



**Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-ninth session**

**Changing social norms to achieve gender equality: expectations and opportunities**

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

**The Power of Education for Changing Gender-Based Discriminatory Social Norms and Stereotypes: Some Practical Examples of Change**

**by**

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## 1. Introduction

“Empowering Education (Programme) is one of the most significant factors that change people in our country”

Empowering Education participant since 1995

Can education be a transformative factor in generating girls’ empowerment and gender equality? Can education change gender discriminatory social norms and help overcome gender stereotypes? If so, what are the contributing factors that make education to be such transformative force? In other words, how can we change education from being a social vehicle for transmitting old gender stereotypes to a tool for empowerment and equality?

Gender discrimination as a form of structural violence is fueled by unequal power distribution. The task of transformative education is to create a pedagogical space where the foundations of inequality are challenged rather than being explicitly or implicitly endorsed. The conceptual framework which challenges gender norms and integrates non-violence as its key pillars is essential for un-learning old values and learning new values in a sustainable way.

The Empowering Education model, which is built on this approach, has been developed in Ukraine and tested in many countries since mid-1990s. It is inspired by global transformative educational theory of pedagogical giants such as Paolo Freire, and by other experiential educational models developed in Europe, Latin America and Africa.

## 2. Advocacy efforts and mechanisms

The Empowering Education Program encompasses learning process and content that are based on gender equality and non-violence and aims to generate effective learning conditions for acquiring transformative self- and social awareness, self-management and other characteristics and skills through direct personal experience of students, who are becoming their own life-long agents of change.

**Empowerment in this educational model is regarded as:**

- Facilitating process which helps powerless people, communities and organizations become more aware of power dynamics in the context of their own lives;
- Educational strategy, which encourages personal development, sense of confidence, critical awareness and maximizes inner potential of every individual;
- Method of pro-active extension of benefits of education to the powerless or excluded;
- Process of individual or group transformation, which helps develop skills of interpersonal influence and participatory ability to solve problems in a collective action;
- Process, which leads people to seeing themselves as capable to make critical decisions;
- Way to give opportunity to individuals and communities to realize their own rights and responsibilities.

Empowering Education Program has worked in Ukraine since 1996. Since 1999 it expanded its activities to 10 additional countries, including Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Over these years only in Ukraine more than 15 thousand persons have received direct learning experience through this programme. It was offered both through school curriculum and in informal educational settings, such as targeted trainings and seminars and after-school programmes.

During extended period of development we elaborated some tools which help to build and reinforce girls' empowerment and gender equality in co-educational settings. Engagement of boys and young men is an integral part of this model.

The work in class begins with some simple but critically important principles of communication which help to set the stage for the learning process not affected by usual power forces present in a classroom (e.g. between teacher and students, boys and girls, bullies and bullied, students belonging to different ethnic groups, divided by level of academic achievements, physical ability, etc.). We also purposefully generate a space of mutual respect.

**Some basic principles of Empowering Education learning model:**

- Arrive on time (discipline and responsibility)
- Be positive in thought, word and behavior
- Sitting in a circle rather than “auditorium” (spatial manifestation of non-hierarchy)
- Do not criticize yourself, others, or ideas expressed by others. Speak without attaching value judgments about others or yourself
- Speak briefly, one at a time, and without interrupting
- No one is forced to speak (voluntary contribution to the discussion)
- Mutual agreement for confidentiality of personal information shared in the classroom
- Personal experience is extremely valuable, but do not generalize it
- Sensitivity to diversity

These principles help generate the learning space which makes it possible to talk about difficult topics easier and in a more accessible format, without causing emotional trauma. It is particularly important for girls when social norms often enforce them to follow different rules – e.g. girls know that they are usually blamed for everything “bad” that happens to them in the area of sexuality, or that others (usually boys/men) can interrupt you any time because you “talk too much”, even if you don't, etc. The Program is especially successful when offered in mixed groups of girls and boys therefore it also gives boys opportunity to listen and hear girls, respect their opinion, develop dialogue.

