The Girl Child

Report of the Secretary-General to UNICEF

Human rights treaties and international conventions

Realization of the rights of girls is the obligation of every State, established by a comprehensive international legal framework. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols outline rights to be enjoyed without discrimination, including on the grounds of gender.

In its resolution 67/146, the General Assembly urged States to condemn all harmful practices affecting women and girls, especially female genital mutilation/cutting, and take all necessary measures, including enforcing legislation, raising awareness and allocating sufficient resources, to protect women and girls from that form of violence.

The equal right to quality education for every girl is articulated and enshrined in numerous significant declarations, among them the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 26), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Spearheaded by the United Nations, the international community agreed in 2015 on 17 Sustainable Development Goals to pursue over the next 15 years. The needs and rights of girls are encapsulated in Goal 5 and cut across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goals related to the education of girls aim to universalize access to quality education, from pre-primary to tertiary levels, and express a specific mandate to redress social inequalities undermining access to educational opportunities. The empowerment of and investment in girls being central to sustainable development was noted by the General Assembly in its resolution 70/138.

The Incheon Declaration: Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, and the Education 2030 Framework for Action, reaffirmed education as the most powerful means of empowering girls socially, economically and politically. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) submitted a report to the Human Rights Council at its thirty-fifth session (A/HRC/35/11) in which the High Commissioner specifically called for the realization of every girl's right to equal enjoyment of education.

Situation of the girl child worldwide:

Data show that the lives of girls today are better in many respects than those of preceding generations. Girls are more likely to survive childhood and attend

school and complete their education, and less likely to be undernourished and to marry as children. Yet, girls everywhere still face significant deprivations and inequalities as a result of persistent gender discrimination. Further disadvantages based on age, poverty, disability, location, race, ethnicity and migration status compound the barriers girls face to building fulfilling futures for themselves and to making contributions to their communities and societies.

15. The transformational impact of the education of girls on themselves, their families, community and society, including household incomes and the wider economy, is clear. Educated girls acquire more and better-paid work. An extra year of primary school increases girls' eventual wages by 10-20 per cent, and an extra year of secondary school increases wages by 15-25 per cent. Each additional year of schooling can add up to 18 per cent to a nation's gross domestic product per capita.[1]

Girls with higher levels of education are less likely to bear children at a young age and will have fewer and healthier children. Girls with secondary school education are one sixth as likely to marry as children, and girls with higher levels of education are less likely to become pregnant as adolescents. Children under 5 years of age whose mothers lack education are 2.8 times as likely to die as those whose mothers have secondary or higher education. Half of the reduction in under-five child mortality over the past 40 years is considered attributable to increased average years of schooling of women of reproductive age. A 2010 study suggests that, if all mothers had had at least primary education between 1970 and 2009, 1.7 million fewer children would have suffered from malnutrition.[2]

Globally, great progress has been made in getting more children, including girls, in school. In 2014, there were 31.7 million girls of primary-school age and 29.4 million of lower-secondary-school age out of school, compared with in 2000, when 57.8 million girls of primary-school age and 53.4 million of lower-secondary- school age were out of school.

Despite these gains, girls are still more likely than boys to remain excluded from education. There are currently 15 million girls of primary-school age who never attended school, compared with 10 million boys. Across sub-Saharan Africa, 9 million girls will never attend school, compared with 6 million boys; in South Asia, about 5 million girls, compared with 2 million boys, will never attend school.

Among gendered barriers to girls' equal enjoyment of their right to quality education are child marriage, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, domestic labour and restrictive gender norms and opportunities that lead families and

communities to place less value on girls' education when compared with that of boys. Girls' school attendance can also be negatively affected by distances to schools and lack of gender-responsive water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in schools, leaving girls without the means to maintain safe and private personal hygiene practices, including menstrual hygiene management. At the higher levels of education, the proportion of female teachers declines, which can negatively affect girls' participation.

Water and Girls

Girls and women are particularly affected by water scarcity, unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene practices. Girls are often excluded from full and continued participation in school because of their burden of water procurement at home and lack of water and sanitation facilities in schools.

Globally, women and children, especially girls, spend a cumulative 73 billion hours annually fetching water.[4] Water collection often results in injuries and exposes women and girls to the risk of sexual violence.

Girls and women also spend 97 billion hours annually securing a safe place to defecate. In many places, in both emergency and non-emergency contexts, girls and women with no latrine in the household wait until after dark to defecate, thereby increasing their risk of harassment and violence. Urinary tract infections and other illnesses arise from delayed urination and reduced water intake.

Inadequate attention to and investment in menstrual hygiene management continue to create challenges for girls. Millions of girls in low- and middle-income countries and humanitarian contexts lack access to supplies for the management of menstrual hygiene and adequate, private facilities to manage their monthly cycle with dignity and safety. Stigma and taboos leave girls subject to teasing, harassment and social exclusion during their menses.

Violence, sexual abuse and exploitation

Millions of girls worldwide are subjected to various forms of gender-based violence, exploitation and harmful practices in their homes, schools, communities and workplaces, and in public spaces. These violations, including sexual, physical and emotional violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting, take a tremendous toll on girls' physical and mental health, with serious consequences for their social and economic lives.

Despite recent declines in the rate of child marriage globally, 15 million girls under 18 still marry every year. Child marriage and early unions exist in all regions, though are most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Child

marriages rob girls of their childhood, often meaning the end of their education, adolescent pregnancy and a lack of agency over their own futures. Girls who marry in childhood are at greater risk of intimate partner violence than same-age peers who marry later.

The prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting is likewise in slow decline; however, even if progress is sustained, the number of girls affected is estimated to reach around 235 million by 2030. The practice is linked to serious mental and physical health risks, including complications during childbirth, maternal death, infertility, urinary incontinence, infection and tetanus.

One in 10 girls under the age of 20 has been subjected to forced sexual intercourse or other forced sexual acts at some point in her life. In three quarters of the countries with available data, more than one in five adolescent girls had experienced some form of violence at the hands of their partners in the past 12 months.

For further information please contact

Sister Deirdre Mullan RSM

Partnering Religious Congregations with UNICEF