

WHITE PAPER: Putting Girls First

I am the first child of my parents. I have a small brother at home. If the first child were a son, my parents might be happy and would be confident as their future is assured by having a son. But I am a daughter. I complete all the household tasks, go to school, again do the household activities in the evening, and at night only I do my school homework and I study. Despite all the activities, my parents do not give value or recognition to me. They only have praise for my brother, as he is the son.
— Girl, 15, Nepal¹

*“Oh, God, I beg of you, I touch your feet time and again,
Next birth don’t give me a daughter. Give me hell instead...”*
— Folk Song From Uttar Pradesh, India²

Overview

While all children are vulnerable for a variety of reasons and deserve basic human rights, girls start at birth with a unique disadvantage—gender inequality. The global consequences of this inequality are at the root of many obstacles for girls, including poverty, disease, violence, and lack of access to education. As a result, girls experience these violations to their human rights throughout their childhood and into adulthood.

According to the Beijing Platform for Action, Critical Area 12: “In some areas of the world, men outnumber women by five in every 100. The reasons for this discrepancy include harmful attitudes and practices, such as ... early marriage, violence against women, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse ... and other practices related to health and well-being. As a result, fewer girls than boys survive into adulthood” or are even born.³

Across various cultures, evidence continues to show that girls are treated differently from boys, both before birth and then as babies.⁴ In fact, discrimination can begin even before girls are born, with female embryos more likely to be aborted.⁵ Throughout South Asia and in many other parts of the world, for example, sons are preferred to daughters. In some cultures, the birth of a girl may not be an occasion for joy, reflected in an old Vietnamese proverb: “One son is children; two daughters are none.” In Nepal’s rural regions, parents often prefer sons because they are considered to be a form of social security, while girls are seen as an economic burden until they are married.

¹ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2007.” <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/becauseiamagirl.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Enable. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2003-2004.) <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/women/wwdis2.htm>

⁴ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2007,” *Forward*, 9. <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/becauseiamagirl.pdf>

⁵ Ibid. *Introduction*, 14.

The sad reality remains—every day, in every part of the world—girls are severely affected by virtue of their gender: They are kept out of school, hit, ignored, forced to marry and have sex, sold as slaves, and asked to sit silently while societies and governments make decisions for them and about them. These are all violations of their rights.⁶ As such, girl children are considered the most invisible entity in society.

Girls remain hidden and their needs are little understood, much less addressed.

In fact, little research has been done to understand how investment in girls impacts the economic growth, health and well-being of communities. That lack of data speaks loudly to the many ways girls have been marginalized. However, new research is evolving and there is growing interest in the rights and needs of girls. While much of the new research focuses on girls' rights as related to societies' economic well-being, it should be understood that girls, as human beings, are entitled to the fundamental rights of their own happiness and well-being independent of how much or little they contribute economically. Girls' rights are human rights, period.

In this white paper, some core issues facing girls in both the developing and developed world are highlighted. Many of these issues are linked, all with gender inequalities at their core. And while in Western cultures the movement of “girl power” (a term of empowerment from the mid- to late 1990s) has been active for more than a decade, girls in developed nations still face their own set of unique challenges and obstacles, from drug and alcohol abuse to body image and eating disorders.

This white paper considers three basic areas in which girls face systemic gender inequalities: education, health and violence. They are not an exhaustive or comprehensive examination of the myriad ways girls are affected by gender inequities, but a starting point for discussion about the basic question of why girls need special care and protections. In addition, the term “girl” or “girl child” is used in this paper as a female child between 0 and 18 years of age, as defined under article 1 of the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*: “a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”⁷

When, discussing the girl child, the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) must also be taken into consideration. The MDGs were established in 2000 and agreed to by 192 nations with the ultimate goal of halving extreme poverty by 2015. The third MDG calls for the empowerment of women and gender equality and is vital to the achievement of all the other MDGs. The question must be raised, then—how can girls be expected to grow up into empowered women if they are neglected and overlooked as children and adolescents?⁸ “The empowerment of women and girls is inseparable. There will be no empowerment for women if girls are not empowered,” according to Anne-Marie Goetz, lead author of the United Nations Development Fund for Women's (UNIFEM) Progress of the World's Women 2008-2009 Report.⁹

Finally, overall advocacy concerns, as potential solutions, are also addressed. To truly eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls, action is required on all levels of government, addressing the problem of gender inequality and providing frameworks through which nation states can act.¹⁰ Changes in

⁶ UNICEF. *Voices of Youth*. (December 2006). http://www.unicef.org/voy/takeaction/takeaction_3295.html

⁷ Clara Chapedelaine Feliciati. “Restorative Justice for the Girl Child in Post-conflict Rwanda,” *Journal of International Women's Studies* Vol. 7 #4 (May 2006), 15. <http://www.bridgew.edu/soas/jiws/May06/girlchildRwanda.pdf>

⁸ Sheana Laughlin. MediaGlobal. “Girl child as a social group is left out of human development say policy makers.” (September 26, 2008). <http://www.mediaglobal.org/article/2008-09-26/girl-child-as-a-social-group-is-left-out-of-human-development-say-policy-makers>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ World Vision. “Hope for the Girl Child. Executive Summary. A Briefing Paper to the United Nations,” *Commission on the Status of Women at its 51st Session*, (February 2007), 4.

attitudes are also critical, and this needs to happen in families, schools and societies as a whole. Perhaps no other segment of society faces as much exploitation and injustice. Society owes girls its support as integral members of the human family.¹¹

Education

School is a good thing. If you go to school, you will become a female teacher, a minister. However, many parents say that it is not good to send girls to school...I have many things to do when I come back home even if I am tired. I sweep the floor, I go to buy things for my mother, and I play with my brother. I do not have much time to do my homework.
– Ballovi Eliane, 10, Couffo, District, Benin¹²

While exclusion from education for girls is not the only form of gender inequality, it is closely linked to all others. As a result, education is both a catalyst for and an indicator of gender equality, so it provides a unique perspective on girls' status. Education boosts girls' personal and social well-being. It opens doors to better jobs, which benefits the national labor supply and social and economic development of a country. When girls are educated, they "hold the key to breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty in the world."¹³ Every year of education reduces the likelihood that a girl will bear a child in her teens or live in poverty.¹⁴

The 2nd Millennium Development Goal is to achieve universal primary education—for both girls and boys. Yet girls in developing nations are more likely to never enter primary school as opposed to boys. If a family can afford school fees for only one child, it is likely a boy who will attend. If someone needs to fetch water or do housework instead of going to a school, a girl will likely be chosen. If someone needs to stay home and take care of younger siblings or sick or infirm family members, this will most likely be a girl. Girls are also most likely to be withdrawn from school as the age of marriage approaches.

Between 1999 and 2006, the worldwide number of children not in school reached 75 million.¹⁵ However, for every 100 boys out of school, there are 122 girls.¹⁶ In South and West Asia, only about 87 girls start primary school for every 100 boys.¹⁷ In sub-Saharan Africa about 93 girls begin their primary education for every 100 boys.¹⁸ In addition, gender disparities against girls in secondary education are more severe than those against boys, with boys having greater access than girls in 28 percent of countries.¹⁹ For many girls, gender disparities increase significantly at higher levels of education, especially in sub-Saharan

[http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/girlchild_200702.pdf/\\$file/girlchild_200702.pdf?open&lid=girlchild_2&lpos=main](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/girlchild_200702.pdf/$file/girlchild_200702.pdf?open&lid=girlchild_2&lpos=main)

¹¹ International Center for Research on Women. "Girls Speak: A New Voice in Global Development, Forward." (October 2009). <http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Girls-Speak-A-New-Voice-In-Global-Development.pdf>

¹² Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2007."

¹³ Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009," *Putting Girls First*, 21.

