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*Violence and discrimination*  
*Voices of young people: Girls about girls*

Prepared by  
**UNICEF**

# Violence and Discrimination

## Voices of Young People: Girls about Girls



**The Expert Group Meeting on the Elimination of all Forms of  
Discrimination and Violence against the Girl Child**

**Florence, 25-28 September 2006**

## Introduction

Violence against girls and women is pervasive. The recent studies by the UN Secretary General on violence against women and violence against children have revealed alarming levels of gender-based violence across the world. In the household, at school, in the workplace or the community, girls and women experience physical, sexual and psychosocial violence on a regular basis.

Eliminating violence and discrimination against girls is a critical development challenge. While studies and analyses raise key themes and produce important insights, formulating recommendations requires understanding the impact of violence from the perspective of young people, girls in particular.

Over the years, the participation of young people in development debates has struck a cord among UN agencies, international organizations, and development practitioners. Children's participation can be instrumental in improving a programme's effectiveness, while also empowering young people to take actions that will improve their lives.<sup>1</sup> UNICEF is convinced that, like other initiatives affecting young people, the elimination of violence and discrimination against the girl child can only be achieved if young people are made partners in the process. For this reason, their voices must not just be heard but also be listened to; their perceptions and ideas must become part of decision-making process.

Although young people are absent from the Expert's Group Meeting (EGM) on eliminating discrimination and violence of the girl child, UNICEF is committed to including their voices in another way. Drawing from multiple sources, this paper presents the voices of girls [and boys] on how violence and discrimination affect their lives. The paper goes even farther by presenting young

people's ideas about how to end discrimination and violence against the girl child. Many of these voices are drawn from *Voices of Youth (VOY)*, UNICEF's website dedicated to the promotion of youth rights ([www.unicef.org/voy](http://www.unicef.org/voy)).<sup>2</sup> Other voices come from additional sources, primarily documents which capture the stories of young people involved in particular projects or other activities that address key issues related to violence and discrimination against girls.

This briefing is not meant to be an analytic or technical paper or to advocate for specific recommendations. Its aim is to share with you the perspective and opinions of children and young people on the issues of violence and discrimination against girls to help enrich our work here.

Four main conceptual issues were identified to frame the EGM's discussion:

- Protection
- Vulnerable situations
- Empowerment
- Institutional arrangements

The following sections present young people's ideas on these issues, primarily the first three. In some cases, their thoughts and views may go beyond the confines of these terms but are included because their relevance to the broader discussion of the task at hand.

## Discrimination

Young people see that girls are treated differently, and that this discrimination on the basis of gender restricts girls' access to education, health and other services.

Some, like one 22-year-old female youth from India, see discrimination being directly tied to violence: “[P]ersistent gender discrimination and inequality towards a girl child [are] manifested in the form of heinous practices like female infanticide and

*feticide, genital mutilation, domestic abuse, incest, sexual exploitation, non-accessibility of primary education and child labor. . .”*

Others see discrimination against girls in the day-to-day choices made by families. As one 20-year-old female youth from the Republic of Korea describes, “[i]n a number of countries, girls are given less food than boy. Girls may also be given poorer quality food than their brothers. And because girls may receive less medical care than boys, girl’s undernutrition may go undetected, leading to serious health problems. . .”

As a 15-year-old Turkish girl points out, such choices are made by adults who do not fully appreciate girls’ potential: “I never ever understand why boys and girls are not equal to each other. In rural areas elders think that girls are born to give birth and to marry and for cleaning the house. Girls who live in rural areas ... are not sent to schools. Their parents are not aware of the changing world yet.”

Girls consider that they undertake on a large share of domestic work compared to their brothers. A 10-year-old girl from Ethiopia who cares for her HIV-positive mother says, “I am the one who does all the housework. . . I do the cooking and take care of the household items. [My brother] just eats and goes outside to play.”

