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## GIRL CHILD

“Short-changing girls is not only a matter of gender discrimination; it is bad economics and bad social policy. Experience has shown, over and over again, that investments in girls’ education translate directly and quickly into better nutrition for the whole family, better health care, declining fertility, poverty reduction and better overall economic performance.”

From the *Millennium Report*

### Vital Statistics

- Of the more than 110 million children not in school, approximately 60 per cent are girls.
- By age 18, girls have received an average of 4.4 years less education than boys.
- World-wide of the more than 130 million primary school age children not enrolled in school, nearly 60% are girls.
- In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls have HIV rates up to five times higher than adolescent boys.
- Pregnancies and childbirth-related health problems take the lives of nearly 146,000 teenage girls each year.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, a woman faces a 1 in 13 chance of dying in childbirth. In Western Europe, the risk is 1 in 3,200.
- At least one in three girls and women worldwide has been beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime.
- An estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted, a direct result of malnutrition in early life.
- Two million girls and women are subjected to female genital mutilation every year.

### The story of Maya

*My name is Maya. I was born 14 years ago in a poor peasant family. There were already many children, so when I was born no one was happy.*

*When I was still very little, I learned to help my mother and elder sisters with the domestic chores. I swept floors, washed clothes, and carried water and firewood. Some of my friends played outside, but I could not join them.*

*I was very happy when I was allowed to go to school. I made new friends there. I learned to read and write. But when I reached the fourth grade, my parents stopped my education. My father said there was no money to pay the fees. also, I was needed at home to help my mother and the others.*

*If I were given the choice of being born again, I would prefer to be a boy.*

## **A familiar picture**

Such views may reflect the plight of girls in many developing countries, but the reality is that in virtually every area of life and in every country, girls and women routinely bear burdens and endure treatment that reflect their unequal status.

Everywhere in the world, girls face discrimination. They often receive less food than boys do, have less access to schooling, and in many countries, work long hours even when they are only 5 or 6 years old. Eighty million girls aged 6 to 11 do not even go to school, as indicated by the example of the mother given above. In societies where a male child is regarded as more valuable to the family, girls often are

- denied the right to life
- denied the right to name and nationality

By being married off early or forced to stay at home and help in domestic chores, girls are often denied the

- right to education and all the advantages that go with it
- right to associate freely
- rights accompanying unjustified deprivation of liberty

War, extreme poverty and other deprivations further endanger girls' lives as they may be raped and forced to work in extremely dangerous situations and environments as sex slaves, highly exploited domestic workers, or bonded workers in factories or on farms. All these make a strong case for the extra protection and support from the international community to ensure that girls' rights are realized and protected.

## **What protection do girls have?**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989 and by now ratified by most countries of the world, provides an agenda for action in identifying persisting forms of inequality and discrimination against girls, abolishing practices and traditions detrimental to the fulfilment of their rights and defining an effective strategy to promote and protect those rights. But implementation is paramount to ensuring positive change

Other than the CRC, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by 163 countries, is the most extensive and widely-ratified international agreement promoting the rights of girls and women.

CEDAW, while drawing on existing international human rights treaties, is a separate and distinct convention addressing the rights of women. It clarifies the negative consequences of discrimination and seeks full equality between men and women regardless of marital status, in all fields of political, economic, social and cultural life. States that have ratified CEDAW must take concrete steps, such as enacting laws, establishing women's rights commissions and creating conditions to ensure that the human rights of girls and women are realised. Their progress is monitored by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

### **How do these Conventions protect girls?**

The two Conventions clearly demonstrate that the wellbeing and rights of girls and those of their mothers are inextricably related. If a girl is brought up in a nurturing environment and her rights to education, health, nutrition and protection are met, her life as a woman will be greatly improved. At the same time, a girl's life and upbringing will be determined by how the mother is living and whether her rights are respected. If a mother, who was lucky enough to survive the birth of her children, has no education, labours long hours, is denied the right to own property and control resources, she will be condemned to a life of poverty making it difficult for her to provide a better life for her child. Thus the importance of beginning early to address the root factors of gender inequality. By intervening early when perceptions and attitudes are being formed, the cycle of gender discrimination can be broken before it has a chance to be internalised as the norm.

