

THE GIRL CHILD*

“Investing in adolescent girls is precisely the catalyst poor countries need to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and to create a better distribution of income. Investing in them is not only fair; it is a smart economic move.” Robert Zoellick, President, World Bank

Introduction

In virtually every area of life and in every country, girls and women routinely face discrimination, bearing burdens and enduring treatment that reflect their unequal status. The girl child is defined as under the age of 18, and comprises roughly half of the global child population. Girls often receive less food than boys, have less access to schooling and work long hours even when they are only 5 or 6 years old.¹ Eighty million girls from the ages of 6 to 11 lack the opportunity to attend school. In societies where a male child is regarded as more valuable to the family, girls often are denied the right to life, the right to name and nationality. Many times women, and consequently girl children, are viewed differently by law and in the norms of society.

War, extreme poverty and other hardships further endanger girls' lives as they may be assaulted and forced to work in extremely dangerous environments. They are often as exploited as domestic workers, and in factories or on farms doing dangerous and difficult manual labor.

All of these factors indicate the need for extra protection and support from the international community to ensure that girls' rights are realized and protected. This briefing paper provides information about the issues of education, labor and health of the girl child, as well as actions of the United Nations has taken to improve her situation.

Reflect and Analyze:

Why do you think women and girls are more often discriminated against than men and boys? What are some of the main challenges girls face?

Being a Girl

Is it hard to be a girl? In many places around the world the answer is yes! It is difficult because discrimination, culture, religion, family and society all play a role in how a girl child is treated. Discrimination is making a distinction in favor of or against a person based on the group, class, color or gender. The desire to have sons often results in harmful practices regarding sex selection when giving birth and also leads to inferior treatment of girls upon birth. Families' preference for boys often leads to neglecting girls, proportioning them less food and frequently requiring them to care for other children in the family or in the community at a young age.

* This briefing paper was adapted from United Nations Cyber School Bus and can be found at www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/girl/index.htm.

By being married off early or forced to stay at home and help with domestic chores, girls are denied basic human rights, such as the right to associate freely and most importantly, the right to education and all the advantages that accompany it. These advantages include increased income, greater opportunities for work, greater access to health care and the opportunity to choose the size of their family. Some girls are forced to marry at ages as young as 10 or 12. Additionally, according to UNICEF (the branch of the United Nations that protects the rights of the child), girls are often married off to older men when they are still very young, thereby hindering their ability to pursue opportunities in education and increasing the likelihood of domestic domination and abuse within a marriage as well as large family size. Lack of education and limited opportunities mean the issues of the girl child are passed from one generation to another.

Education

Nothing has as great an impact on children and especially on girls as a quality education. Girls comprise over 60% of the 140 million primary school age children are not in school.ⁱⁱ Despite the progress made over previous decades, fewer girls than boys who enroll in school. Once enrolled, girls lag behind boys in success in their studies, leading to lower levels of grade completion and graduation. This challenge has been identified at the international level, and organizations like the United Nations, along with individual governments are working to include more girls in school and enhance their levels of achievement.

Worldwide, girls do not attend or complete school at the same rates boys do, which in turn affects the lives of their families, communities and the workforce of nations. “For each additional year of school, a girl’s income increases by 10 to 20 percent, and is a significant step on the road to breaking the cycle of poverty.”ⁱⁱⁱ Part of the reason more girls than boys are kept out of school is the perception that men will have greater opportunities in the workforce and should therefore be educated so they can gain employment in a competitive market. Although men may have greater opportunities for employment in many countries, it is women who put a greater percentage of the income they earn back into their families.

According to UNICEF, the more education a girl receives, the older she will be when she has her first child. The longer a girl puts off having her first child, the more opportunity she has to acquire education and the more education a girl obtains, the greater her prospect of finding a job. A good job will allow a mother to support herself and her family. Therefore, as girls increase their educational achievement, the benefits translate into higher living standards for the family, especially because girls and women are more likely to reinvest in their families and communities both in income and time.

Gender equality is not accomplished just through getting girls to school. The quality of education in the school is also a factor in helping girls achieve. Beyond merely having equal access to education, true gender equality means that schools are in gender-sensitive environments that promote equal participation and empowerment. Schools that include girls in all parts of education, from sports to math classes, send the message that girl children hold the same value to society as do boy children. Extreme poverty undermines the ability of countries to successfully implement policies addressing discrimination and inequality because the government cannot support public education for all its children and many families need children to begin working at a young age to help support the family.

The Ability to Work and Chose One's Job

Women and girls often engage in work that is different from that of men. For instance, while boys may be allowed to fish in certain countries and keep some of their earnings, a girl may only be allowed to perform domestic labor in her own home or the home of a neighbor. This type of labor is often low paying or unpaid. Although women are half the population of many countries, in many families they are the sole providers of income.

Recent global estimates from the International Labor Organization^{iv} state that over 100 million girls are involved in child labor. Child labor and domestic and agricultural work are often part of the informal economy. The informal economy is defined as the process of generating income that is unregulated by society; thus the earnings are not taxed and the work is unregulated. For example, in the formal economy, a store clerk can get a lunch break if they work for eight hours. In the informal economy, the person working in a store may not get a lunch break and may have to work for 12 hours at a time. Girls are frequently employed in the informal economy, which usually means that they do not have steady income and their hours worked are unpredictable. As with domestic labor, agricultural labor is often non-paying or at best low paying.^v This impacts the family life of women because access to health care and credit are especially limited. In order for girl children to value education themselves, and for their families to value sending them to school, they need to know that as women they will have the opportunity to find and engage in meaningful work that allows them to support themselves and provide for their families.