Girls and boys in Latin America pointed out that the prevalent ‘macho’ culture which makes girls and women inferior makes girls in particular vulnerable to violence: “In the street they harass girls, the drunk guys say things. . . abuse them sexually. . . , violate them.”

As described in the Panel opposite, the expectation that girls must fulfil this domestic role is often reinforced by the traditions within their own families and community. At the same time, in some countries young people seem to believe that discrimination against girls is lessening. A 16-year-old girl from Uganda says, “[i]t’s true that in most parts of the world and especially in developing countries, girls

*have less access to education and in other cases no education at all. It [is because] the role of women is considered unproductive. Many years ago here in Uganda, the girl’s education was only a preparation for marriage and was non-formal. Today, however, the trend is rapidly changing.”*

### **A girl’s work**

*“My initiation into household chores started swiftly and firmly. With my tiny hands I learned to wring water out of the baby’s clothes. My soft back learned to bend and clean the yard. I learned to boil water for tea on a wooden stove in the kitchen. While I learned all this, my brother left me each day for their play. They were never asked to stay at home by my grannies. Come to think of it, the grannies weren’t happy when my brother came back home early.*

*During my grannies’ three-month visit, I never went out to hunt birds or play monkeys with my brother. After they left the pattern was established. I was now the sister with home responsibilities, which I was expected to carry out without questioning. I would never play with my brothers again.”*

- Mercy Shuma-Iwisi, aged 6, Tanzania, in “Surprises from Granny”, UNICEF, 2001.

One of the avenues for eliminating discrimination that young people, especially girls, strongly advocate is education for girls. A quotation from a 21-year-old female youth from Nigeria eloquently encapsulates their view: “Educate the girl child today and liberate them from the bondage of discrimination in our societies. Education is freedom.”

Young people have pointed to the need for governments to spend more on education. Yet as one 21-year-old female Indian youth points out, efforts need to target girls specifically: “There are lots of children working in unorganized industry sectors to earn only to eat a day’s meal. They do not know how to read and write.

*Providing midday meals, employment and free education to children is being discussed at a variety of levels. But for whom? For those boys who work as chainvallas along roadsides, or those who work in the carpet industry? [And what about the] girls who work as maids in Indian households?"*

## Protection

Young people see that girls need to be better protected from the violence they face in schools as well as the sexual, physical and emotional abuse in their homes and communities. The lack of safety and support in communities, within families and by governments for girls suffering violations of their rights to protection increases their vulnerability to violence.

A 16-year-old girl from India describes how violence against girls has become the norm: *"[v]iolence against children, especially girls, has crossed all limits. Every day in almost every part of India a girl is raped in public transport, or one is molested at malls & market places in front of people who remain silent and do nothing. Even the police constables abuse and insult the victims and their families.*

*People feel that a girl is meant to be used - either as a doormat, a maid, a birth-giving machine or as a source of physical pleasure. Something concrete seriously needs to be done to change the current scenario because now a girl does not feel safe even in her own house, let alone the streets."*

Not even schools are safe spaces for girls, according to one 21-year-old female youth from Thailand: *"It is in school where Thai girls are seduced by local Thai boys, who have sex with them, then get them pregnant. Once pregnant, the girl will be forced to drop out of school, and [no one does] anything.... The thousands of girls who get pregnant at such an early age ... will be stuck with a baby, no job, and no father to help out. So what will they do?"*

One young girl in Latin America described how teachers commit violence against girls:

*"The teachers bring things for the adolescent girls and tell them lies, they say that they are going to eat at home and take them to their houses where they can abuse them, or rather, abuse them sexually and they can be traumatized."* A group of indigenous girls from Latin America said that teachers would lock adolescent girls in the bathroom and try to abuse them sexually, threatening them with lower grades if they refused.

Who do many young people see as responsible for protecting girls? Primarily families but also governments, schools and the community.<sup>3</sup>

Young people also recognize other forms of violence against girls which stem from harmful traditional practices. For instance, girls are married without any say and even violently "abducted" into marriage in some settings (see Panel on this page). They may undergo female genital mutilation/cutting without any choice or understanding of its potential impact on their lives.