<http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

¹⁴ ICPD at Ten. "A Report Card on Sexual and Reproductive Rights." 3.

http://www.populationaction.org/cd2015/reportCard/art_WhereAreWeNow_A.php

¹⁵ The World Bank. "Girls' Education," (April 1, 2009)

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0..contentMDK:20298916~menuPK:617572~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:282386,00.html>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2010).

http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=8118_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Africa and South Asia.²⁰ When it comes to tertiary education in wealthier countries, however, around 25 percent more girls than boys are enrolled in universities in nations such as the United States and Russia, and in several South American countries including Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela.²¹

Primary education is universal in all North American and Western European countries for both girls and boys, with most countries achieving universal secondary education.²² In the United States women and girls have made tremendous progress in education during the past 100 years. The passage of Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972 marked the recognition by Congress “that girls and boys hold the right to equal educational opportunities” and put an end to overt displays of gender bias.²³ However, gender differences do persist. Commonly referred to as the Nation’s Report Card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests U.S. students’ knowledge and skills in reading, mathematics and other subjects. On the NAEP tests, boys generally outscored girls on math tests by a small margin and girls consistently outscored boys on reading tests by a larger, but still relatively small margin.²⁴ Girls from higher income families scored higher on average than did lower-income girls in both math and reading.²⁵

What has been generally overlooked, however, is that girls in the United States are dropping out of high school at dangerously high rates. In fact, one in four girls overall do not finish high school, and the numbers are worse for girls of color. One in two Native American female students, four in 10 Black female students, and nearly four in 10 Hispanic female students fail to graduate with a diploma each year.²⁶ As to graduation rates, however, states are not currently required to track these statistics through a consistent and transparent system that enables interstate comparisons, leading to wide variances in estimates of dropout rates.²⁷

In developing nations, factors related to water, sanitation and hygiene, and safety going to and from school, all affect girls’ rights to education in many ways. At the root, however, is a cluster of broader social and economic reasons. Poverty is a particularly significant barrier in developing countries, which lack the resources needed to provide low-cost or free education to low-income girls who need it the most.²⁸ As stated earlier, many of these issues interlock, such as early marriage, pregnancy and unpaid household work, family responsibilities and care giving—all these and more hold back girls from acquiring the skills and knowledge they need to take advantage of an education—and as a result, future economic opportunities for decent employment and gender equity on many levels.

Investing in girls’ education has positive social and economic results that benefit several generations within a family and nations as a whole. Educated girls have better opportunities to earn higher wages and

²⁰ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2009,” *Preparing Girls for the World of Work*, 74.

<http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

²¹ UPI.com. “UNESCO blasts girls’ access to education,” (2010).

http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/09/17/UNESCO-blasts-girls-access-to-education/UPI-61101284756224/

²² UNESCO. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003-2004. “Gender and Education for All. The Leap to Equality,” 1.

http://www.unesco.org/education/efa_report/zoom_regions_pdf/namerweu.pdf

²³ AAUW. “Where the Girls Are: The Facts About Gender Equity in Education,” (May 2008), 13.

<http://www.aauw.org/learn/research/upload/whereGirlsAre.pdf>, p. 13

²⁴ Ibid, 33.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ National Women’s Law Center. “When Girls Don’t Graduate We All Fail,” (2007, p. 5.

<http://www.thesociety.org/pdf/Teen%20Pregnancy%20and%20Drop%20Out%20Rates.pdf>

²⁷ Ibid, p.17.

²⁸ Maureen A. Lewis and Marlaine E. Lockheed. Centre for Global Development, “Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren’t in School and What To Do about It.” Chapter 1, (October 28, 2007), 19.

<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>

to participate in community life and decision-making. They tend to marry later and to have fewer, healthier children who are more likely to go to school themselves.²⁹

Providing girls one extra year of education boosts eventual wages by 10 to 20 percent.³⁰ A 100-country study by the World Bank in 1999 shows that increasing the share of women with a secondary education by 1 percent boosts annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percentage points; this is a substantial amount considering that per capita income gains in developing countries seldom exceed 3 percent a year.³¹ In addition, girls' education has other positive outcomes, such as:

- In Africa, Asia and Latin America, women with seven or more years of schooling have between two and three fewer children than women with less than three years' education.³²
- An extra year of girls' education can reduce infant mortality by 5 to 10 percent. In Africa, the children of mothers who have spent five years in primary education are 40 percent more likely to live beyond the age of 5.³³
- An educated woman is 50 percent more likely to have her children immunized.³⁴
- A study of Zambia finds that AIDS spreads twice as fast among uneducated girls. A review of 113 studies indicates that school-based AIDS education programs are effective in reducing early sexual activity and high-risk behavior.³⁵

In essence, study after study shows that educating girls is the single most effective policy to raise overall economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, educate the next generation, improve nutrition and promote health.³⁶ Although these outcomes are certainly significant and valuable, it must also be noted that education for girls, in and of itself, is a basic human right. Girls have a fundamental right to an education for purposes of their own well-being and empowerment, regardless of how their education impacts economic productivity.

Health

In a number of countries, girls are given less food than boys. Girls may also be given poorer quality food than their brothers. And because girls may receive less medical care than boys, girls' under-nutrition may go undetected, leading to serious health problems ...
– Girl, Republic of Korea³⁷

A need exists in the world to address the health-care needs of all low-income communities, but girls require special attention because of their vulnerable situations. In poorer nations, their basic needs for

²⁹ Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009," *Putting Girls First*, 20. <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

³⁰ Center for Global Development. "Girls Count Report." http://www.womenforwomen.org/about-women-for-women/files/Facts_Young_Women_and_Girls.pdf

³¹ Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009," *Putting Girls First*, 118. <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

³² Ibid, 21.

³³ Ibid, *Call to Action*, 158.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ UNICEF. Millennium Development Goals. "Goal: Promote gender equality and empower women." http://www.unicef.org/mdg/index_genderequality.htm

³⁷ Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009." <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

food, health information and health resources often go unmet.³⁸ Why? Again, gender inequality is at the root. Girls must often overcome myriad barriers, from restrictions on movement to taboos about discussing sexuality to lack of autonomy in decision-making.³⁹ In developing nations, son preference and gender inequality can often lead to fewer immunizations and visits to health clinics for girls and poor access to reproductive health services.⁴⁰

Research in several Asian countries shows that son preference is evident in the treatment of infants—boys are breastfed for as long as possible while breastfeeding for girls is ended as quickly as possible.⁴¹ Such feeding practices in childhood sometimes lead to protein-energy malnutrition, anemia and other micronutrient deficiencies in young girls.⁴² An estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted as a result of childhood protein-energy malnutrition.⁴³

In Western cultures, girls face their own unique set of health issues, including use of tobacco, drugs and alcohol, teen pregnancy, and body image and eating disorders. And in all countries throughout the world, girls face challenges around reproductive health, mental health and health education about HIV/AIDS.