Health

The well being of mothers has a direct impact on the well being of girls. A mother who is able to survive the birth of her children may still be denied the right to own property and have to work long hours if she is uneducated. Girls face multiple health challenges, from increased risk of disease to malnutrition. Girl children also face great health challenges in becoming young mothers. Pregnancies and childbirth-related health problems take the lives of nearly 146,000 teenage girls worldwide each year. However, the girls facing the most serious challenges are those in nations where health care is limited and education is not universal. According to UNICEF,^{vi} 75% of girls 15 or older are anemic. Anemia, which is a condition of low iron in the blood, can easily be corrected through diet or vitamins; however, if left untreated, it can cause reduced mental performance and harmful cardiovascular consequences.

There are additional health issues that disproportionately affect females in the countries with extreme poverty and conflict. Conflict zones in particular increase health issues for girls who are often those left behind with their families, unprotected. In these regions, a girl traveling to gather water or firewood for her family can quickly become a victim of violence.

Real-Life Connection:

The story of Maya

My name is Maya. I was born 14 years ago in a poor peasant family. There were already many children, so when I was born no one was happy. When I was still very little, I learned to help my

mother and elder sisters with the domestic chores. I swept floors, washed clothes, and carried water and firewood. Some of my friends played outside, but I could not join them. I was very happy when I was allowed to go to school. I made new friends there. I learned to read and write. But when I reached the fourth grade, my parents stopped my education. My father said there was no money to pay the fees. Also, I was needed at home to help my mother and the others. If I were given the choice of being born again, I would prefer to be a boy.

Reflect and Analyze:

What do you think is a root cause of these issues? Is there a way to solve them? What is one way to address these issues?

UN Conventions and Conferences

The premise is straightforward: If a girl is brought up in a nurturing environment in which her rights to education, health, nutrition and protection are fulfilled, her life as a woman will be greatly improved. And so, too, will the lives of her family members and her community.

The United Nations has already taken several steps to protect children and women, in particular the girl child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted in 1989 and now ratified by most countries of the world, outlines the agenda to address forms of inequality and discrimination against girls; however, implementation is still important to ensure long-term, positive change. The rights of girls apply equally to all children. The core principles as defined by the CRC are:

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

In 1994 at the *International Conference on Population and Development* in Cairo, countries further agreed to:

- Eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child and eliminate the root causes of son preference.
- Increase public awareness of the value of the girl child and at the same time, strengthen the self-image, self-esteem and status of the girl child.
- Improve the welfare of the girl child, especially with regard to health, nutrition and education.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified by 163 countries, is the most extensive and widely ratified international agreement promoting the rights of girls and women. It clarifies the negative consequences of discrimination and seeks full equality between men and women, regardless of marital status in all aspects of life, whether it be

political, economic, social or cultural. States that have ratified CEDAW must take steps, such as enacting laws, establishing women's rights commissions, and creating conditions to ensure that the human rights of girls and women are realized. Their progress is monitored by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

Currently, UNICEF is at the forefront of research and advocacy for the girl child. Several case studies demonstrate the success of dedicating focus to the rights of the girl child. In Zimbabwe, older girls mentor younger girls, helping them with math and science during the holidays. In Nepal, community centers are reducing childcare responsibilities of older girls so they can attend school. In Egypt, community schools and improved teacher training have had positive results for girls including a higher enrollment rate and improved performance on national exams. Despite this progress, there are still many unresolved issues of discrimination, inequality, neglect, exploitation and violence against girls and women.

In his *Millennium Report*, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan outlined the **Millennium Development Goals**. One of the goals addressed the problem of extreme hunger and poverty. He urged governments by 2015 to adopt a target of cutting in half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty and by 2020, achieving a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers world-wide. The Millennium Development Goals call the international community to help ensure that all children will have completed a full course of primary education by 2015.

Unfortunately, the decline of the global economy is working against these lofty goals. Some politicians, educators and diplomats have warned that an increase in global unemployment combined with a decrease in the amount of international aid projects may reverse the gains achieved for the girl child. That is, while past actions in education, health and human rights of the girl child have made a difference to many girls around the world, there are still millions at risk, and many more that may once again find themselves in the same impoverished circumstances.

Questions to Consider When Crafting Your Resolution:

1. Is the country you are representing currently afflicted with the problems of discrimination against the girl child? How so? What factors contribute to the inequalities?
2. If not, what is your country able to do to help the other nations? What has it done in the past? (Provide medical or economic aid?) Have these efforts been proven successful?
3. What do you think should be the top priority in addressing the plight of the girl child? The inequalities in education? Sexual exploitation? Poverty? Health?
4. What makes programs such as those of UNICEF sustainable and effective? How can the UN help ensure the successful implementation of policies and programs?

Helpful Terminology:

Girl Child- female under the age of 18

Informal Economy – exchange of goods and services not accurately accounted for by governments, work that is untaxed and unregulated

Millennium Development Goals- eight goals agreed upon by the members of the United Nations to strive to achieve by 2015

ⁱ United Nations Cyber School Bus (www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/girl/index.htm)

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Plan USA -2009 Report on the Status of Girls Plan USA, 2009, 9

^{iv} International Labor Organizations (www.ilo.org/ipec/Campaignandadvocacy/WDAAC/WorldDay2009/lang--en/index.htm)

^v Plan US 2009 Status of Women 2009 Report

^{vi} UNICEF Annual Report 2008 (www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_Annual_Report_2008_EN_072709.pdf)