

Chapter 9.

The Situation of **GIRLS** &
YOUNG WOMEN



Some of the opportunities and challenges facing girls and young women today are discussed in this chapter, taking into consideration factors such as: negative attitudes, exclusion and discrimination; access to services (health, education, employment); empowerment, attitudes and values; young women as victims of violence; and maternal health issues. Attention is given to issues and concerns of special relevance to females, and to their status or position relative to that of males; within the latter context, areas of both inequality and convergence are explored. The various sections of the chapter focus primarily on health, educational and employment issues, the effects of violence on girls and women, their values and attitudes, and the concept of empowerment. The final section provides a summary and analysis of the issues addressed and of the overall situation of girls and young women, suggesting that while enormous progress has been made in many respects, the gap between existing inequalities and the achievable objective of full equality is still far too wide, particularly in developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

In all areas of society, gender equality has become the norm. Universally accepted principles of human rights have set the standard for equality between women and men. This concept extends to the recognition that girls and young women are unique individuals with rights and responsibilities similar to those of boys and young men.

This chapter explores some of the challenges and opportunities girls and young women face today, taking into consideration factors such as access to health, education and employment, as well as values, attitudes and behaviour (including violence) towards young women and girls. It is important to examine the specific circumstances that have distinguished the lives of girls and young women from those of boys and young men. For example, in societies in which the economy is based largely on subsistence operations, most of the production takes place in the surrounding fields or through hunting and fishing, and consumption is mainly by the family in the home. Under these conditions the goal of both sexes is survival. Despite the convergence taking place in many developed countries, young men are still engaged primarily in paid labour, while many young women are relegated to the home and unpaid work.

The status of men is higher than that of women in developed societies because women's unpaid household labour is still not seen as an essential and valid contribution to the industrial economy. In other societies, girls and young women are viewed mainly as "reproductive labourers". They have fewer rights to political and economic participation than do boys and young men, and they perform essential work for which they are neither paid nor fully recognized. They still live mostly in the private sphere, as the public sphere remains largely a male domain.

In industrialized societies, girls and young women have access to the organized institutions of modern life—the economy, the State, formal education, organized religion, professions and unions, and mass-media forms of communication and entertainment. However, the private sphere also remains important to them, with its less formal and emotionally more open networks of social relationships (marriage, family, kinship, neighbourhood, community and friendship) that coexist with the public sphere.



Life opportunities for girls and young women vary in different parts of the world, at times reflecting a reconvergence of “spheres” (the distinct worlds of work, family and households, and education) separated from each other in industrial societies. In all the Western countries studied, women tend to move more easily between these spheres than do men. In most societies, however, young women’s participation in the public sphere is still restricted. In industrial societies the family, traditionally a female concern, is a household unit of consumption that exists largely in the private sphere, whereas the arena of material production, traditionally a male concern, is typically in the public sphere.¹

Girls and young women in late-industrial societies are portrayed as those most subordinated to the consumer culture. The majority construct their femininity according to popular culture; women’s magazines and advertising directed at females tend to promote aspects of narcissistic, pleasurable consumption as part of a woman’s image. In former communist countries, prostitution has offered one way to obtain the money necessary to participate in new consumer lifestyles.

Throughout history, young women have been scrutinized with regard to their attitudes, behaviour, sexuality and general conduct. The monitoring and setting of cultural and moral standards, in particular the policing of young women’s sexuality, is conducted in public, in private and through the media. Moral “panics” are often constructed in Western cultures. For example, young single mothers are identified as a problem group and are discussed as such in an effort to find ways to alleviate the problem they represent. Some countries have experienced periods of moral panic over teenage pregnancy, to the extent that inner-city disturbances and crime rates have been attributed to the growing proportion of young single mothers.²

In various parts of the world a pattern of life-course convergence is occurring for younger women and men. In some developed countries, in particular, this convergence is taking place with respect to educational experiences and attainment, work and career opportunities, and personal lifestyles.³ The norm of the traditional family with a breadwinning husband and a stay-at-home wife has given way to a new norm deriving from the general trend towards the employment of both spouses outside the home.

*“Youth in general can be regarded as a period of vulnerability: young people attempt to enhance their educational and vocational credentials and gain a foothold in the labour market, develop adult identities and create new lifestyles, form new friendships and sexual and collegial relationships, establish a degree of financial independence and perhaps move away from the family home”.*⁴

In each of these spheres some girls and young women are far more vulnerable than others owing to a structural lack of resources, primarily in terms of education, vocational training, health and housing. Those girls and young women exposed to a poor quality of life tend to experience higher levels of vulnerability; immigrants and ethnic minorities are the most seriously affected.⁵

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES AND THE IMPACT ON YOUNG WOMEN

Youth and early adulthood are periods in which females generally reach their full adult strength and capacity. For girls, the risks associated with childhood diseases and other health and safety issues are different in developed and developing countries. The degree of risk is often related to gender; statistics on accidental death, suicide, violent crime, STDs and mental disorders indicate notable gender biases, and it is girls and women alone who face reproductive challenges including the consequences of early pregnancy. Discrimination against girls often has deep historical and cultural roots. In many cultures boys have been valued more than girls from the moment of birth. Female infanticide, inadequate food and medical care, physical abuse, genital mutilation, forced sex and early childbirth take many girls' lives. In some countries the number of adult men is higher than the number of adult women because of such discrimination. Although many countries have banned prenatal tests to identify the sex of a foetus, illegal tests are still available, and females are aborted more often than males. In parts of the world—especially South Asia, South-West Asia and North Africa—girls are more likely than boys to die.

