INTER-AMERICAN PROGRAM ON THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUITY AND EQUALITY

SEPIA III- Gender and Education

Proposals for Integrating a Gender Perspective in Education presented to the III Meeting of Ministers of Education

1.   Progress and challenges in education

Until a few decades ago, the main education demands, from a gender perspective, were focused on overcoming the gap in education between men and women. There were significant disparities in illiteracy rates between the sexes in almost all countries in the region, especially for rural and older women. Moreover, educational systems provided significantly less basic and secondary education coverage to girls than to boys.

These gaps are being overcome in most countries in the Hemisphere. Girls and boys have virtually equal access to basic and secondary education. Several countries have high percentages of women in higher education, and the illiteracy gap has narrowed considerably.

This progress is taking place in a context of increased schooling for the entire population. In the 1990s in Latin America, the working-age population (persons age 15 and over) grew at a rate of 3.1%, while the number of professionals and specialists (ages 25 to 59) increased at an annual rate of 7.5% -- that rate was higher for women (8.7%) than for men (6.4%).1[1] Despite this considerable progress, the lag in education from decades past accounts for the fact that roughly 80% of the population ages 25 to 59 in 2000 did not have a technical or professional education.

Retention rates in the educational system are low, particularly among low-income sectors, despite a significant increase in preschool education, basic education coverage, and secondary school enrollment. This leaves children and youth lacking the training they need to effectively join the labor market, thereby breeding poverty.

For women, these disadvantages are compounded by the persistence of discriminatory mechanisms in the labor market that contribute to an even more precarious employment status, such as greater difficulties in combining domestic work with salaried jobs, more limited occupational options resulting from the segmentation of employment by sex, and income disparities between men and women. In this context, education for women represents a fundamental mechanism for social mobility and autonomy as well as a means to pass the value of education on to their children.

This situation presents great challenges for the education reforms being carried out in most countries in the region

2.   Including proposals for a gender perspective in education among the commitments of the Summits of the Americas

The Summits of the Americas have addressed the topic of education with particular interest. The heads of state and government participating in the First Summit of the Americas in Miami called for access to quality education; adult education and professional training;

technical, professional, and teacher training; increasing access to and strengthening the quality of higher education; universal access to education for women; strategies to overcome nutritional deficiencies; decentralization; and community participation.

At the Second Summit of the Americas, governments planned to implement compensatory educational policies for the most vulnerable groups; use indicators to assess the quality of education; and develop comprehensive programs to improve and increase the level of professionalism among teachers and school administrators and train workers, considering the adoption of new technologies. They also recognized the need to include the following in education: democratic principles, human rights, gender-related issues, peace, tolerance, and respect for the environment and natural resources. They further identified that education reforms are based on equity, quality, relevance, and efficiency in education.

The Third Summit of the Americas recognized the value of an educated citizenry in achieving more democratic societies, economic growth, and social equity. That acknowledgement led to agreements on devising policies to improve access to quality education through teacher training, civic education, and use of information technologies in the classroom, to help reduce income inequalities in the Hemisphere. The mandates from the Third Summit address five main topics: 1) quality and equity; 2) management and decentralization, social participation, and teacher training; 3) training, secondary education, and certification of job skills; 4) higher education, science and technology, and academic mobility; and 5) new technologies applied to education.

In pursuance of the mandates of the Third Summit of the Americas, the Meeting of Ministers of Education was established as a political forum with the aim of developing guidelines, programs, and strategies for horizontal cooperation based on the positions taken by the Heads of State and Government. The Second Meeting of Ministers of Education was held at Punta del Este in September 2001, under the auspices of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CIDI). At that meeting the Ministers recognized the progress made in the education field and reaffirmed their commitment to developing and implementing projects in the five dimensions identified: (a) quality and equity in education; (b) improved management, decentralization, social participation, and teacher training in the education system; (c) youth training, secondary education, and certification of job skills; (d) strengthening of higher education, science and technology, and academic mobility; and (e) application of new technologies to education.