Sexual/reproductive health. The social and developmental consequences of sexual and reproductive decisions for girls are far-reaching. In fact, girls are more vulnerable to reproductive health problems than boys for biological and social reasons. They often have little say about the conditions of their sexual relations and childbearing. Despite data in the United States that shows boys are more likely to be sexually active than girls at younger ages, girls are still reporting young ages for sexual activity. Statistics show that 8.8 percent of boys and 3.7 percent of girls report having sexual intercourse before age 13.⁴⁴

In addition, schooling and reproductive behavior are closely linked. Surveys reveal that American girls with secondary education are less likely to become young mothers, and girls who give birth are far less likely to complete high school than their childless peers.⁴⁵ As such, girls require education around sexual reproductive health and HIV/AIDS to prevent and reduce their risk of infection, as well as education around maternal health. If a girl is educated six years or more, as an adult her prenatal and postnatal care, and childbirth survival rates will dramatically and consistently improve.⁴⁶

In developing countries, the sexual and reproductive needs of girls are often unmet or ignored completely. In these countries, pregnancy-related problems constitute a leading cause of death for girls ages 15-19.⁴⁷

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Center for Global Development. “Start with a Girl: A new agenda for global health.” Executive Summary, (2009), 3. www.cgdev.org/files/1422899_file_Start_with_a_Girl_FINAL.pdf

⁴⁰ International Center for Research on Women. “Girls Speak: A New Voice in Global Development,” (2010), 12-13 <http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Girls-Speak-A-New-Voice-In-Global-Development.pdf>

⁴¹ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2009,” *Building the Foundations*, 37. <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

⁴² WomenAid International. “Women’s Health Problems. Briefing Paper BPH 20.” (2000). <http://www.womenaid.org/press/info/health/bph20.html>

⁴³ United Nations. Division of Advancement of Women. Department of Social and Economic Affairs. “The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 1995.” <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/girl.htm>

⁴⁴ Barbara Newman, Phillip Newman. “Development Through Life: A Psychosocial Approach,” (Wadsworth, 2009), p. 344.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ UNICEF. Millennium Development Goals. “Goal: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women.” http://www.unicef.org/mdg/index_genderequality.htm

⁴⁷ World Health Organization. “Promoting and Safeguarding the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents.” (2006). http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/Publications_policybrief4.pdf

Although worldwide contraceptive use among adolescents has been increasing, the unmet need for contraceptives is two times higher in developing countries—while the poorest of the developing countries, provide the least amount of family planning services.⁴⁸ In some developing countries, as many as one woman in two gives birth before the age of 18.⁴⁹ The importance of sexual and reproductive health cannot be overstated. For without it, girls cannot fully exercise their fundamental human rights, such as rights to education and economic self-sufficiency.

Teen Pregnancy. Teen pregnancy is a critical issue, one of the most difficult experiences a young girl might ever face. An unintended pregnancy can disrupt a young girl's life, interrupting school, training and future plans. Children born to teenage mothers are more likely to suffer health, academic, social, emotional and economic problems.⁵⁰ The highest rate of teenaged pregnancy today in the world is sub-Saharan Africa, where women tend to marry at an early age, and some Asian countries, where the tradition of early marriage is still preserved.⁵¹

Again, education is closely linked with reproductive behavior and childbearing throughout the world. The proportion of women who have their first child before age 19 ranges from 5 percent in developed countries such as Denmark, to more than 50 percent in developing countries such as Niger.⁵² In the United States, teenage birth rates are high, exceeding those in most developed countries.⁵³ The teenaged birth rate per 1,000 births are: Sweden, 7; France, 9; Canada, 20; Great Britain, 31; and the U.S., 49.⁵⁴ Teenpregnancy.org, a site managed by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, states that there are “750,000 teen pregnancies annually. Eight in ten of these pregnancies are unintended and 81 percent of all teen pregnancies are to unmarried teens.”⁵⁵

Teen mothers in America are less likely to complete high school and only 1.5 percent has a college degree by age 30. Teen mothers are more likely to end up on public assistance and have lower birth weight babies; their children are more likely to perform poorly in school and are at greater risk of abuse and neglect.⁵⁶

In developing nations, girls under 15 are five times more likely to die from complications in childbirth and are more likely to develop fistula.⁵⁷ In particular, girls who become child brides in many developing

⁴⁸ UN Millennium Project. “Key Fact and Figures on Sexual and Reproductive Health. (2005).

http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/UNMPL_FactsFigures_SRH.pdf

⁴⁹ World Health Organization. “Promoting and safeguarding the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents.” (2006). http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/Publications_policybrief4.pdf

⁵⁰ HealthCommunications.com. “Teen Pregnancy Overview, Consequences of Teenage Pregnancy,” (December 4, 2007).

<http://www.womenshealthchannel.com/teenpregnancy/index.shtml>

⁵¹ Treffers PE. “Teenage pregnancy, a worldwide problem.” *Ned Tijdschr Genneskd* 147 (47): 2320-5. PMID 14669637, (November 2002). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14669537>

⁵² Population Action International. “Why Good Sexual and Reproductive Health is Critical to the Well-Being of Youth,” (May 3, 2004). http://www.populationaction.org/Publications/Fact_Sheets/FS19/Summary.shtml

⁵³ March of Dimes. “Teenage Pregnancy,” (November 2009).

http://www.marchofdimes.com/professionals/14332_1159.asp

⁵⁴ The Body. “Differences in Teenage Pregnancy Rates Among Five Developed Countries: The Role of Sexual Activity and Contraceptive Use.” (January 18, 2002). <http://www.thebody.com/content/art2418.html>

⁵⁵ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, “Teen Birth Rates: How Does the U.S. Compare?”(2007). http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/TBR_InternationalComparison.pdf

⁵⁶ Family First Aid. Help for Troubled Teens. “Teen Pregnancy Facts, Stats and Prevention.”

<http://www.familyfirstaid.org/teen-pregnancy.html>

⁵⁷ International Women's Health Program. “Obstetric Fistula.” http://iwph.sogc.org/index.php?page=obstetric-fistula&hl=en_US

nations may suffer from obstetric fistula during childbirth. Because the girl's body is not fully developed and the birth canal is often too small, a fistula (hole) occurs between the women's birth passage or vaginal cavity and her internal organs, such as her bladder. This often causes the woman to leak urine, feces or both, and she often ends up ostracized and living in poverty. Today, there are an estimated two million women suffering from obstetric fistula worldwide, the majority of cases occurring in lower-resource African countries.⁵⁸

HIV/AIDS. Every 14 seconds, a young person is infected with HIV and increasingly, these tend to be girls and young women.⁵⁹ A South African study shows that a major reason young girls are at greater risk of being infected than boys is that they have sexual relationships with older men, who generally are not monogamous and themselves are more likely to be carriers of the virus.⁶⁰ From a biological perspective, a girl's immature female genital tract is more likely to tear during sexual activity, which creates a higher risk of HIV transmission. These biological factors are further exacerbated by the economic and social inequalities, such as extreme poverty and lack of education, that increase young girl's vulnerability. Together these aspects make girls and women more susceptible to contracting HIV and AIDS.⁶¹

In addition, girls face discrimination and violence, which makes them powerless to refuse or negotiate safe sex. As such, violence against girls can be a cause of AIDS. Research has confirmed a strong correlation between sexual and other forms of abuse against girls and their chances of contracting HIV. Condoms are irrelevant when a girl is being beaten or raped.⁶²

Again, many issues for girls are interconnected, each dependent on the other, and education is key to moving girls into good health and a better future. Uneducated girls are more likely than educated girls to contract HIV/AIDS, which spreads twice as quickly among uneducated girls than among girls who have had even some schooling.⁶³ In addition, HIV/AIDS continues to impact girls on other levels. The burden of caregiving work affects them emotionally, physically and economically, as throughout the world they shoulder a disproportionate burden of care for relatives and family members with HIV/AIDS. The costs to girls include loss of childhood, loss of education and limited economic opportunities, impacting their participation in income-earning opportunities.⁶⁴ Furthermore, girls who become child brides are more at risk to contract HIV/AIDS from their older husbands.

Although nearly half of people infected with HIV around the world are women and girls, there is currently no reliable information on how many of them receive treatment. There is, however, data documenting the barriers to receiving treatment, such as transportation and distance, costs of services and drugs, lack of female counselors, and issues of privacy and confidentiality.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ German Foundation for World Population. Reproductive Health for All. "Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people."

http://www.wpf.org/documenten/RH4all_factsh_gezJong_GB_def.pdf

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Youth, the Arts, HIV and AIDS Network. "Girl Specific Guide to HIV." <http://www.yahanet.org/guides/facts/girl-specific-guide-hiv>

⁶² United Nations Population Fund. "The Gender Dimensions of the AIDS Epidemic," (2004).