Survival

Globally, girls have a greater chance of surviving childhood than do boys, except where sex discrimination is greatest. However, the gap between children from poor households and those from economically secure settings is more pronounced for girls: boys from poor households are 4.3 times more likely to die and girls from poor households 4.8 times more likely to die than their respective counterparts from financially secure households. This greater vulnerability likely reflects the lower probability of their receiving adequate medical care.

In countries where girls are most seriously disadvantaged, boys tend to receive greater medical attention. For example, a study conducted at a diarrhoea treatment centre in Bangladesh indicated that boys were seen 66 per cent more frequently than were girls. In India and Latin America girls are often immunized later than boys or not at all. In some places, boys tend to be given more and better food than girls. Breastfeeding and weaning practices also seem to favour boys in some countries.

Surveys of girls' and young women's health show that, globally speaking, childhood is a period of relative inequality. In both developed and developing countries, girls are generally healthier than boys, but in adolescence, girls are more likely to suffer chronic illnesses and psychological disturbances.⁶ The risk of depression increases among young women during the teenage years.⁷

Mental health

Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are more common among young girls than among young boys. Both anorexia and bulimia tend to be concentrated among white, middle-class teenage girls. In Western late-modern societies it is fashionable to be thin, and slimness is associated with success and sexual attractiveness.⁸ Anthony Giddens regards eating disorders as a modern phenomenon linked to the desire to establish a distinct self-identity.⁹ Giddens sees

such disorders as a determined attempt to control body image and identity during a period when girls and young women are increasingly denied autonomy in many other aspects of their lives.¹⁰ It is striking that girls and young women in developed countries suffer from eating disorders, while those in developing countries suffer from diseases caused by insufficient food consumption.

Young women are more likely to contemplate suicide, though young men are more likely to successfully commit the act. The rapid transition from child to adult woman, involving sudden changes in gender roles and the expectations directed towards young women, could explain some of the mental health problems and self-destructive behaviours they exhibit. Females face greater uncertainties and are more likely to find themselves in situations in which their expectations conflict with their subsequent experiences. The rise in expectations associated with extended educational experiences can have an effect on the psychological well-being of girls and young women.

Lifestyle choices

The lifestyles and behaviours of girls and young women have changed. Smoking and under-age drinking have become more common, and drug use has increased. A British study released in 1995 showed that one in five females between the ages of 14 and 25 used cannabis at least once a week, and 22 per cent of the 15- to 16-year-old girls surveyed had tried it;¹¹ many girls reportedly associated drinking and drug use with sociability and maturity.¹²

Girls' sexual experimentation, with all of the attendant health risks, is also linked to the process of psychological maturation. Readily available contraceptives are one means of reducing the risk of contracting STDs (such as gonorrhoea, syphilis and HIV) and preventing unwanted pregnancy, which in some societies leads to social stigmatization for young women. Worldwide, the vast majority of sexually experienced males aged 15 to 19 years are unmarried, while two-thirds or more of sexually experienced young women in the same age group are married.

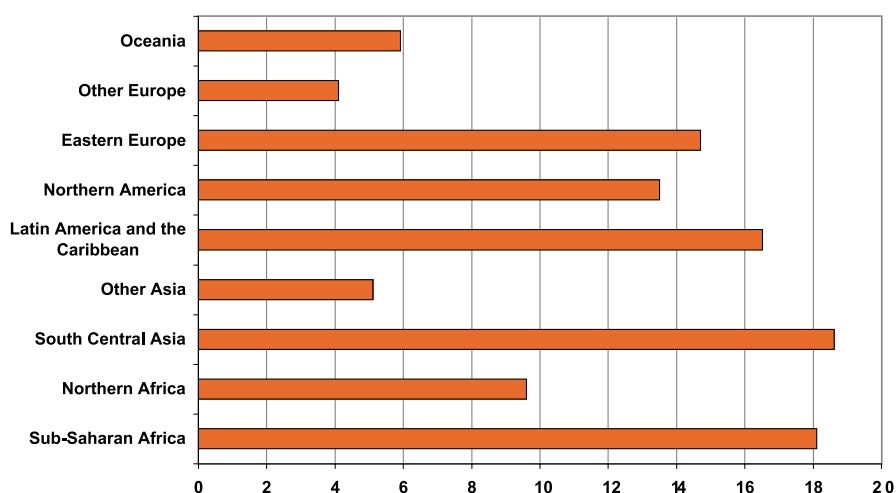
Sexual and reproductive health

The average age of teenage sexual initiation varies widely according to country and gender. For example, the proportions of girls having first intercourse by age 17 in Mali (72 per cent), Jamaica (53 per cent), Ghana (52 per cent), the United States (47 per cent) and Tanzania (45 per cent) are seven to ten times those in Thailand (7 per cent) and the Philippines (6 per cent). In most African countries, three-quarters of women become sexually active during their teenage years. In Latin America and the Caribbean, sexual initiation tends to occur somewhat later. In developed countries, over half of young women are sexually active before the age of 18.¹³ The proportions of males who have had intercourse before their seventeenth birthday in Jamaica (76 per cent), the United States (64 per cent) and Brazil (63 per cent) are about ten times the level reported in the Philippines (7 per cent). Differences between young men and young women are very large in Ghana and Mali, where higher proportions of females than males become sexually active early, and in Brazil, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Thailand, where the reverse is true.¹⁴

Early marriage and early pregnancy are not uncommon among girls and young women. In some countries, half of all girls under the age of 18 are married, often in response to poverty, family pressure, or fear of out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Countries with relatively high percentages of girls aged 15 to 19 years who are already married include the Democratic Republic of the Congo (74 per cent), Niger (70 per cent), Afghanistan (54 per cent) and Bangladesh (51 per cent).¹⁵

One in every ten births worldwide is to a teenage mother. In the least developed countries, one out of every six babies is born to a young woman between the ages of 15 and 19. In Central and South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, one in five births is to a female under age 20. The birth rates for young women in this age group are also high in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Eastern Europe compared with the rest of Europe (see figure 9.1).