a. *Quality and equity in education*

Quality and equity in education are inseparable principles when it comes to improving living conditions, particularly for the poorest population segments. Only to the extent that there is quality for all can equity be achieved. Although girls and women may be considered a vulnerable group, to be accorded priority attention they must be included in specific actions, especially in the rural sectors, which still lag behind other sectors in several countries of the hemisphere, to eliminate existing inequities in terms of access to education as well as discriminatory teaching practices. This principle holds particularly true when one considers the multiplier effect of education for mothers, in terms of encouraging their children to attend and stay in school, improving health conditions for the family, and helping the region's most dispossessed families overcome poverty, as well as other aspects of social development, such as maternal and infant mortality, health, nutrition and education of new generations, population control and environmental protection, social integration, and the development of citizenship.

b. *Improved management, decentralization, social participation, and teacher training in the education system*

The management and decentralization of education systems have proven to be an effective mechanism for strengthening strategies for social participation in the education process. The decentralization processes carried out in the hemisphere have opened significant opportunities for participation by women at the local level, where they have played leadership roles in their communities.

On the one hand, participation by women in the management of education at the community level can be viewed as a source of training for new leaders, strengthening their participation, opening possibilities for positive solutions to education problems, and developing relations with other local interests and authorities. Women have been actively engaged at the local level, facilitating the integration of education with other related sectors. On the other hand, the traditionally greater involvement of women than men in the education of their children, a role almost exclusively assumed by women, tends to strengthen gender roles, with education of the children assigned as the responsibility of the mother. This area therefore represents fertile ground for greater family involvement – mothers and fathers – in the management of education, thereby influencing how these roles are shaped and promoting equality between men and women in domestic matters, including education.

The challenge of creating educational settings designed as learning communities naturally extends to teachers, whose responsibility it is to promote democratic values, equity and tolerance, as opposed to authoritarianism and rigid hierarchies. Teacher training therefore needs to incorporate principles promoting these values, and in particular nondiscrimination for reasons of gender, throughout the education system.

c. *Youth training, secondary education, and certification of job skills*

The results that have been achieved in increasing the coverage of basic education, and the increase in enrollment in secondary education, are not as yet reflected in the expectations people have with respect to the labor market. It must be borne in mind that students who reach the higher education level are a small percentage. Accordingly, education needs to be reoriented toward employment, so that students get the training they need to hold jobs and enhance the human capital of countries in the region. For women, such training is particularly important, since their employment options are limited by the prevalence of stereotypes concerning masculine and feminine work, the latter being more restrictive and less valued in the labor market. On many occasions, options for women are limited to informal employment with low levels of productivity, or domestic employment, given their lack of training to qualify them for other, better paid occupations that would afford them of the economic autonomy necessary to support themselves and their families.
We also know that women take on a variety of jobs in their daily lives that they have learned empirically. Certification of such skills should be part of the education process.

d. *Strengthening of higher education, science and technology, and academic mobility*

The percentage of students starting basic and secondary education who go on to higher education continues to be very small. The percentage is very small and tends to be closely linked to the socioeconomic status of the students' homes. From a gender perspective, while the gap between male and female enrollment at this level has been narrowing, there is a persistent segmentation of university courses of study, with high concentrations of women in some fields and a minority in others. In redefining higher education, proposals to

expand the career options of men and women, encouraging both sexes two enter courses of study where they have been absent in the past. Access to this level of education, therefore, continues to be characterized by socioeconomic and gender-based discrimination, which calls for effective mechanisms for combining equity with quality at this educational level.

e. *Application of new technologies to education*

The rapid change and innovation observed in the areas of technology, connectivity, and communication must be brought to bear in the field of education in order to close the education quality gap in the more isolated and vulnerable sectors. Based on the respective roles assigned to each sex, women have traditionally been less involved in the use of technology. Efforts to apply technology to the education process should give special attention to exposing girls as well as boys to the application of innovative technologies, avoiding sexist discrimination in their use.