### **What are the core principles that define girls' rights?**

The rights of girls apply equally to all children. Four main core principles as defined by the CRC are:

- Regardless of the background of the child, the parent or the legal guardian, children must not suffer discrimination.
- Children have a right to life and maximum survival and development in all aspects of their lives.
- The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all decisions or actions that affect the child or children as a group.
- Children have the right to have their views heard and be taken seriously in all matters affecting their lives.

Refining these principles further, countries at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 agreed to:

- Eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child and the root causes of son preference which results in harmful and unethical practices regarding female infanticide and sex selection before birth
- Increase public awareness of the value of the girl child and at the same time strengthen the self-image, self-esteem and status of the girl child
- Improve the welfare of the girl child, especially in regard to health, nutrition and education

### **Making progress**

By the end of 1999, nine African countries and seven industrialized countries had passed laws banning female genital mutilation. Many other countries had in place education and public awareness programmes. Since 1990, primary school enrolment in developing countries has increased by 50 million children, half of them girls.

- The African Girls Education Initiative, an international campaign, assists 4,200 schools and literacy centres in more than 20 countries.

- In Yemen, the Government has declared education free for girls in rural areas and has trained some 2,000 women teachers.

In addition to the Population conference noted above, many international conferences have been held during which countries have reported on what they have done to combat the discriminatory practices against girls and women, establishing new declarations and objectives. Some of the conferences include:

- The World Summit for Children (1990)
- The World Conference on Human Rights (1993)
- The Fourth World Conference on Women (1995)
- The World Conference on Human Settlements (1996)
- The Beijing +5 Women 2000 Conference (2000)

### **Success stories from around the world**

UNICEF is undertaking many successful programmes in developing countries to assure that girls enjoy their rights:

- In Zimbabwe, older girls mentor younger girls help them with math and science during the holidays. In Nepal, community centres are reducing childcare responsibilities for older girls enabling them to attend school. In Egypt, community schools and improved teacher training have had positive results for girls: increased enrolment rates (from 30 to 70% in the northern provinces), higher attendance, and improved performance on national exams.
- In Thailand, the Youth Care Development Programme (YCDP), provides skills training and job opportunities for girls who are at high risk of being sexually exploited. Nepalese carpet factories where 50 percent of the workers are estimated to be children are common sites of sexual exploitation by employers as well as recruitment centres for Indian brothels. UNICEF sponsors programs to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS among 8,000 child sex workers in Calcutta.
- In a village outside Dakar, Senegal, the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), or female circumcision, was banned due, in part, to an innovative literacy campaign focused on women's right to health. This programme, bolstered by the passage of national legislation banning FGM, has empowered women, garnered support from the community, and resulted in the establishment of similar programmes in 60 other villages.
- Nutrition supporters in Bangladesh are working in over 1,000 community centres to promote improved caring practices for women and children, with special attention given to girls.

Other agencies also provide programmes protecting the child from violence and armed conflict

- A programme entitled Child Connect utilises the latest telecommunications technology to reunite lost children caught in conflict or natural disaster situations with their parents. The project initiated by the International Rescue Committee uses a shared database available to all agencies in the field who can post data and photographs pertaining to lost children as well as search requests from parents. Searches that once took months can now be completed in hours.
- A new disaster response programme, which will provide and maintain mobile and satellite telephone service as well as microwave links for humanitarian relief workers. This will greatly improve and quicken humanitarian responses to the many unpredictable disasters we face today.
- In July 2000, leaders of the eight most powerful nations (Group of 8 or G-8) announced a universal feeding programme. The school lunch programme will be an incentive for parents to make sure that all children, including girls, attend.

## **Box**

### **A small miracle at the top of a mountain**

In its native Pushtu, Laram means “scorpion”. Once a month a battered UN truck labours up a narrow, forbidding valley along stream beds and swithback roads to this tough mountain village in Pakistan’s North west Frontier Province. It is loaded with vegetable oil to be delivered among the parents of Aram who have agreed to send their little girls to school.

The oil-for-schoolgirl project administered by the United Nations is a new weapon in a worldwide battle against not just female illiteracy but hunger. The people here are so desperately poor that a girls’ education is often the last thing on a parent’s mind. In 1994, the World Food Programme of the United Nations launched its oil-for-schoolgirl programme. The strategy was to give an 11-pound can of cooking oil – often the most expensive item in the people’s diet here – to each girl who attended classes at least 20 days a month. The same incentive was given to teachers to reduce absenteeism.

