls. Under national, regional and/or local laws, states have the obligation to respect the human rights to education in all circumstances. Governments may violate these principles when they turn a blind eye to traditional practices that interfere with the human right to education. Alternatively, governments can work with communities in a positive way, promoting education for female students while still respecting local culture.

### **Exercise IV : The role of government vs the role of tradition**

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**Objective:** To define the responsibility of government for the promotion of girls' education and to strategize action to further that role

**Time:** 45 minutes

**Materials:** Copies of "Case Study : The Girls of Tula" (below)

#### **I. Read:**

Case Study: The Girls of Tula

In the village of Tula, girls older than the age of 13 rarely attend school. Some parents forbid them to attend; others simply do not encourage their girls. Less than 10% of the graduates from secondary school in Tula are girls. Only one girl has ever attended the university, and when she came back to the village, no man would consider marrying her as they assumed she had lost her virginity while in the city. Girls in Tula are expected to marry young, to stay at home and to bear many children, particularly sons.

#### **2. Role-Play:**

Divide participants into small groups. Read the following scenario and ask them to use it to develop a role-play:

*Scenario:* You are an educator speaking to Tula Community members about the importance of education for girls. What could you say to different groups to encourage keeping girls in school? How might they respond?

Suggested roles: student, parent, head of family, teacher, local legislator and local religious leaders.

#### **3. Imagine / Discuss:**

Ask the participants to imagine: You are a girl of 15 in Tula. You want to go to school, but your parents won't let you. What do you do? How could and should the government help you?

- ◆ Should the government force parents to send their older girls to school?
- ◆ Should the government fund “outreach” educators to explain the importance of education to members of the community?
- ◆ What other tactics could the government use in the community? In the school? In the university?

#### 4. Discuss:

Ask these questions about girls' education in the local community:

- ◆ Does your community value equally the education of boys and girls?
- ◆ Do more girls than boys drop out of school or attend irregularly? If so, at what age? For what reasons?
- ◆ Are government authorities doing anything to correct or challenge the problem? Are people in the community doing anything?

### Strategies to Promote Women's Right to Education

Here are some suggestions. Compare these with the list from Exercise III, Step 5. Make a final list of strategy suggestions and place them in order of urgency. How can you implement these strategies?

- ◆ Insure access by girls and women to education and improve the quality and relevance of that education for them.
- ◆ Eliminate gender stereotyping in textbooks and school curriculums.
- ◆ Set specific targets and time-frames to progressively reduce the gender gap.
- ◆ Establish schools and learning centres within walking distance of girls' homes.
- ◆ Recruit more women teachers.
- ◆ Campaign to elicit parental support and participation in education.
- ◆ Make more efforts to enroll adolescent wives and mothers in basic education programmes.

Provide day care facilities.

- ◆ Adopt innovative programmes to combine learning with income earning for out-of-school girls and women in poor communities.
- ◆ (UN Public Information Department, “Literacy: A Key to Women’s Empowerment”, from Press Kit for the Beijing Conference, 1995)