3.   The gender perspective in education

The CIM Biennial Work Plan 2002-2004, stipulates in its priority areas of action that "[g]ender-sensitive education is a way to form new values and change attitudes. It is essential in guaranteeing the full exercise of women's rights with a view to including them at all levels of the political arena, allowing them to enter and remain in the labor market, and enhance their quality of life. In the education area, the CIM proposes developing activities that will produce and induce social and cultural changes, eliminate stereotypes regarding domestic and work roles, and create an awareness that men and women should share the tasks of public and private life. It will, in general, focus attention on women's education throughout their life cycles, with special attention to training programs for educationally disadvantaged groups, such as minorities, people living in rural areas, marginal urban groups, indigenous groups, and other ethnic groups."

Specific objective 5 of the Inter-American Program on the Promotion of Women's Rights and Gender Equity calls on OAS member states to promote gender equity and women's human rights, among other means by ensuring their " full and equal access to education at all levels and to the various fields of study". This appeal is reaffirmed by specific objective 8, with "the elimination of cultural patterns or stereotypes that denigrate the image of women, particularly in educational materials..."2[2]. In terms of activities to be conducted by the OAS General Secretariat, this same program calls for the adoption of measures needed to promote the incorporation of this perspective into the work of the agencies of the inter-American system.

In this context, the CIM proposal for incorporating a gender perspective in the Third Meeting of Ministers of Education is based on the premise that this, in addition to being a mechanism for social mobility, integration, and overcoming poverty, is a prime sphere for fostering cultural change to help achieve gender equity. Although equal access for women to all levels of education is an essential step forward, there are other factors that are related to the potential that lies in educating girls and boys about the values of equity, tolerance, respect for diversity, and civic education.

Education with a gender perspective is understood as educating girls and boys from a very early age on principles of equity between the sexes, to pave the way for overcoming the greatest barriers stemming from gender inequity, among other factors, and for equal access to the labor market; it brings about cultural change in both men and women, such as

responsible parenthood and equal sharing of housework. It also creates the conditions for empowering women and, therefore, for forging a more just and equitable society.

Furthermore, there is a direct correlation between women's level of education and opportunities for boosting household income; their education level also impacts their health and that of their family and, as shown below, is a factor in reducing the dropout rate for their children.

Nonetheless, in order to integrate a gender perspective in education, changes are needed in areas ranging from legislation to education management, including changes in the behavior of teachers, revising sexist messages in textbooks, and equal vocational guidance for boys and girls, among other aspects.

4.   Toward gender equity in education

Certainly, from a gender analysis standpoint, it is essential to grant girls and boys equal opportunities to access the different levels of schooling. However, there are other factors that, if upheld or changed, could perpetuate or eliminate gender inequities in different aspects of individuals' lives.

Starting at the preschool level, the countries in the region have recorded higher enrollment, which was motivated by the need for the educational system to improve girls and boys preparedness at the basic education level, which is a valid, high-impact reason. However, the supply is insufficient given women's mass entry into the labor market. The scant coverage of child care centers extends to the preschool level, creating a barrier to entry into the labor market for the female labor force, since women continue to be almost exclusively responsible for child rearing. In this regard, "enrollment at this level has risen in a manner consistent with the internal logic of the system, instead of with the demand stemming from women's entry into the labor market, which leaves much to be done".3[3]

Basic and secondary enrollment have risen considerably, with average enrollment among countries in the Hemisphere of 90% for primary and 50% for secondary, and in several countries in the region enrollment is higher for women than for men. Nonetheless, the number of young people who complete those levels is dropping substantially.

One of the most serious problems in education is the dropout rate. When those rates are broken down by gender, they duplicate sexist patterns found in society. Periodic household surveys in countries in the region found that the reasons why students drop out before completing secondary differ greatly by gender: among boys it is primarily to work or look for employment; among girls it is because of family problems, including pregnancy or motherhood and household duties.

