

Report of online discussion

The Girl Child

Organized by UNICEF

16 December 2009 – 28 February 2010

The discussion on the "Girl Child" was part of a series of United Nations online discussions dedicated to the fifteen-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000); and was coordinated by WomenWatch, an inter-agency project of the United Nations Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality and an unique electronic gateway to web-based information on all United Nations entities' work and the outcomes of the United Nations' intergovernmental processes for the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. For more information and other "Beijing at 15" online discussions, visit <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/beijing15/>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report reflect the opinions of participants to the online discussion and not the official views of the United Nations

Beijing at 15 *online discussions*

GENDER EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE



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YOUNG VOICES ON GIRLS AND GENDER EQUALITY

Ahead of the fifteen-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UNICEF and WomenWatch organized a consultation on Section L about the Girl Child. A special effort was made to reach children and young people in rural areas through surveys and focus group discussions, and overall more than 100 people participated. Their key messages are presented below:

KEY MESSAGES

Girls still lack the right to make decisions about their own lives. Although more girls have right to access they still don't have equal opportunity.



"Girls in Scotland share the same rights as boys but there is hidden discrimination across society, particularly in the work place. This affects equal opportunities for the sexes and in workplace pay there are double standards, where women expect less than men." – Boy, 17, United Kingdom

Discriminatory norms and perceptions against girls persist. Tradition and culture are still the key obstacles to realizing girls' rights and reinforce the lower status of girls in societies around the world.



"From the moment we are born, we live up to the idea that men are superior over women. In our homes, patriarchy is always present. With this it is hard to go against our culture, our own ways in which we have been accustomed to." – Girl, 17, Philippines



"The key obstacle is the thought. In my homeland I feel that girls are treated as...they never believe that girls can do better than boys in school...they think girls [will] always be worse than boys." – Young woman, 19, China

Girls' education is key to girls' empowerment.

Educating girls allows them to claim their rights today, and prepares them for the future to assume full responsibilities as duty bearers for the next generation.



"Scholarships should be offered to girls to ease their scholar plans, more emphasis should be laid on promotion of girls' rights which should be introduced at all levels of education to ease understanding at all stages." - Young woman, 19, Cameroon

Policies and laws relating to girls' rights are not enforced and implemented. National laws and policies don't reach the grass root level, and there are no consequences for those who violate rights.



"We are not informed about what [leaders] are doing. Don't perceive any sign of change" – Young woman, 19, Togo



"[Global] policies do not matter actually, because the gap between policy formulation and implementation is very wide due to no action plan, lack of education, feudal system, conservative mindsets and a majority does not even know that any policies exist. Measures must be taken to fill these gaps." – Young woman, 22, Pakistan

Girls' rights are typically the first to be denied during times of economic crises.

Economic hardships often leave girls and families with little or no choice to focus on survival and less on upholding girls' rights.



"Economic crisis is most threatening to girls' rights because, as what I have observed in our community oftentimes, it is the girl who is asked to sacrifice her education when the family faces a financial problem." – Young woman, 19, Philippines

Those most central to girls' rights are too often unaware of the implications of discrimination against girls. Parents, community and religious leaders have a critical role to play in leading the way for girls, as advocates for their rights.



"I believe that laws can be set as much as we want, but the most important thing would be to change the mindsets of people." – Young woman, age unknown, Mauritius



"Ensure community law enforcers are educated on human rights of girls because they are the problem solvers at the grassroots level." – Young man, 21, Kenya

CONSULTATION SUMMARY

The discussions revolved around 5 questions on progress, impact, obstacles, new threats and recommendations on girls' rights:

GIRLS' RIGHTS TODAY



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Q1. Which rights do girls have? Which rights are denied? How do these rights shape girls' lives today and their hopes for the future?

Participants agreed that girls' rights are **increasingly recognized** around the world, but that there is still a long way to go before there is **equality of opportunities**. They have seen concrete improvements in:

- The **right to education** – more girls are going to school
- The **right to expression** – more girls are allowed to express themselves freely



"Girls have place [as leaders], in study, have priority in community. The right [that] shapes them is the right [to education]." - Girl, 15, Rwanda

However, many rights are still **denied or not granted in full**. Participants mention:

- The **right to participate** – girls and women hold few important leadership positions, both in their communities and in their countries
- The **right to make decisions about their own life** – although more girls are going to school, they are often not free to choose their field of study or work
- The **right to free movement** – girls are often not allowed to move

freely in their communities, most often due to safety constraints

- The **right to inheritance** – it is mostly boys who inherit property and family possessions



"The girls go to school, get married and raise children" – Girl, 14, Zimbabwe



"One of the communities confirms that most of the speaking, expression of ideas, etc. in their youth meeting is normally done or dominated by male youth. The female youth are not prohibited to talk but it is because of their traditional upbringing, where women are not allowed to talk or express opinions during island meeting." – Focus group report, Tuvalu

While not everyone perceived that rights have an impact on their lives, many mentioned that:

- Knowing about rights is **empowering** and gives **confidence**
- Girls today are more **independent**
- Trying to claim their rights can create **clashes with parents and community leaders**



"Girls have the right to have big positions like Presidents." - Group of girls and boys, 11-14 years old, Ghana



"...a girl about to go to college and wants to take a certain course socially believed to be for men alone, parents limit their daughter's future plans according to social beliefs on degree programs that accounts only to men." – Girl, 17, Philippines

GLOBAL POLICY IMPACT

Q2. Do you believe that declarations and global policies actually have an impact on girls' lives? If so, in what way? If not, what needs to happen to ensure they have an impact?