<http://www.unfpa.org/gender/aids.htm>

⁶³ UNICEF. Millennium Development Goals. "Goal: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women."

http://www.unicef.org/mdg/index_genderequality.htm

⁶⁴ Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009," *The hidden cost of AIDS care*, 62.

<http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

⁶⁵ World Health Organization. "Women and Girls Need Access to AIDS Treatment." (2004).

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2004/pr86/en/index.html>

Drugs, alcohol, tobacco. While there used to be more boys who smoked than girls, today in parts of Europe and South America, girls are now smoking more than boys. In addition, in several European countries, levels of drinking among young women have started to equal or even surpass those of young men.⁶⁶ Drinking alcohol, smoking and using drugs are illegal for U.S. teenagers. Yet many girls engage in these activities. Today, one in five girls in the U.S. between the ages of 12 and 17 drinks alcohol and smokes cigarettes.⁶⁷ In addition, American girls are smoking, drinking and using marijuana at younger ages, according to a study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.⁶⁸ Almost a quarter of 9th-grade girls first smoked cigarettes before age 13, with 35 percent of 9th graders responding they drank alcohol before age 13. When asked about marijuana, 9 percent of 9th graders had smoked it before age 13.⁶⁹

Furthermore, girls and young women not only get hooked faster, they get hooked using lesser amounts of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs than boys and young men.⁷⁰ Why? Because of biological differences, girls' bodies are impacted differently than boys' bodies. Therefore, consequences are unique to gender. For example, smoking in early adolescence for girls and even moderate alcohol consumption increases the risk of breast cancer. Smoking or drinking raises the likelihood of menstrual disorders and infertility. Smoking and use of oral contraceptives raises the chances of heart disease.⁷¹ In addition, adolescent girls are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, such as unprotected sex, when they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.⁷²

In particular, the tobacco industry has been targeting girls in developing countries with seductive advertising that exploits ideas of independence, power, emancipation and slimness. According to a report by the World Health Organization, out of 151 countries, half reported as many teenage girls smoke as boys, and even outnumber boys in parts of Latin America, notably Chile, Colombia and Mexico, as well as Eastern Europe.⁷³ In Japan, where rates of male smokers have sharply fallen in recent years, pink packs of cigarettes are being aggressively promoted to girls.⁷⁴

Body image and eating disorders. When a girl is unhappy with her body, it affects the ways she thinks and feels about herself as a person. A poor body image often leads to emotional distress, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Developing a positive body image is crucial to a girl's well-being.⁷⁵ When girls experience poor body image, they often turn to dieting as a solution. In a recent study of nearly 10,000 girls ages 8-12 in the United States, 17 percent induced vomiting or used laxatives or diet pills to lose weight. By the time the girls reach adolescence, eating disorders are the third most

⁶⁶ Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2007," *Health*, 70.

<http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/becauseiamagirl.pdf>

⁶⁷ MentalHelp.net. "GIRLPOWER! Is Good Mental Health," (March 27, 2006).

http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=9226&cn=28

⁶⁸ Joseph A. Califonia, Jr., *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, "Substance Abuse: The Feminine Mystique," (May 19, 2003).

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=2975

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Adolescent and School Health, "Sexual Risk Behaviors," (Nov. 4, 2010) <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/sexualbehaviors/>

⁷³ World Bulletin. "WHO says tobacco ads targets poor countries' women," (May 28, 2010).

http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=59187

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ The National Women's Health Information Center. "Body Image. Loving Your Body Inside and Out."

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/bodyimage/index.cfm>

common chronic illness affecting them.⁷⁶ In Western or developed countries in particular, girls are developing eating disorders as young as 5 or 6 years old.⁷⁷ Eating disorder experts cite some of the reasons as obsession from their parents who are preoccupied with their own body images, and media images of skinny pop stars like Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears.⁷⁸ In the developed world and Eastern Europe, on average around a quarter of 11-year-old girls up to 40 percent of 15-year-olds, thought they were too fat.⁷⁹ In Japan, “one in every 20 girls enrolled at high schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area suffers from anorexia nervosa.”⁸⁰ The striking paradox is that girls in developed countries suffer from eating disorders, while those in developing countries suffer from diseases caused by insufficient food consumption.⁸¹

Mental Health. Research has long held that women express their mental health problems quite differently than men. The same goes for girls. In general, females usually express their distress through internalizing behavior that typically manifests in depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and eating and personality disorders.⁸² In developing nations, links to poor mental health have been attributed to girls’ disadvantaged social status, as well as vulnerability to violence and poverty. Girls start out in life as second-rate citizens and are denied many rights. In addition to poverty, girls’ mental and emotional health is affected by illiteracy, lack of education, domestic violence, abuse, and cultural attitudes toward gender.⁸³

In developed nations, studies reveal that most women suffering from depression in their adulthood experienced depression as children or teens. Until the age of 12 or 13, the number of girls and boys suffering from depression is nearly the same, but then these statistics show a dramatic change, where the number of girls suffering from depression starts to double the number of boys.⁸⁴ Family history of depression; stress factors that present in the form of tension at home, especially between parents; bad grades at school; peer pressure to look and behave a certain way; weight issues; and coping with hormonal changes all contribute to depression in girls.⁸⁵

⁷⁶ Our Bodies Ourselves Health Resource Center. “Body Image,” (January 2005).

<http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/book/companion.asp?id=1&compID=7>

⁷⁷ PreventDisease.com “Young Girls Start Eating Disorders Early.”

http://preventdisease.com/news/articles/disorders_start_early.shtml

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2007,” *Health*, 70.

<http://www.planusa.org/becauseiamagirl/docs/becauseiamagirl.pdf>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Association for Women’s Rights in Development [AWID]. “What analysis has been done on the world program of action for youth?” (December 2, 2008).

<http://www.awid.org/eng/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/What-analysis-has-been-done-on-the-World-Programme-of-Action-for-Youth>

⁸² Canadian Institute of Child Health. “The Canadian Girl Child: Determinants of the Health and Well-Being of Girls and Young Women,” 36.

<http://www.cich.ca/PDFFiles/cndgirlchildeng.pdf>

⁸³ World Health Organization. “Women’s Mental Health: A Public Health Concern,” Regional Health Forum WHO South-East Region (Volume 5, Number 1). (September 2006).

http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section1243/Section1310/Section1343/Section1344/Section1353_5282.htm

⁸⁴ All-on-Depression-Help.com. “Depressed girl-discussion.” <http://www.all-on-depression-help.com/depressed-girl.html>

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Violence

Sarah Van Zanten, 15, was lying on the floor, an ice pack on her aching ribs. For a moment, she had no idea where she was; then her boyfriend's face came into focus. They were at a party, and Joe (not his real name), the cute football player she'd been dating, had kicked her, hard, propelling her into a wall, where she had hit her head and blacked out. "I woke up and he was hovering over me," Sarah, now 18, recalls. "I just wanted to get away."⁸⁶

Unconscionable violence against girls is perpetrated in all parts of the world today. Girls are at risk of violence on the streets, in schools, at home, where they work, and in institutions. In many cases, girls are betrayed by the very individuals responsible for their protection and well-being—their guardians, teachers, employers and the police.⁸⁷ Sexual violence against girls affects more than 150 million girls worldwide each year. Half of sexual assaults are against girls younger than 15. It is a global human rights violation of vast proportions, with severe health and social consequences. Girls who are victims of sexual violence suffer severe physical harm, and are frequently stigmatized by their communities and even their families. They are also at risk for becoming infected with HIV/AIDS.