**Other teaching methods used by the Empowering Education Program which contribute to the transformative learning experience:**

- Learning through co-creation of transformative individual experience in a classroom – everything that was said, constructed, mentioned -- becomes a foundation for personal change.
  - Combining gender themes, approaches, theories with other concepts and fields (e.g. civic education, international relations, intercultural education, peace education, human rights concepts, etc.)
  - Understanding gender and other stereotypes and their impact on men’s/women’s/girls’ and boys’ lives.
  - “Gender mirror approach” – is similar to role reversal, which we call “social de-rolization” – “taking off” one’s gender role and “putting on” a set of social roles assigned to the other gender. We found this approach to be important for a person to become aware of gender roles and consciously chose to be released from imposed societal roles and structural violence they encompass.
  - Facilitated conversation about complex and interconnected realms of life, examining them both “horizontally” (economy, education, politics, etc.), and “vertically” (hierarchy, power structures, etc.). This analysis helps every person identify situations, cases, aspects, which reflect their experience and how it shaped their own gender identify and gender concepts.

**Some Facts about Empowering Education Programme:**

- The program grew out of informal exchange of ideas between several representatives of civil society organizations and was built up over time into the program recognized at the national level in Ukraine (it was certified by the Ministry of Education) and was adopted in several other countries globally.
- The program is cost effective – it was developed and adopted with very low or even no financial support. It creates incredible enthusiasm among students, teachers and parents, school administrators, - everyone who had a chance of a first-hand experience.

**Genesis and Adaptability of the Empowering Education Model:**

- The Empowering Education Program was initially conceived out of compilation of the existing transformative pedagogical methodologies and was shaped over time into a holistic model with tested core elements, focused on gender and non-violence, adaptable to countries and groups of population with very different contexts (e.g. Roma people in Moldova and Ukraine, LGBT population, youth, older people, rural and urban youth, refugees from Burma, conflict and post-conflict settings, etc.)
- The Empowering Education Program was initially designed as a tool for bringing gender education to schools. It embraced learnings from different disciplines and educational approaches but has never lost its main focus and thrust on women’s empowerment, gender equality and non-violence.

**Some cumulative results observed among participants in the Empowering Education Program:**

- EEP, as its name suggests, has been especially beneficial for empowering most disadvantaged, powerless people, communities and organizations, for example, as mentioned earlier, the youth – both girls and boys - from post-conflict and conflict areas in Afghanistan, Burma, Tajikistan, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The graduates became more aware of power dynamics, including gender inequalities, in the context of their own lives and they shared examples of how they resist them, for example, in their own families.
- For example, a 15-years old boy from Georgia, shared in the ex-post evaluation (which took place about a year after graduation) that his relationships with his father radically changed and he stood up for his mother who was suffering beating and other forms of violence from his father's hands. Another example from evaluation pointing to the personal transformation: a 14-years old girl from Uzbekistan said that the programme transformed her life, made her confident and fearless and that she aspired to work for the United Nations and to promote principles of non-violence.
- As evident from these examples, the programme encourages personal development, sense of confidence, critical awareness and maximizes inner potential of every individual. No doubt every teacher would be very happy to have this kind of educational results.
- The program leads people to perceiving themselves as capable and empowered to make decisions.
- Empowering Education gives opportunity to people and communities to change into more aware of own rights and responsibilities.
- It already changed lives of many girls and women as well boys and men.

### **3. Challenges and Conclusions**

Some Challenges: However it is also important to consider some challenges that we observed over last 20 years of Empowering Education model development (some are common for any education in general):

- It is a labour, time and resource-demanding process.
- It is not easy to achieve quick wins, many positive results become evident after many years.
- Democratic content of the programme is sensitive to political context of a country. For example, some of the countries where the model was successfully offered, eventually withdrew, after political leadership changed and became less open and less democratic. At the same time a number of countries where Empowering Education has been promoted more actively, continue their advancement to open society and gender equality.

Recent experience of Ukraine confirmed again the importance of integration of non-violent transformative learning into all forms and levels of education (formal, informal, non-formal). This is the agenda not only for women's and girls' empowerment and gender equality but also for a non-violent world for all.

“If we do not see a light ahead, we can light it ourselves”.