



**Open-ended Intergovernmental Working
Group to explore the possibility of,
elaborating and submitting to the Human
Rights Council a draft optional protocol to the
Convention on the Rights of the Child**

**Panel Topic 4: Girls' access to secondary education and the empowerment of girls and
women through the provision of free pre-primary education**

Excellencies, colleagues,

At Make Mothers Matter, we believe that education and care are deeply interconnected—and both are inseparable from the role of parents, mothers in particular. As the first educators of their children, mothers shape their development and aspirations from the very beginning. Yet this essential contribution too often goes unrecognized and unsupported. Recognising mothers' pivotal role is therefore essential to advancing girls' and women's education and empowerment. When care is recognised and supported through strong public systems, mothers can participate fully in society, and girls are enabled to pursue education without being held back by unpaid domestic and care responsibilities or other barriers. Investing in education, therefore, is also an investment in transforming the way societies value and share care.

Early childhood care and education must be the starting point. Guaranteeing at least one free year of quality pre-primary education is not simply about preparing children for school; it is a matter of equity and rights. These early years are also decisive because children begin to absorb cultural norms and gender roles very early. By the age of 6, many already associate girls with caregiving and boys with leadership.

A gender-transformative pre-primary school system can change this trajectory: it can challenge stereotypes through curriculum and pedagogy, contribute to engaging both fathers and mothers in shared parenting, and create learning spaces where girls and boys are equally encouraged in different roles. At the same time, accessible pre-primary provision recognises and supports mothers' care responsibilities, allowing them to engage in paid work, study, and participate in civic life - showing how care policies and education policies reinforce one another. Evidence demonstrates that where pre-primary education is free and compulsory, children are significantly more likely to complete primary education, with the strongest gains being for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ensuring girls' access to secondary education is equally decisive. For adolescent girls, access to free and compulsory secondary schooling is transformative: it delays marriage and childbirth, prevents child labour, and enables later participation in civic and economic life.

But genuine access requires more than tuition abolition. It means addressing hurdles such as inadequate sanitation and the lack of safety, and tackling hidden costs such as transport, uniforms, meals, materials, digital tools that silently exclude girls. When these barriers are removed, secondary education becomes a powerful equaliser, giving young women voice, agency, and opportunity.

The correlation between care and girls' education is direct and intergenerational. Educated mothers have healthier and better educated children. A mother's level of education is one of the strongest determinants of her daughter's empowerment. Likewise, when young girls are relieved from excessive unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, they are more likely to remain in school. In this way, investment in care systems and investment in girls' education reinforce one another across generations, breaking cycles of exclusion and poverty, and enabling equal futures.

We therefore call on governments to recognise the imperative of a 4th optional protocol:

1. To Guarantee at least one free, quality year of pre-primary education for all, with special attention to inclusion
2. To Fulfil SDG 4.1 by making secondary education both free and compulsory, and by removing the hidden barriers and costs that exclude girls
3. To Integrate education policies with national care strategies, investing in the care workforce, community-based early education, and flexible pre-schooling that reflects the realities of families
4. To Ensure equity by prioritising girls education in rural, poor, migrant, and disability contexts, and by supporting adolescent mothers' re-entry into education

For us at Make Mothers Matter, the message is clear: advancing free pre-primary and secondary education is inseparable from recognising and supporting care. It is a matter of social and economic justice, of equality, and of ensuring that both mothers and daughters can realise their full potential as rights-holders and as contributors to society.

About Make Mothers Matter

Make Mothers Matter is an international NGO founded in 1947 to promote the recognition and support of the essential role of mothers in society. MMM envisions a world where women who are mothers are supported by society and can balance motherhood with their personal and professional aspirations, without being penalised. MMM brings the voices and lived realities of mothers to global platforms, including the EU, the UN (General Consultative Status), and UNESCO, ensuring they are heard, acknowledged and addressed.