Violence at school. Many girls around the world routinely experience school-related violence that puts their physical and psychological well-being at risk, undermines their opportunities to learn and often causes them to drop out of school entirely. Schoolgirls may be raped, sexually assaulted, and sexually harassed by classmates and even by their teachers. They may be targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In South Africa, for example, schoolgirls of every race and economic group encounter sexual violence and harassment on a daily basis. A study in the U.S. found that 83 percent of girls in grades 8 to 11 (around ages 12-16) in public schools experienced some form of sexual harassment.⁸⁸ And in Latin America, sexual harassment against girls has been found to be widespread in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama, among other countries.⁸⁹

Bullying in school. Bullying is a very real problem for girls today, especially in the United States and other developed nations. Almost every girl has either seen one, knows one, or is one. At its roots, bullying is another form of violence and abuse against girls that comprises repeated aggressive acts in order to intentionally hurt, control or have power over another person, physically or mentally.⁹⁰ Bullying among girls crosses all cultural, religious, gender and nationality barriers. Emotional bullying, especially by girls, is gaining awareness as a serious causative factor in female issues later in life.⁹¹ These may include greater risk of depression and lower self-esteem, increased problems with family life and relationships, and problems with alcohol and drug use.⁹²

⁸⁶ *People*, September 2007. <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20060228,00.html>

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch. "Violence Against Girls," The 51st U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2007/02/20/global15357.htm>

⁸⁸ Amnesty International. "Violence Against Girls in School: Key Facts." <http://www.amnesty.org/en/key-facts/violence-against-girls>

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Karen Krakower Kaplan. "Girl Bullies." *HealthLeader*, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. (September 14, 2006).

http://www.uthealthleader.org/archive/children_teens/2004/girlbullies-0325.html

⁹² overcomebullying.org, "Effects of Bullying: Implications into Adulthood," (2010) <http://www.overcomebullying.org/effects-of-bullying-into-adulthood.html>

Girls most often bully other girls, using more subtle and indirect forms of expression. For example, girls are more likely to spread gossip or encourage others to reject or exclude another girl.⁹³ Cyber bullying is becoming another common form of abuse, especially by girls. Cyber bullies use computers to send mean emails to their victims and through instant messaging, blogs, chat rooms and social networking sites. Bullying of any kind can cause girls to suffer serious long-term effects such as depression, suicide, physical ailments, frequent switching of schools, low self-esteem and problems with future relationships, among other negative consequences.⁹⁴

Teen dating violence. In teen dating violence, one partner tries to maintain power and control over the other through abuse. This abuse may include emotional, physical or sexual abuse, as well as isolation, threats, intimidation, harassment and minimization, denial and blame.⁹⁵ Statistics show that one in three teenagers in the United States has experienced violence in a dating relationship, with most victims being girls or young women. Teen dating violence crosses all racial, economic and social lines.⁹⁶ Girls may believe that their boyfriend's jealousy, possessiveness and even physical abuse is "romantic"; that the abuse is "normal" because their friends are also being abused; and that there is no one to ask for help.⁹⁷ Unhealthy, abusive or violent relationships can cause short term and long term negative effects, or consequences to the developing teen. Victims of teen dating violence are more likely to do poorly in school, and report binge drinking, suicide attempts, and physical fighting. Victims may also carry the patterns of violence into future relationships.⁹⁸ Girls experience teen dating violence throughout the world, although it is often underreported or not reported at all.

New research has also found that an alarming number of tweens (ages 11 to 14) are also affected by technological teen dating violence. A survey funded by Liz Claiborne, Inc. and the National Teen Dating Violence Abuse Helpline found that two-fifths of tweens know friends who have been verbally abused by a boyfriend or girlfriend—called names, put down, or insulted—via cell phone, instant messenger, and social networking sites such as Facebook. The use of these technological devices to control and abuse dating partners intensifies the relentlessness of abuse as abusers can have access to their dating partner twenty-four hours a day, even when they are not physically together.⁹⁹

Sex Trafficking. Trafficking is a form of slavery. It happens when human beings (mostly girls and women) are bought, recruited, transported, transferred, harbored or received for the purposes of sexual exploitation, either into other countries or within their own country. These actions are accomplished by means of force, threat of force or other forms of coercion.¹⁰⁰ While trafficking can include labor trafficking (domestic servitude, small businesses, factory settings, etc.) and servile marriage through

⁹³ National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center. "Bullying Facts and Statistics," (November 12, 2007).

http://www.yellodino.com/pdf/SafeYouth.org_Bullying_Facts_Statistics_2001.pdf

⁹⁴ EcoGuide. "Girls Who Bully: What, When, Where, Why and How." <http://www.eduguide.org/Parents-Library/Social-Violence-Girls-Bullying-Statistics-2329.aspx>

⁹⁵ New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. "Teen Dating Violence." http://www.opdv.state.ny.us/teen_dat_viol/tdvinfo.html

⁹⁶ EcoGuide. "Girls Who Bully: What, When, Where, Why and How."

<http://www.eduguide.org/Parents-Library/Social-Violence-Girls-Bullying-Statistics-2329.aspx>

⁹⁷ The Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "Dating Violence." <http://www.acadv.org/dating.html>

⁹⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Teen Dating Violence," (October, 7, 2010). http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teen_dating_violence.html

⁹⁹ Soroptimist International of the Americas. White Paper, "Teen Dating Violence," (September 2010) <http://www.soroptimist.org/whitepapers/WhitePaperDocs/WPTeenDatingViolence.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ The Salvation Army. Salvationist.ca "Human Sex Trafficking," (2010). <http://salvationist.ca/action-support/human-sexual-trafficking/>

international marriage brokers, the reality is that sexual exploitation accounts for 79 percent of human trafficking.¹⁰¹

In addition, the link between sex trafficking and prostitution is widely documented. Sadly, the majority of girls enter prostitution before they have reached the age of consent.¹⁰² Research shows that most women in prostitution were sexually and physically abused as children, suffered a myriad of deprivations and were pushed into the flesh trade very young, on average, at age 14.¹⁰³ In the United States, the average age of entry into prostitution is 12 to 14 years old.¹⁰⁴

Many of the poorest and most unstable countries have the highest incidences of trafficking, and extreme poverty is a common bond among trafficking victims. For example, Srey was only 5 years old when she was sold to a brothel by her parents. It's not known how much her family was paid, but girls in Cambodia speak of being sold for \$100; one was sold for \$10. Before she was rescued, Srey endured months of abuse at the hands of pimps and sex tourists.¹⁰⁵ In another example, a Mexican man was convicted of orchestrating a sex trafficking scheme in which he lured impoverished Mexican women, as young as 14, to the Atlanta area with false promises of better lives, high-paying jobs and hints of romance.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the incident of HIV/AIDS and sex trafficking are closely linked. Young girls' physically immature bodies are highly vulnerable to the virus, significantly heightening their risk of infection.¹⁰⁷

The sex trafficking of girls happens because of the demand for sex. A global marketplace consists of thousands, if not millions, of brothels, bars, strip clubs, massage parlors, escort services and street corners where mostly men purchase girls for sexual acts.¹⁰⁸ Other factors making girls vulnerable to entry into the global sex trade include: gender inequality, poverty, high unemployment rates, domestic violence/childhood abuse, and a desire for a better life and way to help their families.¹⁰⁹

Female Genital Mutilation.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the female genitalia, or other injury to the female genitals for non-medical reasons.¹¹⁰ Reasons for conducting FGM rituals include a mix of cultural, religious and social factors. The practice is mostly carried out by traditional circumcisers, who often play other central roles in communities such as attending at

¹⁰¹ Matthew Berger, IPS-Interpress Service. "Few Governments Serious About Human Trafficking UN Finds," (May 14, 2009). <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=46844>

¹⁰² Donna M. Hughes, "Men create the demand; women are the supply," *Lecture on sexual exploitation, Queen Sofia Center, Valencia, Spain* (November 2000), 2. <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/demand.htm>

¹⁰³ Victor Malarek, *The Johns: Sex for Sale and the Men Who Buy It*, (Arcade Publishing, April 16, 2009), 214.