Figure 9.1
Percentage of all births to women under age 20, by region/subregion



Source: United Nations Population Division, 2000. *World population Monitoring, 2000: Population, Gender and Development*.

Early pregnancy carries a higher risk of illness and death. Girls aged 10 to 14 years are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than are women between the ages of 20 and 24. Early pregnancies are also linked to higher abortion rates. At least 1 in 10 abortions worldwide occurs among women aged 15 to 19 years, meaning that more than 4.4 million adolescent women undergo the procedure every year; 40 per cent of these abortions are performed under unsafe conditions.¹⁶ Adolescents tend to delay obtaining an abortion until after the first trimester and often seek help from non-medical providers, leading to higher complication rates. Self-induced abortion is also common among adolescents in many countries. In Argentina and Chile, more than one-third of maternal deaths among adolescents are the direct result of unsafe abortions. In Peru, one-third of the women hospitalized for abortion complications are aged 15 to 24 years. WHO estimates that in sub-Saharan Africa, up to 70 per cent of women hospitalized for abortion complications are under 20 years of age. In a Ugandan study, almost 60 per cent of abortion-related deaths were among adolescents.¹⁷

The sharp increase in HIV infections and deaths from AIDS are threatening girls and young women, especially in developing countries. In those areas most seriously affected, HIV/AIDS is spreading fastest among young people under the age of 24, who account for one-half of new infections. Many HIV-positive young women will die by age 35, possibly leaving behind children who will be among the millions under the age of 15 who have lost a mother or father or both to HIV/AIDS. Other children become infected even before they are born to HIV-positive mothers.¹⁸

In many developing countries, a girl's sexuality is a channel of oppression and abuse. For at least 130 million women around the world, this began with their being subjected to genital mutilation, a degrading and dangerous practice sometimes dignified with the name "female circumcision"; an additional 2 million girls undergo the procedure each year.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG WOMEN

Enrolment at various levels of education has generally improved more for girls than for boys; the gender gap in schooling is closing in most regions of the world. Nevertheless, the gap remains wide in many areas. In 22 African and 9 Asian countries, enrolment for girls is less than 80 per cent of that for boys. The divide is greatest in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, particularly for secondary education; fewer than 40 per cent of secondary students are women.¹⁹

Illiteracy rates

According to data presented by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in 2002, literacy rates for young people aged 15-24 years around the world have been increasing steadily. The proportion of illiterate young people worldwide declined from 25 per cent in 1970 to 13.2 per cent in 2000, and is projected to drop further, to about 9.5 per cent, in 2015. There has been a persistent general tendency at the global level towards higher rates of illiteracy for girls than for boys. The inequality, caused by both cultural and economic factors, is obvious, and the improvements in girls' literacy rates are occurring very slowly. In the 1970s, girls were 1.8 times more likely than boys to be illiterate; by 2000 the ratio had dropped only slightly, to 1.6 times.²⁰

In 2000, Africa and Asia had the highest rates of illiteracy among 15- to 24-year-old girls, at 29 and 19 per cent respectively. These figures, while high, represent a major improvement for the two regions over the past 30 years; in 1970 the illiteracy rate for girls was 71.7 per cent in Africa and 50.3 per cent in Asia. In one generation the risk of illiteracy for girls has been reduced by more than half on both continents. Nonetheless, in the year 2000, African and Asian girls still faced a 60 and 70 per cent greater risk of illiteracy, respectively, than did African and Asian boys.

The level of development in a given country has become the major determinant of its level of literacy. Although the situation in developing countries has been steadily improving, the gap between developing and developed countries remains dramatic, as illustrated in the chapter on education.



The gender gap

Girls outnumber boys in school in regions where overall access to basic education is higher, such as Southern Africa, Latin America and most of East Asia. Larger gender gaps are observed in regions of the world with lower overall levels of education. Educational access is lower in rural areas for both boys and girls, but particularly for girls. In Niger, for instance, there are 80 girls in school for every 100 boys in cities, but in rural areas the corresponding ratio is only 41 to 100.

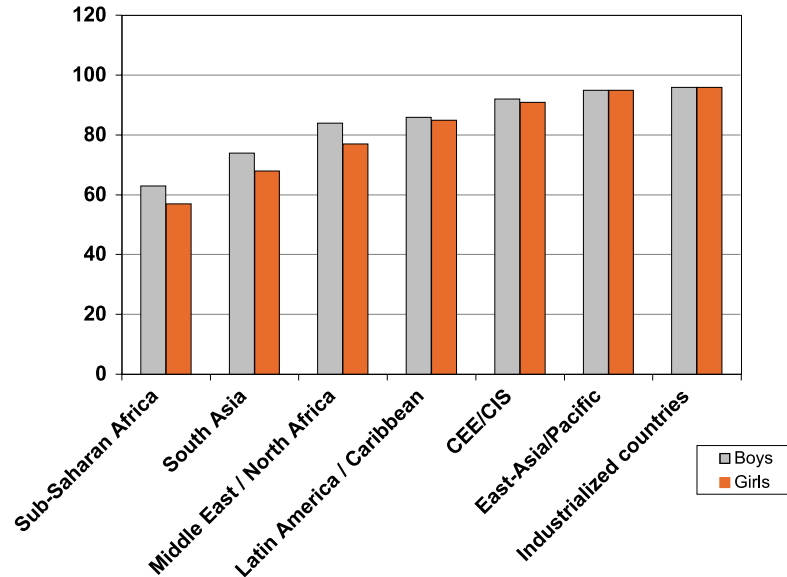
These differences reflect family expectations of future returns from their educational investments. Faced with a choice, some parents elect to educate sons because there are more and better-paying jobs for men than for women. Some parents invest less in girls' education because economic returns will go to their future husbands' families after marriage. Disparities in educational access also reflect the lower value parents place on education compared with household activities for girls; some girls are kept or taken out of school to work at home.