Reasons for dropping out of school among young people ages 15 to 19
(Selected countries)

Country		Reasons	
		Economic	Family
Bolivia	Boys	50	15
	Girls	38	41
Chile	Boys	34	4

	Girls	14	50
El Salvador	Boys	47	5
	Girls	22	49
Nicaragua	Boys	38	-
	Girls	7	-
Paraguay	Boys	21	1
	Girls	14	14
Peru	Boys	17	2
	Girls	6	31
Dominican Republic	Boys	35	-
	Girls	20	-
Venezuela	Boys	37	1
	Girls	12	32

These attrition figures show that gender patterns persist, affecting young people's decision to leave school; these patterns are consistent with gender socialization in which boys assume a role as provider and girls assume a domestic role.

Early pregnancy –a growing phenomenon in recent decades– is an important cause of attrition among girls. It impacts the life of these young women in many ways, reducing their opportunities to pursue studies, which makes it difficult to find high-quality jobs that would enable them to support themselves and their children. Adequate sexual education starting in junior high school would promote a drop in teenage motherhood and foster responsible fatherhood.

One factor that has a major impact on school dropout rates is household poverty; however another important factor is a mother with a low level of education: among young people whose mother has little schooling (5 years or less), over 40% in the urban sector have dropped out of school and 55% in rural areas. In contrast, for those whose mother completed at least primary school, that figure drops to 15% in urban areas and 34% in rural areas. In view of this, emphasis on increasing education coverage for girls and reducing their dropout rate has a long-term impact that is felt in successive generations.

With regard to higher education, on average women have achieved similar coverage and, in several countries in the Hemisphere, higher coverage than their male peers; however there is strong gender segmentation in courses of study. Women have much lower enrollment in the sciences than men.

A high percentage of young women pursue studies that reproduce feminine roles, including education and health, which have lower status and earnings. The teaching male and female students receive from the basic level on is implicit in young people's options. Boys receive more attention in the sciences than girls; in secondary school, vocational guidance steers boys and girls towards pre-determined interests, according to their gender. In this way, the hidden agenda, which makes distinctions between the treatment and guidance of boys and girls, defines their preferences.

The images portrayed in textbooks also play an important role here. Although some countries have begun to review textbooks from a gender perspective in the framework of the educational reforms they are implementing, in many countries there are still stereotypical images of men and women based on gender roles or the image of women is given less importance than that of men.

In this way, sexist vocational guidance in school sidelines a large contingent of women from the science and technology labor market, marginalizing them from cutting-edge productive activities, which are the ones in greatest supply due to market transformations brought on by economic integration and globalization.

In short, the progress made in women's access to formal education is out of line with the benefits they can expect, inasmuch as gender equalities persist that, in general, are manifested in a low correlation between improving their standards of living and, in particular, the persistence of difficulties in accessing skilled jobs, consistent with higher levels of education. The main barriers to breaking through this breakdown between education and better living conditions are related to several factors:

- o Unequal distribution of family responsibilities, giving women sole responsibility for the home, is exacerbated by the numerous roles they play and the lack of domestic support services and adversely affects their professional opportunities.
- o Sexist language that conceals women's experience and participation in society, as well as in teaching practices and methodologies, which is one of the most subtle but effective manifestations of indirect discrimination. All of this reinforces the division of labor by gender, restricting women's options in selecting a profession.
- o The limited correlation between the supply of education and market demand has an adverse impact on women in particular, inasmuch as they need special support to break out of internalized general views in order to access innovative areas of activity or those providing more and better job opportunities.

Training, which is considered informal education, is one alternative for building the skills of persons who did not complete their formal education or who would like to gain expertise to improve their job opportunities.

In this area, training systems do not adequately take into account women's situation. Firstly, there is a lack of flexibility in the structure of courses, which have high entry requirements; many courses are long or have a schedule incompatible with family responsibilities. In addition, support services for child care are lacking. Together, these constitute a barrier to entry or cause women to drop out before the training is completed.

Based on the foregoing, the following lines of action are being proposed, to ensure women's full access to and continued participation in the educational system, as well as promote and incorporate gender equity in teaching.