¹⁰⁴ Shared Hope International. "The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children," (May 2009), 30.

http://www.sharedhope.org/dmst/documents/SHI%20National%20Report_without%20cover.pdf

¹⁰⁵ CNN World. "Girl, 6, Embodies Cambodian's Sex Industry." (2007). http://articles.cnn.com/2007-01-23/world/sex.workers.1.phnom-penh-srey-needy-children?_s=PM:WORLD

¹⁰⁶ Women's View on News. "Mexican Man Convicted of Sex Trafficking Girls." (2010)

<http://www.womensviewsonnews.org/wvon/2010/11/mexican-man-convicted-of-sex-trafficking-girls-as-young-as-14/>

¹⁰⁷ Physicians for Human Rights. "Sex Trafficking and the HIV/AIDS Pandemic." Testimony of Holly Burkhalter, PHR before the House International Relations Committee.

<http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/2003-06-25.html>

¹⁰⁸ The Salvation Army. Salvationist.ca "Human Sex Trafficking," (2010).

<http://salvationist.ca/action-support/human-sexual-trafficking/>

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ World Health Organization. "Female Genital Mutilation," (February 2010)

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>

childbirths. FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.¹¹¹ It is discriminatory and violates the rights to equal opportunities, and health; freedom from violence, injury, abuse, torture and cruel or inhuman and degrading treatment; protection from harmful traditional practices; and to make decisions concerning reproduction.¹¹² FGM is carried out on young girls sometime between infancy and age 15 and is most common in the western, eastern and northeastern regions of Africa, and in some countries in Asia and the Middle East.¹¹³ FGM can cause severe bleeding and problems urinating, and later, potential childbirth complications and newborn deaths.¹¹⁴ In addition, FGM denies women the ability to derive sexual pleasure.

FGM does not just pose problems in nations in which it is a traditional practice. With increased migration of peoples from Africa and the Middle East, Western countries such as Italy, Canada, the United States, Ireland, and Australia are now dealing with public policy, medical issues and legal cases surrounding the practice of FGM. As a result, many western nation states have passed laws prohibiting the practice of FGM and have put in place measures to prevent, oppose, and suppress the practice.¹¹⁵

Child marriage. Defined as marriage before the age of 18, child marriage or forced early marriage, devastates the lives of girls, their families and communities. This harmful traditional practice is most common in poor, rural communities and its consequences only perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Child brides are usually pulled out of school, and as a result, deprived of an education and meaningful work. In addition, they suffer health risks associated with early sexual activity and childbearing, leading to high rates of maternal and child mortality, as well as being at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. A child bride may have a husband old enough to be her grandfather and is more likely to be a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse and social isolation than other girls.¹¹⁶ It is difficult to determine the number of child marriages because many are unregistered and unofficial, but there are an estimated 51 million child brides worldwide; and 100 million girls will be married before age 18 in the next 10 years.¹¹⁷ The majority of child marriages occur in West and East Africa and in South Asia. Niger has the highest rate of child marriage, with 77 percent of girls married before the age of 18. Worldwide, an estimated 3,500 girls marry each day before their 15th birthday and another 21,000 before they are 18.¹¹⁸

What do Girls Want and Need?

*The girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace.*¹¹⁹

What are girls themselves saying about what they need and their rights in today's world? In a report by the International Center for Research on Women, girls say they want their voices to be heard and they

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² UNICEF. "Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting," (September 23, 2010), http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_genitalmutilation.html

¹¹³ The Vancouver Sun. "Facts about Female Genital Mutilation," (January 8, 2011) <http://www.vancouversun.com/health/Facts+about+female+genital+mutilation/4078467/story.html>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Azibo Press. "Migration of Female Genital Mutilation." (2010). <http://www.azibopress.org/?p=746>

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Soroptimist International of the Americas. White paper: "Unhappily Ever After: The plight of child and mail-order brides." (2010) <http://www.soroptimist.org/whitepapers/WhitePaperDocs/WPPlightChildMailOrderBrides.pdf>

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/declar.htm>

want families, communities, policymakers, governments and NGOs to listen to their aspirations and support the pursuit of their goals and dreams.¹²⁰

Specifically, girls want families and communities to know how important education is and help them find ways to support their educational goals. Girls want families and societies to learn how to provide them with their fair share of food, access to health care, and information that reflects the realities of their lives. Girls want the choice to put off marriage and childbearing until they are ready to decide. Girls want to be safe from all types of abuse and sexual exploitation.¹²¹

Girls' Rights

In reality, however, girls' wants and needs are not heard or always honored, even though their protection and enjoyment of human rights are enshrined in many documents. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, in a World Fit for Children, governments declared they were "determined to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child" throughout her life cycle and to provide special attention to her needs in order to promote and protect all her human rights.¹²² The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has sought repeatedly to end discrimination and violence against girls. Without attention to these issues and to the rights of girls, advancement for women is not sustainable. Therefore, the rights of girls need to be honored, including:

Right to education and training. Getting girls in developing nations through secondary school is one of the most important actions governments can take to improve girls' chances for good health.¹²³ Particular attention needs to be paid to the factors preventing girls' attendance, such as availability and accessibility. Situating schools close to home, with community involvement and flexible schedules, makes schools more accessible for girls.¹²⁴ Girls' education should be made affordable through eliminating fees, providing scholarships, and ensuring access to health and nutrition programs. It is also important that schools be more girl-friendly—with the provision of separate toilets, the elimination of gender stereotypes in the curriculum, and the recruitment of female teachers.

In addition, a wide range of development and government workers need to allocate the thought, time and money required to promote girls' education. Commitment to the long-term goal of increasing girls' participation at all levels of the education system will require adjustments to policies, such as changing the school day to accommodate girls' chores in the short term. As such, attention must be given to parental opposition, that is, a girl's obligation to take care of household duties and forced early marriage.¹²⁵ This will require changes in attitudes, such as encouraging communities to rethink how much

¹²⁰ International Center for Research on Women. "Girls Speak: A New Voice in Global Development, Forward," (October 2009), xxvi

<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Girls-Speak-A-New-Voice-In-Global-Development.pdf>

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Fifty-fourth session. "Statement submitted by members of the Working Group on Girls, NGO Committee on UNICEF," (March 1-12, 2010).

http://www.girlsrights.org/Written_Statement_files/WGG%20Written%20Statement%20on%20Girls%20CSW%2054--Final.pdf

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ United Nations General Assembly. Sixty-fourth session. "Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children. The Girl Child. Report by the Secretary General," (August 2009).

<http://www.crin.org/docs/GIRLREPORT.pdf>

¹²⁵ Plan International. "Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009," *Girls' Economic Rights and Empowerment Under the Law: Analysis and Commentary on the Legal Framework Supporting Girls' Economic Rights*, 203.

<http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/BIAAG%202009.pdf>

domestic work should be expected of school-age girls.¹²⁶ Finally, while education for girls is a principal tool in eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child, there also must be education for society at large. Awareness comes through education and the problems that girls face in many countries are a direct result of a lack of awareness on all levels of society.

Right to health. Health systems have a critical role to play in addressing the inequities that affect girls. Strong health systems can facilitate access to necessary care by providing essential services for women and girls, including family planning, prenatal care, skilled and emergency obstetric care at birth, postpartum care, and gender sensitive community-based health promotion and communication interventions.¹²⁷ In addition, international agreements affirm that girls have a right to age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information, education and services that enable them to deal positively and responsibly with their sexuality.¹²⁸

In the United States, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey of parents found they support sex education that discusses a wide range of topics, including negotiating skills, what to do in cases of sexual assault, and use of condoms and other contraceptives.¹²⁹ Evidence shows that withholding information and services from young people only increases the likelihood that if and when sexual initiation occurs, it will be unprotected. Girls require not only basic information about their bodies and preventing HIV/STDs and pregnancy, but also programs that address gender equality, empowerment, rights and responsibilities, and sexual and reproductive negotiation and decision making.