## Marriage by abduction

"Marriage by abduction" is a harmful traditional practice in Ethiopia that happens in nearly 70 per cent of the country. In cases where families do not have enough money to pay dowries, some will resort to kidnapping girls and forcing them to marry their sons.

One 13-year old girl who is fighting her attacker in court shares her story which began as she was washing clothes with a friend by the river.

*"I ran to my friend and then they came and pulled her to the ground. They gagged my friend so she couldn't scream. . . Two of them held her and the other three dragged me away. They took me to a house at sunset and after three hours they took me a long distance. When I tried to sit, they beat me...After a week, I lost my virginity."*

She pretended to be sick and was eventually returned to her family. Her attacker's family and her own reached some sort of agreement to

return her, but she would not go because she wanted to stay and study in school to become a secretary.

*“I don’t feel ashamed. I want there to be strong measures taken, and he should be punished. Our traditions, customs and norms support the men – this is my personal opinion. I hope it will change and make both boys and girls equal.”*

Excerpt from UNICEF-Ethiopia Country Report, December 11<sup>th</sup> 2004

As one girl’s experience shows from Sri Lanka, some girls have taken a stand themselves against child marriage: *“Every girl child in some corner cries in silence because of marriage in early ages. You may not be among those who cry for freedom, those who wish to study further but are forced to marry an old ugly man for money. But I have seen and faced forced marriage, and I understand how horrible it is. I escaped a forced marriage, because I always went against my parents and society. Sometimes you just need to stand on your own.”*

In terms of other ways girls are harmed by traditional practices, one 19-year-old boy in Ethiopia feels that boys and girls have to work together to stop female genital cutting: *“in my country female circumcision is completely terrible. Especially where women [are] sewing the vagina. [Girls] suffer a lot. During menstruation period the pain is sorrowful. We have to fight together this shameful act.”*

Moreover, violence against girls is perpetuated not only when they lack protection but also when girls do not speak out because they feel ashamed or are afraid of accusing their violators. The lack of safe spaces and opportunities to share their experiences makes girls even more vulnerable to suffering acts of violence and the harmful traumas that result as one girl’s story (see Panel opposite).

Protecting girls is further complicated by poverty, which many young people view as a

contributing factor to violence against children. As a 21-year-old Ghanaian girl says, *“Parents send their girls to have sex with older men for a fee...because they don’t have money.”*

A 17-year-old girl from Sierra Leone shares her own experience as a poor girl with few opportunities, *“I [went] out to the street to be a prostitute to get money... just to get money to eat and to give to my parents.”*

## Vulnerable situations

Girls in especially vulnerable situations such as those living on the streets, orphaned or made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS or exposed to conflict and war need special protection from violence and discrimination. Young people see this as an important priority. As one 19-year-old girl from the United Arab Emirates describes, *“[a]bandoned and destitute...children devoid of all the basic necessities in life are taken advantage of... they are exploited at the hands of people in numerous ways leaving them scared, helpless and vulnerable. The most heinous facet of child trafficking is forcing children into prostitution and using them as pornographic material...”*

## Violence condoned through silence

Girls often fall victim to violence within their communities. In many cases, the community leaders fail to hold attackers accountable for their crimes, and, in effect, tolerate violence against girls and young women. This was the case with one 9-year-old girl from southern Africa who was raped when on her way home from school, she took a ride from a man to escape the rain.