Participants were divided on this question, with some seeing both direct and indirect impacts of global policies:

- **Greater awareness of rights** – both children and adults know more about their rights and responsibilities
- **More organizations providing services** – it is easier to access child-friendly information and services



"Yes. In every localities with radio programs we girls are hearing about our rights so we are fighting for it" – Young woman, 21, Togo



"Global laws and policies that address this are extremely important for bringing a second point of view to people who otherwise would not have thought about it." – Young man, 19, Venezuela



"Yes. We have seen a reduction of female genital cutting and early pregnancy in the community" – Young woman, 20, Kenya



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Other participants are skeptical about the impact of global policies:

- **People are not aware** – the information about rights does not reach the most marginalized communities and remote areas
- **Policies are not enforced or implemented** – there is still too much impunity and no consequences for those that violate rights, both at the country and individual level



“No, I think the governments should be serious on every goal they declare on girls and also provide all the materials they need.” - Group of girls and boys, 11-14 years old, Ghana

KEY OBSTACLES



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Q3. What are the key obstacles which continue to impede the realization of girls' rights?

Many issues were brought up as obstacles to girls' rights, and most revolved around the **mindsets and attitudes** of duty-bearers and the environment in which girls live:

- **Tradition and culture** – overwhelmingly, participants felt that traditional and cultural attitudes towards girls and women were the biggest obstacle
- **Role of parents** – among duty-bearers, parents were most often mentioned as impeding their daughters' ability to claim their rights
- **Poverty** – economic hardships often leave girls and families with

little or no choice but to focus on survival, and less on upholding, girls' rights

- **Violence and conflict** – in conflict situations, girls' rights get little attention and are continuously violated



“We should go to our village to sensitize our parents.” – Young woman, 21, Togo



“Many girls are locked in their houses thus they don't know their rights.” – Boy, 15, Kenya

NEW THREATS

Q4. In the world today, what do you feel are the most significant new threats (such as climate change, food insecurity and economic crises) to girls' rights, and why?

Many participants noted that they didn't see any connections between “global politics and economics” and their rights. However, some noted the links with:

- **Economic crisis** – unemployment among parents is often the key obstacle to girls being able to go to school
- **Climate change** – droughts, hurricanes and floods can have a devastating impact on communities, but is not viewed as a specific threat to *girls'* rights
- **HIV and AIDS** – girls are especially affected by HIV and AIDS and often have to become caregivers for the family



“Most girls turn to sell their rights themselves because of economic crises” – Young woman, 19, Cameroon



“They should find a work for those parents who are not working so that, they can send them to school. So if they do that the girls will get their right.” - Group of girls and boys, 11-14 years old, Ghana

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE



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Q5. What future actions do you recommend should be taken by the world community to prioritize and invest in girls' rights?

The most common suggestions related to **awareness** and **education**, often with a specific focus on reaching duty-bearers:

- **Right to education** – girls' rights should be included in school curricula at all levels, and there should be more scholarships for girls so they can go to school even if their parents cannot support them
- **Empowerment campaigns** – media and cultural activities can be used to raise awareness about rights and build confidence among girls themselves
- **Awareness-of impacts of rights violations** – parents and community and religious leaders need to be educated about the rights of girls and made aware of the impacts of rights violations



“Teach all girls their right, create many NGOs help girls and support their problem. Increase levels of women's active engagement, decision making of women who have capacity.” – Girl, 15, Rwanda

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ABOUT THE CONSULTATION

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UNICEF Voices of Youth, in partnership with the UNICEF Gender and Rights Unit, organized an online discussion on the Girl Child to allow children and young people voice their opinions and contribute to the review process at the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2010 in New York. The consultation started in December 2009 and finished in February 2010. In addition to the online discussion, several focus group discussions and surveys were done by UNICEF Rural Voices of Youth National Focal Points in 11 countries, where more than 100 children and young people in rural areas discussed the rights of girls. These contributions were also posted on the online discussion forum. For details, please visit:

<http://www.unicef.org/voy/discussions/showthread.php?t=11751>



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ABOUT VOICES OF YOUTH

Voices of Youth (VOY) is an Internet site created by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for young people who want to know more, do more and say more about the world. It's about linking children and adolescents in different countries to explore, speak out and take action on global issues that are important to them and to creating a world fit for children.

ABOUT RURAL VOICES OF YOUTH

Rural Voices of Youth (RVOY) is a Voices of Youth (VOY) initiative launched by a group of young people in Nigeria in 2005. RVOY has the objective of linking young people from rural areas and the hard to reach in different countries, who do not have access to the internet, to explore, speak out and take action on global issues that are important to them in order to create a world fit for children.

We would like to acknowledge as well as thank the following team of young people who are UNICEF Rural Voices of Youth's National Focal Points, who worked with VOY in organizing the consultation with rural youths, the hard to reach and those without internet access.

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TOGETHER, LET'S TURN YOUNG PEOPLE'S IDEAS INTO ACTIONS, AND NOT JUST WORDS.

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