5.   Proposals for incorporating a gender perspective in education

Incorporating a gender perspective requires a comprehensive approach to ensure that the initiatives in different areas are mutually reinforcing. In each specific area mutually complementary proposals are advanced as parallel means to close the gender gap and the persistence of gender-based discrimination in education.

a. *Legislation*
- To review current regulations and make the necessary changes to eliminate legal barriers, where they exist, that impede access to education on equal footing for men and women

b. *Inter-agency coordination*
- To forge inter-agency alliances between national mechanisms for women's equality and the ministries of education, in order to design and implement awareness-raising and training programs from a gender perspective for those responsible for

formulating education programs and policies, ensuring they are funded in the budget.

- To design and implement joint programs with national mechanisms for women's equality that are transferred to the ministries of education as permanent programs for teaching staff on the gender perspective, sexual education, equity, and integral development and training, with ongoing programs and methodologies to ensure they are applied in the classroom.
- To design indicators to monitor the incorporation of a gender perspective in education policies, in coordination with the countries' national statistics offices.
- To achieve coordination between the training system and the productive sector to determine needs and update job profiles, provide feedback to the information system on labor supply and demand, and determine existing employment opportunities for women.

c. *Revision of the educational curriculum following a gender analysis*
- To eliminate differing requirements in the curriculum for boys and girls, encouraging both to learn about gender neutral tasks.
- To eliminate requirements that, based on gender, prevent male and female students from participating in differentiated electives.
- To review textbooks to eliminate messages that reproduce sexist stereotypes or do not provide a balanced portrayal of the skills and functions of men and women and to delete discriminatory language.
- To introduce sexual education in the regular curriculum for all levels of education.
- To review curriculum developments in training, to ensure its relevance and to update it with respect to the required skills, so as not to repeat or strengthen gender stereotypes, particularly with respect to segmentation of tasks and occupations.

d. *Teacher training*
- To identify and eliminate stereotypes in teaching practices, such as the transmission of messages that promote gender inequity, differentiated use of space for men and women, and discounting or ignorance of female students' needs and interests.
- To sensitize and train teaching staff about the importance of encouraging girls' interest in science and technology.
- To sensitize and train guidance counselors about the importance of girls and teens selecting more diverse areas of study and occupations, instead of steering them towards traditionally feminine ones.

e. *The educational community*
- To sensitize the educational community, particularly for the most disadvantaged groups and stressing rural sectors, about the importance of girls and boys staying in school, equal opportunity between the sexes, and the equitable distribution of responsibilities in the home, as well as in various economic and social activities.

f. *Hemispheric projects*
Gender criteria need to be established for approving and implementing compensatory projects that are aimed at overcoming gender inequities in the formal and informal education of women. To that end, the following courses of action are proposed:
- Educational programs for adult women aimed at reducing illiteracy, in accordance with their needs, language, and culture, establishing special support for illiterate and functionally-illiterate women.
- Promote a multicultural approach in the curriculum for indigenous girls and boys and, particularly, for indigenous women that is consistent with their needs, aspirations, and culture.

- Programs and actions targeting groups of women living in adverse conditions: poor women with low levels of education, female heads of household, teenage mothers, etc., and supplementing and coordinating them with other related institutional programs or services.
- Promote continuing education, particularly targeting older adult women.
- Establish gender studies programs in universities at the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- Develop key skills for employability, enabling women, particularly poor women, to extend their influence, adapt to, and change their environment, by fostering entrepreneurial capacity and cooperation strategies.
- Educational programs and projects that contribute to the comprehensive training and employment of women, with a flexible curriculum tailored to their skills and schedules.
- Diversification of women's participation in professional and technical training, to steer them towards dynamic activities with development potential, and to improve their access to management, supervisory, and executive functions, particularly in areas where they are underrepresented.

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[1] *Social Panorama of Latin America 2001-2002*, ECLAC.
[2] Inter-American Program on the Promotion of Women's Rights and Gender Equity (CIM/RES. 209/98 and AG/RES. 1625 (XXIX-O/99))
[3] Valdés and Gomáriz, "*Mujeres Latinoamericanas en Cifras*" [Latin American Women in Figures], Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), 1995.