

# **The forgotten priority: Promoting gender equality in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)**

## Summary report

This paper summarizes the findings of the gender side event at the World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Bonn. It builds on the discussions held, as well as the written comments submitted by the participants.

In general the participants shared the opinion that increased gender equality has to be an inherent objective for educational initiatives that aim at increasing global sustainability. Further the participants agreed upon that gender is not sufficiently addressed within the DESD and in current ESD conversions.

Regarding the current level of gender awareness of ESD at the national level a diverse overall picture emerged. While in some countries gender has been very insufficiently been addressed in national policies on ESD and education in general, in others gender is addressed in ESD policies. Yet it appears that the connection between gender and sustainability in many cases is vague or transversal. The focus of the discussions and topics raised indicate that synergies between gender equality and sustainability are not adequately illuminated at large, neither at a policy level nor in educational practices. A central question that tied into this problem dealt therefore with the locus of initiatives that aim at promoting gender equality in the context of sustainability. Should these initiatives target planning processes or should they promote the conversion of educational plans into educational practices, into concrete actions? A possible solution has to take differences between national contexts into account; however the discussions made it obvious that the relationship between gender and sustainability has to be paid increased awareness to, and participants called for actions at both the national and local level.

It was put forward that ESD should create premises that make it possible to alter practices of gender discrimination, which coincide and reinforced through systemic exploitation of women. Systematic gender discrimination as gender inequality in practice could therefore be described as a propulsive force that impedes progress toward greater equality. These systematic practices of gender discrimination were in the discussion related to cultural value systems. The role of cultural or social value systems was highlighted as they are used to legitimate discriminating practices. Dwelling on these cultural value systems that actuate discriminating practices, the discussions adumbrated that a linkage exists between modes of domination in regard to gender but also in regard to ethnicity. Enacted and trough transfer to the next generation these value systems reinforce social inequality and impede progress toward sustainability.

A question that was raised and that could be seen to touch upon the synergies between gender equality, greater sustainability and the role that cultural value system have in relation to both, was the question if it should be promoting gender equality in ESD or through ESD. Building on that question it could be asked what the unique potential of ESD is concerning the promotion of gender equality. As a participant mentioned ESD is beyond quantitative education, with the unique ability to raise awareness on existing value/knowledge systems and to find alternative modes of engagement. These gendered domains of knowledge and action were highlighted by some participants, as male domains of actions (technological solutions) are paramount to female domains (education) in the current discourse of sustainability. Further it was made clear that approaches to resource management, social equity and economical reorientation are influenced by gender representation, calling for equal levels of representation and inclusive decision-making processes.

It existed a consensus that initiatives that in the context ESD aim at promoting gender equality have to build on and link up with existing initiatives, especially in regard to EFA. In that regard the ESD can build additional momentum through raising awareness on how gender issues in the light of sustainability are of equal importance for both men and women. Additionally the concept of ESD promotes critical assessment of educational content and practices, calling for a plurality of approaches. The significant number of participants and the active discussions indicated a demand for further cooperation and knowledge exchange existed in order to refine means to promote gender equality during the second half of the DESD.

Building on the above identified linkages between gender equality and ESD the following suggestions were made during the side event on how to maximize the promotion of gender equality through ESD:

- Raise awareness on gender roles and their impact as early as possible, starting preferably in early childhood education, to sensitize students later learning experiences.
- Integrate a gender perspective into all forms of education, including formal, informal and non-formal education.
- Mainstream gender into ESD at all levels of education, especially into teacher training, teacher in-service training, university lecturers training.
- Promote interdisciplinary gender research, and further utilize existing gender-aware research and teaching methods in ESD.
- Encourage and provide teachers with tools to critically examine their work and learning materials from a gender perspective.
- Linking gender issues in ESD with a wider context and other factors such as ethnicity, socio-cultural background or race.
- Encourage and highlight both male and female role models in educational practices and society at large that stand up for increased gender equality.
- Promote gender balanced representation, participation and decision making in ESD projects and planning.
- Ensure the existence of means to assist educators, stakeholders and decision makers to mainstream gender into ESD.

Based on the presented outcomes of the side event it can be stated that the participants' contributions correspond with the statement in the Bonn Declaration that acknowledges that "Gender equality, with special reference to participation of women and girl children in education, is critical for enabling development and sustainability". Further the outcomes indicate that collective action is needed to ensure greater gender equality through ESD.