Some families are not willing to educate girls if the school is distant or the teachers are male. Parents may not want their daughters to encounter boys or men in classrooms or on the way to school, or they may fear for their safety, making distance an important factor. In Pakistan, for instance, where schools are segregated by sex, 21 per cent of girls in rural areas—more than twice the proportion of boys—do not have a school within 1 kilometre of their homes.²¹

Although basic education has become more accessible for both young men and young women, gender differences in this context remain dramatic in many areas. In 2002, almost 20 per cent of young women and 12 per cent of young men in most developing countries were illiterate. By contrast, in developed countries and in countries in transition in Central and Western Asia, the proportion of illiterate youth was equal for both sexes, at 0.3 per cent; although a slight gap was evident in 1970 (0.8 per cent for boys and 1.2 per cent for girls), it had effectively disappeared by 2002.²²

Studies have repeatedly shown that investment in educating girls and women raises every index of progress towards economic growth and development. Despite this, two-thirds of the estimated 300 million children without access to education are girls, and two-thirds of the 880 million illiterate adults are women. In the past few decades, all regions of the world have expanded primary education, though in Africa progress began to slow in the 1980s owing to higher costs for parents and declining school quality. In developing countries as a whole, the gender gap at the primary level has narrowed significantly, though it persists in Africa and South Asia (*see figure 9.2*).

Figure 9.2
Net primary school enrolment/attendance ratios by sex



Between 1990 and 1999, the gender gap globally was halved, falling from 6 percentage points to 3 percentage points.

Source UNICEF/UNESCO, 2001

Female representation decreases at the secondary and post-secondary levels, but the gender gap has narrowed somewhat in recent decades.²³

The link between education and fertility

Fertility affects levels of educational attainment and vice versa. The various determining factors relate directly to the young women themselves as well as to cultural, economic and family considerations (one example being a pregnant mother's decision to withdraw her daughter from school to help at home).

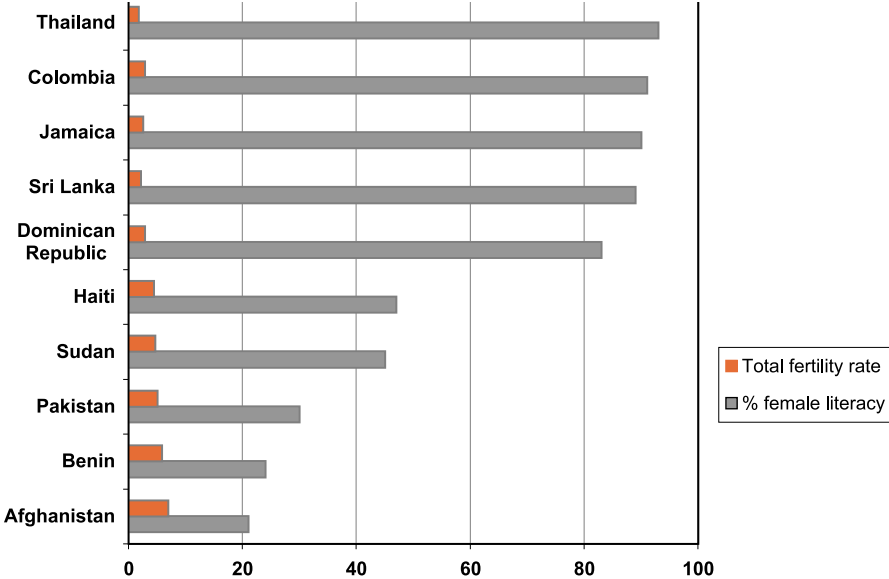
Family size influences educational attainment, with children of either sex from small families enjoying better educational opportunities. One study in Thailand found that, all other factors being equal (income, religion, residence, and parents' educational attainment and ambitions for their children), in families with four or fewer children 31 per cent went to upper secondary school, while in families with more than four children only 14 per cent reached this level. Similarly, a study in Bangladesh found that children in small families stayed in school longer because they were not called upon to care for younger siblings at home. In both the Thailand and Bangladesh studies, however, boys had a higher level of educational attainment than girls.

Once girls reach puberty, pregnancy may prevent them from staying in school. Students who become pregnant often drop out of school or are expelled by school authorities. An American survey indicated that young women who gave birth were much less likely to complete high school. The rates varied somewhat according to the

socio-economic status and racial/ethnic background of the respondents. Girls of low socio-economic status were less likely to complete high school than were those at the middle and higher socio-economic levels. Overall, African-American and Hispanic girls were twice as likely as Caucasian girls to give birth by age 19 (39 and 34 per cent respectively, versus 17 per cent); Asian girls were only half as likely as whites to become mothers (9 per cent).²⁴

Higher educational attainment among women is positively correlated with reduced child mortality. In Kenya, for example, 10.9 per cent of children born to women with no education will die by age 5, compared with 7.2 per cent of the children of women with a primary school education and 6.4 per cent of the children of women with a secondary school education.²⁵ Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, with the highest levels of female schooling in sub-Saharan Africa, record the lowest levels of child mortality. The more educated women are, the less likely they have to have larger families (see figure 9.3).

Figure 9.3
Literacy and fertility rates for women in selected countries



Source: UNFPA, Population Issues Briefing Kit 2001 (New York, 2001).

