

Statement by the UK Government

55th Session on the UN Commission on the Status of Women

Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work

Mr. Chairperson

1. The UK welcomes this important dialogue on the priority theme. We believe that access to education is the gateway to economic security, and opportunity and that it is essential that women and girls have equal access to education so that they can contribute to the success of their societies. We also recognise the critical role of education in international development, empowering girls to make choices about their lives, reducing poverty and contributing to economic development. To that end the UK aligns itself with the statement made earlier by Hungary on behalf of the European Union.
2. In line with many UN Member States, the UK has enjoyed formal 'gender parity' in education for many years
3. However, there are still some segregated patterns. Girls are still underrepresented in the uptake of some disciplines within so-called 'traditional male' subjects such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). Biology has seen a healthy increase in the number of girls undertaking it in recent years, whereas physics related subjects are still not evenly balanced. However, it is interesting to note that there are now more women veterinarians than men in the UK and the number of female medical and dentistry students exceeds the number of male students.
4. When it occurs, this lack of engagement is a great loss to society. When girls avoid these subjects, it means that some of the brightest minds and best skills are lost to those employment sectors. We find that when girls do study STEM subjects they generally perform better

than boys, and some STEM disciplines – including medicine and veterinary science as previously mentioned already attract large numbers of women. However, some disciplines remain largely ‘male-dominated’, at least in part because of the negative perceptions of the opportunities offered in these areas held by children and key influencers, such as parents. The UK is addressing this issue, partly through direct interaction with the relevant professional and business organisations who are best placed to provide the information which is needed to assist students to make career choices, and partly through engaging with a broad spectrum of influencers’ networks such as careers advisors.

5. Furthermore, the UK Government is working closely with the sector to develop policies and initiatives to accelerate change. It is providing support for schools to encourage more girls to study physics and to help them to become more confident and assertive in the subject. We also have the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ambassadors Scheme where working scientists and engineers go into our schools to support teachers and engage and encourage schoolchildren and students to continue to study and work in the scientific and technological sector. This scheme has currently recruited over 20,000 STEM Ambassadors.
6. In a world where there are still too many stereotypes about which jobs and school subjects are suitable for girls and which for boys it's important to recognise the part role models play in challenging those stereotypes, raising aspirations and helping and encouraging all young people to make real informed choices.
7. And there is a financial incentive for Governments to address these issues, especially in light of the global financial crisis. As of 2008, some 620,000 women in the UK were STEM graduates. However, 70% of these did not work in STEM. The Confederation of British states there is a perceived shortage of STEM skills in the workforce. Clearly if the talent pool from which they draw could be increased by increasing the engagement of women in these disciplines.

8. The UK Government is therefore firm in its commitment to work to overcome barriers which hinder women's participation in these fields and the wider labour market, both in the UK and overseas. Our international development programme prioritises the education and economic empowerment of women and girls, recognising that education is one of the most powerful investments to reduce poverty.
9. There are other factors which Governments need to address to make particular sector workplaces accessible and attractive to women. Limited flexible working arrangements, unaffordable and unequal sharing of childcare between parents, are just some of the barriers that lead to wider occupational segregation in these sectors.
10. In the UK, flexible working is currently only available to certain people. However, the Government intends to extend this right to all employees.
11. We know that investing in girls and women is essential to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and to improving child nutrition, infant mortality and poverty in the poorest countries. The UK has put women and girls at the front and centre of the UK's international development policy. We believe in particular that investing in adolescent girls prevents the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. That is why the UK Government has prioritised supporting girls to complete school and enabling girls and women to access skills training, jobs, financial services, and own property. We are taking this forward in all our international development work.
12. Lastly the UK believes that the establishment of UN Women is a very positive step in ensuring that specific actions to address these issues are taken forward. We wish Michelle Bachelet and her staff every success (***especially today – the official launch of the organisation***) and the UK looks forward to supporting and working with UN Women to make real equality for women worldwide a reality.

Thank you Chair