



PARLIAMENTARY NETWORK ON THE WORLD BANK

PNoWB participates in Global Parliamentarians' Summit: Girls and Population

17 May 2011

PNoWB members on 16-17 May 2011 participated in the Global Parliamentarians' Summit on 'Girls and Population: the forgotten drivers of development', hosted by the group "French Parliamentarians in Action". Organised by French MP Danielle Bousquet, and the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (EPF) in collaboration with French NGOs Equilibres & Populations (E&P) and the French Movement for Family Planning (MFPP), the event gathered around 60 Parliamentarians from across the globe. The two day conference was held ahead of the 2011 G8/G20 Summits, at the French National Assembly.

Global representatives and government officials congregated to develop a united and comprehensive consensus for the G8/G20 leaders to address two critical issues in human development: first, fast population growth, and second, the role of young girls in the development of society. The conference involved a series of presentations followed by smaller working groups - the findings of which were later presented to the auditorium.

Conference Highlights

It has been said that educating a girl is perhaps the most socially sound investment one could make yet developing country statistics continue to show a high level of school dropout among young girls. A biased education system, social stigmas, cultural hurdles and fear for safety impede a girl's chance at succeeding in the classroom and in the work place. The conference drew light upon a female agenda in development that has been too long undervalued and often ignored. The participants agreed that the role of girls and women in development must be identified and addressed if the Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved.

Former Canadian MP Raymonde Falco maintained that the role of woman in society is crucial not just because they are mothers, daughters, victims or educators, but also economic contributors whose work and achievements should be acknowledged. She highlighted the reality of the world's poorest women, and the plight of single parent families who, even in Canada, represent the poorest part of the country. Falco insisted that the provision of better health services, an increase in informed and trained health professionals and better nutritional levels are key steps that must be taken in developing countries to improve the quality of life for the world's most vulnerable woman. She discussed the many obstacles facing women and girls in the developing world, including the predicament that a woman's ability to assert herself independently is still very much linked to her role as a child bearer. Falco, referring to the findings of a study by economists at the Toronto-Dominion Bank, said that early motherhood is the main reason for girls to drop out of education.

Judith Bruce, Population Council, provided data to suggest that single motherhood had a stronger correlation to child mortality as well as a disencumbering effect throughout one's life. She also shared data on attempts by development organisations to provide health and information, often revealing bias toward girls who are married, wealthier and native -in other words - those who already have safety nets. To recognise the difficult circumstances, the social stigmas and physical limitations of the poorest woman Bruce urged Parliamentarians to consider population issues at the local level and not simply at a global level that will continue to alienate the most vulnerable. She gave the example of sexual education starting at 15 years of age as being too late and maintained that young girls must have better access to information from age 12 when they are developing naturally and before the peak in school dropouts. An educated woman is more likely to have her first child later and is more likely to have less pregnancies overall.

A video message from Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director, UN Woman, focused on the journey ahead for governments, parliaments and development agencies to combat the many injustices facing young girls and woman today. Noticeably in Sub Saharan Africa the everyday risk of mutilation, trafficking, sexual violence and forced marriage creates an insecure and unproductive environment for young women. Bachelet highlighted the gap in resource allocation for woman, the lack of access to sexual health and information, the inequality in wages as well as resources and the persistently sexist curriculums delivered in the local classroom each contributing to the everyday challenges for women in the developing world.

Working Group highlights

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to the risk of obtaining HIV from a sexual partner or aggressor. For every three African females with the HIV virus between the age of 15 and 24 there is one male. While prevention of the HIV virus is extremely important, the working group conclusion was that HIV drugs must be more readily available to the many women suffering from the virus today. Furthermore, more information and medical services should be made available to pregnant woman with HIV.

The workshops revealed a need to develop a strategy that encompasses concerns over population and women with climate change. Uwe Kekeritz from EPF said woman are too often seen as objects in the development process and not subjects and that woman need to be engaged as agents of change. Henriette Martinez, representing E&P, said that woman's issues in development must be integrated into the greater agenda both vertically, in direct programs for woman, and horizontally in other economic, social and health agendas. Kekeritz also emphasized the role of educating boys to respect women and the crucial role of men in defending the rights and position of women in society. He further urged Parliamentarians and development practitioners across the board to look beyond masculine and feminine stereotypes that often hinder the success of policy in practice. He said, for example, that married girls are often neglected as an area of concern as though their position gave them greater security; however, they too are faced with teenage pregnancy, rape, and are often taken out of school at an early age.

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