In addition, a more comprehensive approach to drug policy in many countries would increase restrictions on the marketing of tobacco and alcohol, and emphasize demand reduction efforts that appeal to youth.¹³⁰ Demand reduction is a critical component in any drug control strategy and national efforts should promote healthy lifestyles and education in collaboration with young people and their communities.¹³¹

Eating disorders affect millions of teen girls and young women worldwide and are more common in cultures that focus on weight loss and body image. Intense focus on thinness can lead to negative body image and unhealthy eating behaviors in girls and young women. Eating disorders are medical and psychological problems. As such, treatment usually includes working with a team of specialists, including a therapist, nutritionist and a doctor or nurse practitioner. Treatment is individualized to fit the teen girl's specific needs.¹³² In addition, parents and teachers need to discuss with daughters the images portrayed on television programs, movies, music videos, websites and magazines, that only a certain body type is acceptable.¹³³

¹²⁶ Ilana Breikopf. Stop Child Poverty. "The Girl Child's Education," (2007).

<http://www.stopchildpoverty.org/learn/bigpicture/education/girlchild.php>

¹²⁷ United Nations General Assembly. Sixty-fourth session. "The girl child. Report to the Secretary General," 16.

<http://www.crin.org/docs/GIRLREPORT.pdf>

¹²⁸ International Women's Health Coalition. "Young Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: Middle East and North Africa," (1994).

http://www.iwhc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2695&Itemid=1162

¹²⁹ Kaiser Family Foundation, "Sex Education in America, Summary of Findings," Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, (September 2000).

¹³⁰ Youth and the United Nations. "Learn what governments committed to in 1995: The World Programme of Action for Youth on Drug Abuse (A/RES/50/81)."

<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wpaydrug.htm>

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Center for Young Women's Health, Children's Hospital Boston. "Eating Disorders."

http://www.youngwomenshealth.org/eating_disorders.html

¹³³ Mayo Clinic. "Tween and Teen Health: Talking about body image," (June 5, 2010).

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/healthy-body-image/MY01225/NSECTIONGROUP=2>

As to mental health, young girls are now diagnosed more frequently than in the past with mental disorders and particularly with depressive symptoms.¹³⁴ Depression is associated with youth suicide, which is a major problem in many countries and the third leading cause of death in young people worldwide.”¹³⁵ In many countries, but especially in developing nations where girls experience poverty, violence, abuse and child marriage in greater numbers, they suffer from post-traumatic stress and depression. Accordingly, professional mental health and health organizations and providers, governments, the UN system, the World Health Organization, other international health and social organizations and appropriate nongovernmental organizations need to integrate girls' and women's mental health as a priority in policy and program development.¹³⁶

Right to be free from violence. Girls everywhere speak about their experience of fear and constraints on their activities and mobility as a consequence of violence and the threat of violence. Given the extent of coercion in sexual relationships and the statistics available on the violence against young women and harassment at school, a shift is needed in how violence against girls is treated.¹³⁷ Greater access to education and information, essential services and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes are critical to end violence and discrimination against girls.¹³⁸ In fact, many advocates see education as the principal tool for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.¹³⁹

For example, training opportunities for adolescent girls can help give them the power to challenge child marriage. Activities that help build girls' skills and engage them in the learning process better equips them to deal with abuse and exploitation and cope with harmful and vulnerable situations.¹⁴⁰ In addition, eliminating violence against the girl child requires an effective partnership with men and boys. Their interest and commitment is vital in achieving the needed change of attitudes in the family and community. They can be reached through targeted programs or as members of community organizations working on social issues.¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ Patricia Loncle. European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy, “Young people’s health in Europe.” <http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/ekcyp/BGKNGE/Health.html>

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Donna E. Stewart, *World Psychiatry, The Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association*, “The International Consensus Statement on Women’s Mental Health and the WPA Consensus Statement on Interpersonal Violence Against Women,” 61-64, (February 2006). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1472251/>

¹³⁷ International Center for Research on Women. “Girls Speak: A New Voice in Global Development, Forward, (October 2009), 39.

<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Girls-Speak-A-New-Voice-In-Global-Development.pdf> Girls Speak:

¹³⁸ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in collaboration with UNICEF. Expert Group Meeting. “Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child,” Florence Italy, (September 25-28, 2006), 8.

http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/elim-disc-viol-girlchild/UNICEFEGM_GirlaboutGirlsFINAL.pdf

¹³⁹ Christopher Schuepp. United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in collaboration with UNICEF. “Online discussion on elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child,” Florence Italy, (September 25-28, 2006), 8. http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/elim-disc-viol-girlchild/Backgroundpaper/Online%20discussion%20report_Final.pdf

¹⁴⁰ United Nations. The Expert Group Meeting on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination and Violence against the Girl Child, “Violence and Discrimination: Voices of Young People, Girls on Girls,” Florence, Italy, (September 25-28, 2006), 9.

http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/elim-disc-viol-girlchild/EGM%20Report_FINAL.pdf

¹⁴¹ Savitri Goonesekere, United Nations. “Background paper for the Expert Group Meeting on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child,” Florence, Italy, (September 25-28, 2006), 31.

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/elim-disc-viol-girlchild/Backgroundpaper/Goonesekere.pdf>

Recommendations to Governments and Communities

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), there needs to be “a recognition of the urgent importance of gathering information and gender specific data in a comprehensive and integrated manner at the international, regional, national and local levels, with a view to assessing the prevailing reality affecting girls, identifying persistent problems and challenging the prevalence of invisibility, which in turn allows the perpetuation of vulnerability.”¹⁴² Through a serious analysis of root causes of gender gaps, it will be possible to develop appropriate strategies and programs to eliminate gender disparity and empower girls.¹⁴³

With other advocates, the UNICEF Working Group on Girls recommends ending discrimination against girls, including abolishing laws that support discrimination against girls, such as inheritance, dowry and forced marriage. It also recommends protecting girls by developing gender-responsive budgeting that explicitly allocates monies for programs to end violence against girls, for education and training at all levels, and for promoting health and mental health. The Working Group also advocates empowering girls by partnering with families and communities to address the needs of girls heading households, and increase girls’ competence through education and training that includes social, political and economic empowerment to prepare them for their critical roles in their families and communities.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

This paper has examined some of the ways gender inequities negatively impact girls from the womb to childhood and then into adolescence. To tackle this gender discrimination at its roots, action is needed at every stage of a girl’s life.¹⁴⁵ Improvement in the quality of girls’ lives will come about only when there is political will, cultural change, and when society at large is committed to their rights and women’s rights. It is time to ensure that a new course is set in which investment in girls becomes a priority—a time for governments, businesses, civil society, organizations, communities and families of girls around the world to commit to, take action on, and invest in policy and practice change for girls.¹⁴⁶ It is time to support girls: to ensure that when a child is born she is not discriminated against simply because she is a girl.¹⁴⁷ The world needs to see that the cost of excluding a girl in society doesn’t just impact her. It impacts everyone. And while the cost of excluding a girl affects society as a whole, the rights of girls should not be subjugated to the rights of society or any other external factors. Education, health care and freedom from violence are basic human rights—intrinsic rights—to which girls worldwide are entitled without any other justifications.