*“What transpired after that shall remain forever inscribed in my mind. The two textbooks that my grandmother had bought me after saving money for a very long time were covered in blood. I was bloodied and aching all over. Then he was ordering me out of the truck. I jumped into the mud and my school bag landed with a thud at my feet as he threw it after me. The truck roared to life and he was off without a glance at me. I*

*was shaking from cold and anger. I wished I could kill him. In the weeks that followed I had many nightmares about the incident. I found myself hating all men, including those male teachers I had used to admire so much. I found I could not longer concentrate on any task. I felt dirty all the time and could still smell my rapist on me.*

*I did not want my grandmother ever to find out about it, as it would have badly distressed her. A lady teacher who liked me noticed the change in my behavior and arranged for a medical examination. The result of the examination shocked me more than the rape itself. Not only was I pregnant but I had also been infected with HIV. This is the sad story of my life."*

*- Duma Marivate, 9-year-old girl in "Too Poor for Safety", UNICEF, 2001*

Girls who live away from their families working as domestic workers or even working on the street are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. One 18-year-old girl working as a nanny in Ethiopia recalls being raped by her employer: *"His wife was out for a traditional funeral...He got me, and threw me on the bed. When my stomach got bigger and bigger, they kicked me out, and I ended up on the street."*

Both girls and boys recognize that discrimination and violence against girls increases their risk of becoming HIV-positive. Harmful traditional practices and entrenched gender norms are seen as contributing to the spread of the pandemic. As one 21-year-old male youth from Malawi says, *"There are many factors that accelerate the spread of the pandemic amongst the youths in Malawi. These include traditional or cultural practices such as chokolo [wife inheritance], fisi [the practice of a man coming to sexually initiate a young girl after her first menstruation], kulowa kufa [cleansing rituals] and kuchotsa fumbi [an initiation ceremony that may include unprotected inter-generational sex], just to mention a few."* To change this, he says *"the best way to protect girls from being infected with HIV/AIDS is to first civic educate local*

*communities on the dangers of continuing with cultural rites that promote the spread of the pandemic."*

A 20-year-old female youth from Zimbabwe feels outrage at the spread of HIV among girls, whose risk increases with poverty: *"The issue of HIV and AIDS is of great concern in most third world countries like Zimbabwe; almost everyone including the president has been affected by the pandemic...What worries me most is that the worst affected are young girls...Older men take advantage of their weak economic position. Older men should leave younger girls alone!! They are not virus dumps!! If they really want to help, they can pay school fees, buy clothing, buy food, etc., without asking for any sexual favors in return!"*

So what do young people see as a way to counter girls' vulnerability to the spread of HIV/AIDS? Information and education about HIV directed at adolescent girls is cited by one 21-year-old female youth from India: *"Adolescent girls from poor families should be provided with adequate information regarding nutrition, sex and reproductive health, and most importantly, sexually transmitted diseases. The number of women with alarmingly high percentages of AIDS around the globe is an indicator of the lack of this awareness."*

In addition to education and information about prevention, girls also need access to services specifically geared towards them so they can receive counselling and testing. They also need to develop skills to negotiate if and under what terms they have sexual relations. Boys and girls alike need to be part of this process: As one 21-year-old male youth from Nigeria says, *"...in the issue of deciding whether to use condom or not she didn't not to prove being wicked or risk heartbreak that is why she reluctantly agreed. We should all consider girls are equal and their rights should be respected and opinions considered."*

Girls see children and young people as key actors in diminishing the spread of HIV. As one 16-year-old from Uganda says, *"We young people can also act as voluntary workers and be willing*

*to educate our people about AIDS. In societies where it is considered taboo to talk about AIDS we can team up with other organizations at work. This might sound difficult, and I know it is, but the motto is, 'never give up.'*"

Situations of conflict and war make girls, adolescent girls in particular, especially vulnerable to being sexually assaulted, raped, recruited into armed forces, trafficked, or being infected with HIV/AIDS in the context of conflict. A 19-year-old girl from northern Uganda expresses her own harsh experience with war, *"a soldier came well-armed at the door calling, 'Everybody out!' Then they picked [me]. Being new in the field [I] refused, but the second night they said 'Either you give in or death.' I still tried to refuse. There the man got serious and knifed me on the head. I became helpless and started bleeding terribly, and that was how I got involved into sex at the age of 14, because death was near."*