Education and employment opportunities

In all countries, women are concentrated in particular educational disciplines that tend to lead to lower-paid jobs and “feminized” professions. They often spend a longer time in education than men do but face poorer employment prospects. In Germany, for example, even in terms of apprenticeship pay, average salaries for female-dominated occupations are only one-half to one-third those for male-dominated occupations. Women in the former communist countries have suffered the highest rates of unemployment. Company childcare facilities are no longer as readily available, and because women have the right to a long maternity leave, employers are less willing to hire them. Even among the best-educated young women, the possibilities for independence have diminished.²⁶

In a survey of twelfth-graders, girls in general displayed more of a negative attitude towards mathematics and science than did boys.²⁷ The same survey showed that women had made substantial progress in obtaining graduate-level degrees in the past 25 years. Although an increasing proportion of higher education faculty are women, salary disparities between males and females at this level have not decreased.

While females remain relatively unenthusiastic about science and mathematics, their attitudes towards computers have changed. Since 1996, there has been no difference in levels of home computer use between American boys and girls in the eighth and eleventh grades.²⁸

ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG WOMEN

Studies have shown that both age and education influence a woman's earnings; younger women with a higher level of education tend to have the highest incomes. However, there are other determinants. In Canada, for example, university-educated young women earn 84 per cent of what their male counterparts earn. This is partly attributable to the types of jobs university graduates eventually find; for some reason, those secured by male graduates are generally better-paying than those found by female graduates. Recently, progress has been made towards wage parity for younger, more educated women, and the situation is even better when hourly wages are taken as the basis for gender comparisons. Surveys in Canada indicate that full-time work averages four hours less per week for women than for men. Male and female earnings appear to be converging in many Western countries. The Canadian data show that annual salaries are slightly better for female university graduates than for their male counterparts after years of experience, job tenure, education and hours of work are taken into account.²⁹ A similar situation prevails in Sweden, where only a small percentage of the pay difference between women and men cannot be explained by age, occupation, hours worked and education.³⁰

In the United States, employment rates for women have increased across all levels of educational attainment since the 1970s. The salaries of male college graduates generally exceed those of female graduates, but the earnings gap between the two has narrowed over time. Women are more likely than men to participate in adult education. In the large industrialized countries, labour force participation for women generally correlates with their level of educational attainment: women who are better educated have higher labour force participation rates than do those who are less educated. Education also correlates with earnings levels for both women and men in large industrialized countries.

In Western Europe increasing numbers of young women are joining the labour force, though their careers are still limited by childcare responsibilities. These women are also the most likely to experience poverty at some point in their lives. Nonetheless, younger Western women take for granted such things as the right to financial independence, an education and a job. Those in the former communist countries, however, can no longer count on professional or social security. They have lost their token representation in the public sphere, and the private sphere is no longer accorded the same value or importance. Young women in this region suffer from a lack of adequate

contraceptive facilities, increasing restrictions on abortion in some countries, and the privatization and individualization of welfare, which hits young women particularly hard as the main users of welfare services.³¹

There is evident gender-based discrimination in access to certain educational opportunities and jobs. In many countries, girls are outperforming boys at school, but this does not necessarily translate into greater labour market success. This is true in part because many girls remain concentrated in traditional fields of study, which often do not relate to rapidly evolving labour market needs. In countries such as France, Jamaica and Japan, where girls have equal access to education, some may still be the intentional or unintentional targets of gender discrimination. In other countries, such as Ghana, India and Kenya, girls' access to education and training is limited, forcing young women disproportionately into the informal sector and subsistence-oriented activities. In still other countries, total economic inactivity is imposed on young women.³²

Unemployment

In many developing countries (such as Botswana, Jamaica and Chile) and some developed countries (such as Belgium, France and Spain), more young women than young men are unemployed. In other countries (including Hungary, India, Indonesia, some Latin American countries and most developed countries), the gender differences in unemployment are small to negligible. In a small number of countries (among them Algeria, Australia, El Salvador, Sweden and the United Kingdom), female unemployment is lower than male unemployment.

Current unemployment figures from around the world for 15- to 24-year-olds and those aged 25 years and over indicate that youth unemployment rates are approximately twice as high as adult unemployment rates in both developed and developing countries. In a number of developing countries (including Egypt, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea and Sri Lanka) the ratio is considerably higher. The ratio is also greater than 2 to 1 in several Southern European countries (such as Greece, Italy and Turkey), as well as in a number of Eastern European countries (including Bulgaria, Estonia, Romania and Slovenia).

An examination of the relevant data show that unemployment rates for young men aged 15 to 24 years are lower than the equivalent rates for young women in virtually all developing countries and transition economies. The pattern is less consistent in the developed world.³³

EU statistics on children, gender and poverty reveal that in every age group, women are at greater risk of experiencing income poverty than are men.³⁴ In 1996, 18 per cent of all women lived in low-income households, compared with 16 per cent of all men. However, the gender gap in terms of income poverty is somewhat age-dependent. The gap is largest in the age groups 18-24 and 65 or over.³⁵ For the EU overall, income poverty rates are the same for men and women under the age of 18, with 21 per cent of each officially qualifying as poor. In most EU countries the income poverty rates are higher for young women under 18 years old than for young men in the same age category. As they get older, young women in the EU face a greater risk of descending into poverty than do young men; the poverty rate among 18- to 24-year-old men in this region is 22 per cent, and among women of the same age group, 26 per cent.

VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Girls have traditionally been perceived as less of a threat to social order, being less likely to get into trouble on the streets, less involved in crime, and subject to greater family control and authority at home. The involvement of girls in delinquency and crime, though still less than that of boys, appears to have increased, however. There is little information about the causes of girls' violence. Some studies show that there are significant differences between girls and boys with regard to displays of aggression and the perpetration of violent acts.³⁶ Nevertheless, in a number of areas girls and young women are increasingly engaging in the more "extreme" antisocial and criminal behaviour typically associated with young males. One example of this is girls joining violent street gangs. Finland's largest daily newspaper reported in August 2002 that youth violence in the city of Helsinki involved more girls than ever before.³⁷ There are girl gangs whose members beat up other girls and rob them of their mobile telephones and handbags, making them afraid to use the central railway station late in the evening. Some girls and young women, denied access to financial resources and forced into greater dependence on their families, may be involved in crime to gain access to consumer goods.

Violent girls and young women are more likely to come from troubled or violent families. They may have a negative view of femininity based on a low personal sense of self-worth—in some cases resulting from sexual abuse. A study of young African-American and Latino women incarcerated for serious offences identified additional factors that propelled them towards violence, including leaving home or being kicked out and spending a considerable amount of their free time without adult supervision.³⁸

For the most part, however, girls and young women are the victims of crime and violence. Violence against women cuts across all social and economic strata and is deeply embedded in cultures around the world. According to some researchers,³⁹ violence against females can even be classified as an ordinary part of life. *The State of World Population 2000*, a UNFPA report, reveals that at least 60 million girls who in ordinary circumstances would be expected to be alive are "missing" from various populations, mostly in Asia, as a result of sex-selective abortions, infanticide or neglect; and that domestic violence is widespread in most societies and is a frequent cause of suicide among women.⁴⁰ "Honour killings" take the lives of thousands of young women every year, mainly in Western Asia, North Africa and parts of South Asia.⁴¹

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are increasing, and young women tend to fall victim to intimate violence more often than do older women. A survey in the United Kingdom indicates that the possibility of sexual assault by a stranger is one of the chief concerns of 12- to 15-year-old girls.⁴² Young women are more likely than men to feel unsafe when out alone. Girls aged 14-15 years are often assaulted or harassed by older males.

One study about sexual violence against girls aged 10-20 years includes some observations regarding the circumstances under which girls and young women experience such violence.⁴³ For the victims covered by the study, 30 per cent of the sexual abusers were the girls' fathers, stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends, cousins or



brothers; familiar people such as friends, neighbours and co-workers carried out another 20 per cent of the sexual violence. Totally unknown attackers and strangers were the perpetrators in 24 per cent of the cases reviewed; this kind of sexual violence normally occurs in public places. In response to this “geography of fear”, girls and young women often avoid walking alone in secluded or low-traffic areas such as forests, parks and beaches.

Every seventh rape of a young girl is a group or gang rape. Girls who are still virgins are often violated in this manner. In many parts of Eastern Europe, gang rape has become a common way of exploiting young women.⁴⁴ Gang rape has also constituted one of the terrors of war around the world, and has been shown to have a very traumatic and isolating effect on the emotional lives of victims.

Sexual violence against girls and young women today incorporates some elements that are generally prevalent and others that are quite culturally specific. Of all the different kinds of sexual abuse, sexual violence inside the family appears to have the most damaging effect on the victim, and incest seems to be the most difficult experience to survive mentally. After being raped or abused within their own families, girls suffer from various sorts of fears, shame, guilt, nightmares, insomnia, anxiety and depression, which can result in suicide attempts or aggression and anger. Incest can also be a factor contributing to eating disorders and alcohol and drug abuse. Often the wounds inflicted by sexual violence lead to lifelong suffering.

A young rape victim is also at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS or other venereal diseases. The time spent waiting for the results of HIV tests is a very high-risk period in terms of suicide attempts. Becoming pregnant is yet another risk. Post-traumatic stress disorder can result from such an experience. Despite the seriousness of this type of violence and its consequences, many rapes, sexual assaults and cases of sexual harassment still go unreported because of the stigma and trauma associated with them and the lack of sympathetic treatment from legal systems; many girls and young women say nothing simply because they do not want their parents and others to find out about their degrading experience. Estimates of the proportion of rapes reported to authorities range from less than 3 per cent in South Africa to about 16 per cent in the United States.

EMPOWERMENT, ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Commercial sex, rather than being simply the free market decision of independent women to sell their favours, is a major source of further abuse. One estimate is that 2 million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 are introduced into the commercial sex market each year. Finnish studies show that, because of the growing sex trade, girls and young women are subjected to increased levels of sexual and verbal aggression.⁴⁶

The concept of empowerment emphasizes personal agency and human dignity in striving to take charge of one's own life, with the confidence that one has the knowledge and skills to achieve this objective, and to do so against a background of respect for differences and diversity.⁴⁷ For girls and young women, empowerment involves enabling them to address their own concerns and helping them to become more independent. Efforts to facilitate the empowerment of girls and young women at the global level must take into account both the informal cultural values and the official institutional cultures prevailing in each society, and the challenges confronting females in this context. Empowerment programmes can be very effective under the right circumstances and with the right kind of training and support.

Girls and young women in difficult circumstances can also be empowered. Various NGOs have helped girls and young women who have been forced into prostitution in Western Europe to become their own agents of change. Many of these young women are not citizens and are therefore denied a political voice, making them more vulnerable to different kinds of material and sexual exploitation.⁴⁸

The gender empowerment measure (GEM) gauges the relative extent to which women and men can and do take part in economic and political life. It measures gender inequality in key areas of economic and political participation and decision-making. More precisely, it tracks the percentages of women in leading positions in society and the gender disparity in economic independence as reflected in earning levels. The GEM standard is applied around the world and shows, for example, that the Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago are ahead of Italy and Japan in terms of gender equality. High income is thus not a prerequisite for creating opportunities for women. Much can be done simply to improve women's economic and political opportunities. In only eight countries do women hold 30 per cent or more of the seats in the national assembly, and in very few countries have there been simultaneous improvements in female secondary school enrolment percentages (rising to 95 per cent or more), in the female share of paid employment in industry and services (equal representation), and in their share of seats in parliament (39 per cent or more).⁴⁹