The good news is an increasing number of organizations are focusing on girls’ rights and offering ways to secure them. For instance, since 2007, Plan International has issued annual reports as part of a series called *Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls*. The inaugural report provided a

¹⁴² United Nations. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “The Girl Child,” 4. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/Documents/Recommandations/girl.pdf>

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Action for Girls. Newsletter of the NGO Committee on UNICEF Working Group on Girls and Its International Network for Girls, “WGG Recommendations to Governments,” Volume III, No. 7, (March 2010), 1. http://www.girlsrights.org/Newsletter_files/AfG%20March%202010%20English.pdf

¹⁴⁵ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2007,” *Put Girls First*, 16. <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/becauseiamagirl.pdf>

¹⁴⁶ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2009,” *Executive Summary*, 12. <http://www.planusa.org/becauseiamagirl/docs/becauseiamagirl2009execsumm.pdf>

¹⁴⁷ Plan International. “Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2007,” 121. <http://www.planusa.org/becauseiamagirl/docs/becauseiamagirl.pdf>

comprehensive examination of the situation of the world's girls, while subsequent reports focus on specific violations of girls' rights and the mechanisms for securing them. Also in 2007, Plan International initiated a study, *Real Choices, Real Lives*, which is following 135 girls in nine countries from birth until their 9th birthday in 2015. Results of the study, which examines their lives and the experiences of their families and communities in light of the UN Millennium Development Goals, are featured in each year's *Because I am a Girl* report. These developments point to a shift in cultural attitudes and research that not only advocates for the right of girls, but is doing so in a holistic, comprehensive fashion.

How Soroptimist Works to Address Girl-Specific Issues

Soroptimist is an international volunteer organization for business and professional women who work to improve the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world. Soroptimist clubs contribute time and financial support to community-based and international projects that work on local realities facing girls. Many projects directly and indirectly address girls' rights to education, health and a life without violence. As an organization, Soroptimist administers the following programs:

Soroptimist Violet Richardson Award. The Violet Richardson Award is a recognition program for young women ages 14-17 engaged in volunteer action within their communities or schools. The award is given to young women whose leadership and volunteer activities make the community and world a better place. This award is not a scholarship and applicants need not be at the top of their class academically or be a star athlete. Rather they must simply be committed to improving the world around them. By honoring young women for their leadership and volunteer efforts, this award encourages them to be powerful female agents of change. As a result, the Violet Richardson Award helps ensure that these young women develop a healthy sense of self-esteem and a confident understanding that they are important and valuable members of society—worthy of only the happiest and healthiest of relationships.

Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Project. To raise awareness among teenagers about teen dating violence, Soroptimist created the Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Bookmark. On one side of the bookmark is a "Dating Quiz" to determine if a teen may be in an abusive relationship. If so, the bookmark provides resources for seeking help. The other side of the bookmark contains a list of "Dating Rights," provided to help teens understand that they have a right to a happy, healthy dating relationship. The Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Bookmark is available as a [writeable PDF](#) on the Soroptimist website and is also available from the [Soroptimist Store](#).

Additionally, Soroptimist wrote a [teen dating violence white paper](#) and created two teen dating violence-related program kits. The first kit is a thorough how-to guide for Soroptimist clubs on implementing the [Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Awareness Campaign: Because Teens Have the Right to be in Safe and Healthy Relationships](#) in their communities. The kit is a how-to guide for Soroptimist clubs on implementing a [Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Awareness Day](#) in their communities.

Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls. Often the abilities and ambitions of Soroptimist clubs exceed their financial resources. Soroptimist introduced the Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls in 1997 to assist with community projects that improve the lives of women and girls. Each year, grants are given to clubs working on projects that address the educational, health and/or safety needs of women and girls in their communities. Since the program's inception, more than \$2.5 million has been awarded for nearly 500 projects assisting more than 200,000 women, girls and their families. Listed below are a few examples of Soroptimist Club Grant projects addressing girls' needs:

Soroptimist International of Fremont, Ohio: <sifremont@soroptimist.net>

The Fremont Ohio club was awarded a \$5,000 Soroptimist Club Grant in support of its project *TRAP: Teen Relationship Abuse Prevention*. The club is using its grant to provide educational materials and forums for teens, parents and community members on healthy dating relationships and teen dating

violence. Club members are organizing and promoting presentations for two high schools, running an educational workshop for parents and community members, and preparing and presenting a curriculum at a local pregnancy crisis center.

Soroptimist International of Garden Grove, California: <sigardengrove@soroptimist.net>

The Garden Grove, California, club was awarded a \$5,000 Soroptimist Club Grant in support of its project *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teen Workshops*. The club will use its grant to expand the teen mentoring program to include teen girls in foster care and impoverished teen girls attending the after-school program at the local Boys and Girls club. Funds will be used to purchase textbooks and workbooks, a computer, backpacks, snacks and gift cards for school supplies. Club members will conduct mentoring sessions for three groups of teen girls, provide healthy snacks and launch a raffle incentive for a laptop computer and school supplies.

Soroptimist International of Hofu, Japan: <sihofu@soroptimist.net>

The Hofu club was awarded \$5,000 for its project *Raising Awareness of Teen Dating Violence*. The club will use its grant to create and distribute teen dating violence flyers to high school students. Club members will also create lecture materials and organize educational lectures for students on the topic of teen dating violence and healthy teen relationships.

Soroptimist International of Pachuca, Mexico: <sipachuca@soroptimist.net>

The Pachuca club was awarded \$3,500 for its project *Renewing the Equipment*. The club will use its grant to purchase new equipment for a computer room at a local boarding home for adolescent girls. Funds will be used for desktop computers, printers, ink cartridges and the program office. Club members will help administer and evaluate computer placement tests, provide the instructor's salary and measure the progress of the students.

Soroptimist International of Salt Lake City, Utah: <sisaltlakecity@soroptimist.net>

The Salt Lake City club was awarded \$8,000 for its project *Possibilities*. The club will use its grant to run a mentoring program for teenage mothers enrolled at an alternative high school for non-traditional students. Funds will be used for tuition assistance, books, classroom supplies and nursery equipment. Club members will conduct educational workshops, book guest speakers, host students at their place of work, and organize holiday events for the teen moms and their children.

Soroptimist International of Sta. Maria, Philippines: <sista.maria@soroptimist.net>

The Sta. Maria club was awarded a \$10,000 grant in support of its project *Activities to Alleviate Poverty*. The club will use its grant to fund livelihood programs for underprivileged women and girls displaced by a typhoon. Funds will be used to purchase computers, printers, a stove and oven, a ceiling fan, styling supplies, cooking products, and bedding and for teacher salaries. Club members will recruit participants, monitor the operation of the classes, help teach, provide tutoring and donate supplies.

Soroptimist Disaster Grants for Women and Girls. While disasters create hardships for many, women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable because of existing gender inequalities that are magnified during and following a disaster. Because relief efforts targeted to women are often overlooked during a crisis, and because women and girls have special needs in times of crisis and disaster, the Soroptimist Disaster Grants for Women and Girls provide funds ranging from \$1,000 to \$20,000 targeted to the special needs of women and/or girls prior to, during and after disasters. Additionally, Soroptimist wrote [Reaching out to Women When Disaster Strikes](#), a white paper addressing the special challenges facing women and girls during natural disasters and acts of war, and what can be done to assist this vulnerable population. Soroptimist also published a feature article in *Best for Women* magazine titled [Women at the Forefront Rebuilding After Disaster Strikes](#).

Soroptimist White Papers. Soroptimist aims to create true social and economic equality for women and girls. As a public service, Soroptimist provides white papers on various topics that can help those who wish to become more educated about issues facing today's women and girls and/or learn what can be done to provide direct assistance to women and girls in need. White paper topics range from [child and mail-order brides](#) to [women and education](#) to trafficking [the new face of slavery](#). For a full list of [white papers](#) please visit the Soroptimist website.

Headquartered in Philadelphia, Pa., Soroptimist offers programs that improve the lives of women and girls through social and economic empowerment. Its major program, the Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards, provides cash grants for women seeking to improve their lives with the help of additional education and training. Each year, about \$1.5 million is disbursed to deserving women through this award-winning program. Soroptimist is a 501(c)(3) organization that relies on charitable donations to support its programs. For more information, visit Soroptimist.org.