Many girls have been victims of sexual violence in times of war and conflict. One such story is told by a girl from the Democratic Republic of Congo in the Panel opposite. But even girls as well as boys are coerced into combat and supporting services for armed groups, they are often overlooked by demobilization and reintegration programs and therefore do not always receive the type of support (material or emotional) that boys may receive. However, as former boy soldiers reported in the Congo, 30-40 per cent of military camps are made up of girls.<sup>4</sup> Girls are often the most in need to receive support when they return home since many may have become pregnant or had children while with armed groups, and may face rejection as from their families and communities. Furthermore, even when not directly involved in fighting forces, conflict situations also contribute to girls' vulnerability by thrusting them into roles such as primary caregivers to younger siblings, and heads of households. The economic dislocation and destitution that orphaning or separation from parents may bring can even force them into prostitution.

Often overlooked, disabled children, particularly girls, are another group that is especially vulnerable to violence and discrimination. One 17-year-old girl expressed this in the following way: *"Out of all the children, disabled children [find it] especially hard to express their opinions about abuse or violence. Many of them are kept in their homes. I think abusing disabled children is one of the cruelest actions that humans can do because they are one of the weakest people."*

## Empowerment

Young people believe that greater access to education and information, essential services and opportunities to participate are critical to end violence and discrimination against girls.

### Sexual violence in conflict and war

One 17-year-old girl from the Democratic Republic of Congo describes her harsh experience with conflict that begins with six armed men breaking into her home and shooting her father in front of the entire family:

*"The men then grabbed my older brother and me by the arm and forced us out of the house. We walked a little way and then they pushed me into the forest. They forced me to have sex with them many times. I felt like I was watching from the outside. Like I was watching a bad film. Then I don't remember anything. For the next three months I was held as their prisoner at their military camp. During that whole time, I felt I was going crazy. I was like a person unconscious. I was alive but not living. Every day they raped me. I stayed there for a long time-more than one year. I was like a dead person."*

*In my mind I could not forgive those men for what they did and I couldn't love their baby. But I have talked with the counselors a lot and now I believe that I must forgive them so that I can free myself, and I know that my baby is innocent and has done nothing wrong and will need me when*

*it is born. I still cry a lot, but I feel a bit batter and I don't want to be sad -- it's not good for my baby. I need to be strong. This is how our life is.*

*Before this all happened, I was in school and I wanted to become a journalist. My father told me it was a good job because you can learn lots of things and you can tell people things that help them. I still want to be a journalist when I am through all of this."*

- Excerpt from "Moving Beyond Sexual Violence", UNICEF, 2005.

For instance, training opportunities for adolescent girls can help give girls the power to challenge child marriage. As one adolescent girl from Bangladesh says, "I stopped my marriage, which my father wanted to arrange with dowry. . . My education was stopped. At that time, I joined [the livelihoods] course and I got a chance to receive training on photography. After a few days my parents told me that they were arranging my marriage, and would pay 10 thousand to take as dowry. I tried to convince them that when I complete my training, then I will be able to learn, I'll be empowered and then dowry would not be necessary during my marriage. My parents understood and stopped the arrangement. Now I've started my own business and I've promised not to marry with dowry."

Opportunities to talk and interact with other young people can help girls especially to overcome trauma and stress that may stand in the way of them taking greater control over their lives. For instance, as one 16-year-old girl from Northern Uganda says: "Just being able to speak to other girls about our problems is a major impact of our work because girls here are taught to be very quiet, even though our needs are great."

Activities that help build girls' skills and engage them in active participation in the learning process better equips them to deal with abuse and exploitation and cope with harmful and vulnerable situations. One 17-year-old girl in India who had dropped out of school and was planning to get married

described her experience in one non-formal education programme aimed at out-of school and married girls as enjoyable and fun: "Learning was no longer a chore. I met other girls of my age." Such non-formal education programmes can be important not only for giving girls a "second chance" to learn basic skills and build life skills but also to reclaim their childhood. As the girl continues, "My didi (teacher) was very supportive and loving. She played with us and also taught us. There were drawing and games session and not just learning boring lessons."