A study carried out in Finland indicates that, even in countries that have gone through long periods of modernization and acceptance of equal rights for both sexes, young women and young men still have different values and attitudes towards life and society.⁵⁰ Education has had some effect on the development of various youth perspectives and philosophies. The study found that a belief in the importance of gender equality in working life was reflected most strongly in the values of girls who had been to upper secondary school. They preferred a female employer or supervisor and felt



that going to work was just as important for a woman as it was for a man, as both needed to earn money and take care of the home and the family. They also thought there should be more women bosses in higher-level jobs, and felt it was very important to live according to one's conscience. They would not mind if their children went to school where half of the children were of another race. These girls were defined as "humanist-egalitarians" in terms of their attitudes and values.

"Traditionalist-conservative" values—opposed by the majority of urban girls—were found most frequently among secondary school boys. These values were reflected by the respondents' agreement with conservative statements such as "Couples who have children should not divorce", "Marriage is for life", and "Young people today don't respect traditional values enough." They supported the political position reflecting the conviction that "Our country needs strong leaders who can restore order and discipline and the respect for values."

"Environmentalist-greens" stressed ecological values and were mostly female upper secondary school students. In their opinion, economic growth and development should not be taken any further. Nuclear energy should be given up even if it brought about a decline in the standard of living. This group believed that the continued rise in economic well-being increased the incidence of mental illness and that science and technology were beginning to control people instead of serving them. They were willing to lower their standard of living to decrease pollution and environmental problems. They also believed that "Even young people can promote world peace by participating in peace work."

The study also identified a group with a new set of values: the "global-internationalists". Those espousing this value system thought that if more foreign people came to Finland such contact would be mutually beneficial. In their opinion it was not a privilege to be Finnish, and the idea that "East or West, home is best" was obsolete.

In terms of gender-based differences, girls valued humanism and equality more, while boys assigned greater value to technology and economic well-being. Secondary schoolgirls (especially those in urban settings) were more concerned about environmental issues, while urban secondary schoolboys in particular expressed more of an interest in science and technology than did their female counterparts. Urban vocational schoolgirls were the most politically passive. They had negative attitudes about traditional politics, citing "green" values as an alternative to technological and economic values. At the other end of the spectrum from the international globalists were the "racists", most of whom were boys who studied in vocational or business schools and colleges. The most humanistic values were found among secondary schoolgirls. In general, family values were more important to rural young people than to urban youth.

The girls participating in the Finnish study were not as engaged in party politics as were boys. For many of them politicians were "old men who lie to people". This critical stance taken by many girls heralds the birth of a new type of political culture. The girls in the study tended to profess attitudes that were more global than those held

by boys. They were more willing to increase aid to developing countries and to accept refugees, and they were also more critical than boys with respect to the capacity of science and technology to solve the problems of the modern era. Most, but not all, of the girls expressed humanistic values. The space within which girls can move has expanded, and it has provided them with the option of being either “soft” or “hard”. Girls’ perceptions of the world seem to be more varied and open than those of boys.

Several other studies have demonstrated that girls and boys perceive the world differently.⁵¹ The formation of both identity and perceptions occurs within, and is effected by, the gender framework. Many cultures regard “soft” values as being feminine. The different values associated with the gender stereotypes created by a patriarchal society are evident. School, peer groups and commercial mass-media entertainment convey sexual stereotypes that shape the viewpoints held by young people and manifest themselves in matters such as career choices.

The collective consciousness about such things as the kinds of role expectations directed towards women arises within a social context. The situations and experiences of mothers, sisters and girlfriends, for example, indirectly provide girls with information about the essence of being a woman and what that role entails in a particular cultural context. Various theories of cultural influence acknowledge the power of the media and their role in creating beliefs, attitudes and values according to which people interpret the world. Many of the differences in girls’ and boys’ values and attitudes are not attributable to biology. (The only personality difference that can be shown to have biological roots is perhaps the level of aggressive activity.) Parents and society tend to respond differently to girls than to boys. These and other factors related to the environment in which girls and young women live have to be considered. One explanation for the differences in male and female beliefs and perspectives relates to the divergent socialization of girls and boys, and another to gender roles and culture.

CONCLUSIONS

The issues addressed in this chapter include not only male-female dynamics and relationships involving sexuality and motherhood, but also education, work, empowerment, attitudes and values, inequalities, and the politics and economics of societies on a global level. The literature cited and data presented here display emerging contradictions between existing opportunities and the actual situations of girls and young women today. The various inequalities between girls and boys are not superficial problems that can be solved within the structures and forms of the family and professional spheres. These inequalities form part of the very fabric of societies and are reflected not only in cultural values, but also in the relationship between production and reproduction and between family responsibilities and wage labour. In such a context the contradictions between modernity and democracy within societies become more apparent. The equality of girls and boys cannot be achieved through reliance on institutional structures that are connected by design to inequality.