The programme immediately raised a girl’s status in her family. “The little girl who picks up her can of oil has something visible to present,” said a UN staff member. “She is bringing it to the household.”

Immediately after the programme was introduced, school enrolment among girls in the village skyrocketed. One school saw its student population increase tenfold, from 20 to 220.

Some of the girls are very bright. According to Hussna Ara, their teacher, if they could stay, they would one day become teachers and help the poor. “If the oil stops, I am afraid, they will stop coming,” she said.

*Adapted from the Los Angeles Times (22 December 1997)*

### **What needs to be done?**

Despite the remarkable progress in efforts to enable girls to fully enjoy their rights, there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to achieve the objective. There are still many unresolved issues of discrimination, inequality, neglect, exploitation and violence against girls and women.

- Part of the problem is the extreme **poverty** in many societies, which undermines the good intentions of many poor countries to implement policies that would redress the discrimination and inequality that affects girls and women. The Secretary General in his *Millennium Report* has urged governments to adopt a target of lifting half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015 and by 2020 achieving a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers world-wide. In addition, to ensure a **safe water** supply, governments are urged to reduce by half between now and 2015 the proportion of people who lack sustainable access to adequate sources of affordable and safe water.
- Nothing has as great an impact on children and especially girls as a **quality education**. Despite the progress made over the previous decades, fewer girls than boys enrol in school, and once enrolled, girls do not succeed in their studies as well as boys. More needs to be done to break the cycle of poverty. By 2005 the Secretary General has proposed demonstrably narrowing the gender gap in primary and secondary education and by 2015 ensuring that all children have completed a full course of primary education.
- **HIV/AIDS**, the gravest challenge human beings face at the moment, complicates the problem as girls are at even greater danger than boys the same age of being infected. Studies have found that there are many girls who are quite unaware of how vulnerable they are to the disease and what they should do to protect themselves from infection. The Secretary General is urging government to establish prevention targets of at least 90 percent by 2005 and at least 95 percent by 2010 of young men and women having **access to the information, education and services** they need **to protect themselves** from infection. In addition, developing countries are encouraged to work with their pharmaceutical companies and other partners to develop and distribute an **affordable, effective vaccine** against HIV.

Societies must therefore redouble efforts to address the social and cultural practices that still prevent girls and women from fully enjoying their rights. Poorer countries need help from the richer ones to provide basic services, the lack of which exacerbates discrimination against the girl child. According to the Secretary General, more fortunate countries can help by

- Granting duty-free and quota-free access to their markets for goods produced in developing countries, especially all exports from the least developed countries.
- Cancelling the debt of the heavily indebted poor countries and diverting much needed funds for health and education programmes to service their debt.

- Granting more development assistance, particularly to countries who are make great strides in poverty reduction.
- Work with pharmaceutical companies in developing an affordable and effective vaccine against HIV for wide distribution to developing countries.
- Developing strong partnerships with the private sector in combating poverty.
- Making special provisions for the needs of Africa in its struggle to overcome the continent's problems.

### **Suggested activities for students**

- Voices of Youth—an online chat room for youth on children's rights and issues. To participate, click on UNICEF's website at [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org) and then on *Voices of Youth*, voice your opinions and vote on a wide range of children's issues. Results of the voting are posted online.
- Participate in your high school's model United Nations club, or if one does not exist, start your own.
- Check to see if your country has ratified the CRC and/or CEDAW and see what efforts of enforcement are being made. Write letters and send emails to your elected officials and leaders --local, national or international--who may have influence to improve the situation of girls.
- Support a program working directly to help girls and women trapped in situations of war or poverty. Such help can be channelled through organizations such as UNICEF.

### **Additional resources on Girl child**

ON the Worldwide Web:

- [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)
- <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/committee.htm> (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women)
- [www.unifem.undp.org](http://www.unifem.undp.org) (UN Development Fund for Women)
- [www.un.org/instraw](http://www.un.org/instraw) (International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women)
- [www.savethechildren.org](http://www.savethechildren.org)
- [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org) (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS)

### **Books:**

- *Girls and women: A UNICEF development priority*, United Nations Children's Fund, 1993.
- *Equality, development and peace—Beijing +5 Women 2000*, UNICEF, 2000.
- *Poverty Reduction Begins with Children*, UNICEF, 2000.
- *Human rights for children and women: How UNICEF helps make them a reality*, UNICEF, 1999.
- *Girls: Challenging the world*, United Nations, 1995

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