Young people also consider that partnerships between girls and boys can provide an important avenue for empowering young people to end discrimination against girls. In Bangladesh, one adolescent boy involved in a project that educates young people about child marriage recalls helping to convince a girl's family to not force her to marry, "We, boys in a group, also went to her father, but he did not listen to our request. Then 'apa' went again and told him that if he did not stop Rupa's marriage, 'apa' would call police, as child marriage is a crime. Then finally Rupa's father agreed to stop the arrangement...Now Rupa is with us and she is studying." In other cases, boys and girls together have formed a powerful lobby group to convince parents not to agree to child marriage for their girls.

Places that are friendly and inviting to young people are also key avenues for empowering girls to protect themselves against violence and abuse. One 18-year-old girl in Mozambique describes her experience at a local hospital when she feared she was pregnant: "I explained the situation to the doctor, but she immediately started criticizing me. . .and told me I was irresponsible and that I shouldn't be having sexual relations. . .I left without even getting a pregnancy test." Her experience was much different when a friend convinced her to go to a "youth-friendly" health center, where health professionals are trained to be supportive and encouraging to young people. "The nurse was

*very nice. . .she listened to me and wasn't critical. . .I came in so scared, but was much calmer and less worried when I left."* Her words show the difference that a supportive environment can make in giving girls and young women confidence and addressing the stigma associated with many violations of their rights to protection from violence, abuse and exploitation...

Adults need to see that, with support and opportunities, children and young people have the capacities to be not only recipients but also partners in the process of ending discrimination and violence against girls and women. For one 13-year-old girl from Bangladesh, her experience as a peer educator has given her the power to promote change in her community and gain respect: *"Before working as a Peer Educator I was never allowed to talk in front of adults. Now I am getting the chance and the courage to talk in my family and community. When I share the information I learned from my course, people not only listen to me but they respect me."* To do so, young people recognize the need for governments and other responsible adults, including parents and guardians, to promote protective spaces for young people to participate and create opportunities for them to act for themselves.

## The way forward

As described above, young people see what happens to girls in the face of violence and discrimination. But they also suggest ways to change how girls are treated and see themselves as vital part of the process. UNICEF believes that their participation is imperative if violence and discrimination against girls and young women are to become history. Their views can help us adults better understand the complex nature of how violence and discrimination affect girls, provide new insights into addressing these conditions, and contribute to the

development of practical and relevant programming and policy recommendations. Their participation also helps to equip young people to deal with violence and abuse. In our discussion and debates on ways to end violence against women and children, thinking about recommendations and in the implementation of those measures, a key lesson coming from the voices of young people is that it is every girl's right to take part in processes that influence their lives. And by supporting this engagement of girls, we may edge closer to eliminating the violence and discrimination they often face.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Hart, Jason. 2004. Children's Participation in Humanitarian Action: learning from zones of armed conflict. Document prepared for the Canadian International Development Agency (SIDA).

<sup>2</sup> Voices of Youth is started in 1995 as an online discussion board. It expanded to become a multi-lingual web-based forum for young people to talk to one another about development issues that currently reaches over 17,000 young people in more than 180 countries. Over 60 percent of participants are from developing countries, 56 percent are female and 40 percent are adolescents aged 10-19.

<sup>3</sup> *Voices of Youth* No. 14, February, 2005 "Poll on violence". Available at [www.unicef.org/voy](http://www.unicef.org/voy)

<sup>4</sup> Save the Children UK. 2004. *Reaching the Girls: Study on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Prepared Beth Verhey (Consultant) for Save the Children UK and the NGO Group: CARE, IFESH and IRC (November).