Modernization has greatly reduced gender inequalities. However, the situation of girls and young women in the family, educational and occupational spheres varies from one country to another, with the greatest differences seen between developed and developing countries. In modern and post-modern Western countries, young

single women are starting to form completely new types of social relationships, the repercussions of which cannot be predicted at present. For example, single mothers are not only divorced women who have unexpectedly ended up raising children without a man's assistance; a number of them have deliberately chosen the role of fatherless motherhood (some, for example, using an anonymous sperm donor). This and other developments are consequences of the modernization of societies.⁵²

In some parts of the world, improved educational opportunities for young women and an increased awareness of their position have built up expectations of greater equality and partnership in both professional and family life—which may be frustrated by encounters with the realities of the labour market and male behaviour. The contradictions between young women's expectations of equality and the reality of inequality may set the tone for future developments in gender politics. To solve the problems of gender inequality a general socio-theoretical understanding is needed. According to Ulrich Beck, gender characteristics are the basis of industrial society, and not some traditional relic that can easily be dispensed with.⁵³ The equalization of educational opportunities and new career motivations among young women reflect the achievement of a new, modern female status. This is leading towards new levels of individualization requiring young women to resolve the conflict between the often incompatible goals of occupational competitiveness and motherhood; however, they are well aware that they have more options and opportunities than their mothers did and do not wish to turn back the clock.

In developed countries, a person's sex has less significance in determining his or her life course and lifestyle than it does in developing societies that are in the early stages of industrialization. The legacy of the separation of private and public spheres persists for many girls and young women from traditional and developing societies, especially for those in the less educated segments of society and members of disadvantaged ethnic/racial groups. Even though the overall education of girls and young women has improved, young women of lower socio-economic status or of particular ethnic-minority origins still tend to have very limited possibilities.⁵⁴

Gender inequality undermines development and prospects for reducing poverty, while economic growth and rising incomes reduce inequality. Studies show that societies in which discrimination is greatest have more poverty, slower economic growth and a lower quality of life than do societies with less discrimination. The effects are strongest in some developing countries. Ensuring that girls and young women enjoy the same rights as boys and young men and have equal access to education, jobs, property and credit and equal opportunities for participation in public life reduces child mortality, improves public health, slows population growth and strengthens overall economic growth. Education, in particular that of young women, has a greater impact on infant and child mortality than the combined effects of higher income, improved sanitation and modern-sector employment. This is true in all countries, but particularly in developing countries. Girls' school attendance in comparison with that of boys is best where both incomes and gender equality are relatively high, and worst in areas in which either equality or incomes are relatively low. Educating girls is one of the most effective ways to promote economic and cultural development.

As incomes rise, previously poor families increase their spending on children's education, health care and nutrition, contributing to greater improvement in the relative position of girls. Similarly, development that creates new job opportunities often benefits women more than men. It is remarkable that in developing countries even improvements in the infrastructure for water, energy and transportation can effect a reduction in gender inequality, as such changes can reduce the time women have to spend fetching water, gathering cooking fuel and producing food for family consumption, giving them more time to earn additional income and participate in community affairs.

The literature and data presented here raise a question: Are girls and young women equally liberated from their gender fate—the traditional traits ascribed to femininity? Population data show an increasing life expectancy for females, which is leading to a demographic liberation of women. Many girls and young women will live beyond the family and childcaring phase of their lives. Post-parental relationships are becoming nearly universal. Even if motherhood is still the strongest tie to the traditional female role, contraceptives, family planning and the legal possibility of terminating pregnancies are freeing girls and young women from the inevitability of taking on this role. In contexts in which these options are available, children and motherhood are no longer the natural fate of a woman. Data show that motherhood without economic dependence is not possible for most young women at the global level (those living in, for example, Scandinavian welfare states would constitute an exception). However, more and more young women can decide when to have children and how many they want to have.

In terms of general health, more reliable international data are needed before anyone can speculate as to the major indicators of health inequalities for girls and young women on a global level. The world is witnessing significant changes, many of which are increasing the level of vulnerability among girls and young women. Depression, eating disorders, suicide attempts and other psychological problems have all become more common in developed countries, threatening girls and young women who are in the process of establishing adult female identities. Girls and young women in developing countries are vulnerable to the health risks that emerge in connection with inadequate food and medical services. Several indicators show that adolescent mothers face greater pregnancy-related health risks and will have more children than those who begin childbearing later.

Many adolescent girls and young women continue to face gender-based stereotyping that often has deep historical and cultural roots. While girls are traditionally believed to pose less of a threat to social order than boys (less likely to get into trouble on the streets or become involved in crime, and more amenable to family authority at home), in many cultures boys have been—and frequently still are—valued more highly than girls from birth.

Gender-based stereotyping and overt and disguised forms of discrimination combine to create risks to the health and well-being of girls and young women that are greater than those faced by boys and young men. In addition to the consequences of

early pregnancy and childbirth, females suffer higher rates of accidental death, suicide, victimization by violent crime, STD infection and mental disorders. Female infanticide, inadequate provision of food and medical care, physical abuse, genital mutilation and forced sex threaten the lives of many girls. Violence against women, including young women, cuts across all social and economic strata and is deeply embedded in cultures around the world.

The right of children to be safe and secure must be guaranteed in all societies. Proper child protection services should be established and maintained everywhere. All over the world, steps need to be taken to improve the training and supervision of those working with children (such as educators and health-care workers) to teach them how to recognize when young people, particularly girls, are at risk or have been abused, and how to protect and/or care for them accordingly.

As a result of concerted efforts, enrolment at all levels of education has generally improved for girls and young women, and the gender gap in schooling has been reduced in most regions of the world. Nevertheless, the gap remains wide in many countries, and gender-based stereotyping and discrimination continue to affect educational attainment. Many individual young women who have completed higher levels of education have increased their earning potential—a positive outcome of the narrowing of the gender gap in education. There is still ample evidence, however, that many women do not receive the same remuneration for work that is equal to that of their male colleagues.

The universal human rights principles adopted by the international community have set the norm for equality, requiring that girls and women be seen as unique individuals with rights and responsibilities similar to those of boys and men. ■

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- ¹⁸ UNFPA, *Population Issues Briefing Kit 2001...*, p. 9; for more information on the subject, see chapter 13 of the present publication.
- ¹⁹ For more information, see chapter 1 of the present publication.
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