

WHERE WE STAND

THE GIRL CHILD

Where things stand

The status of girls continues to be hindered by the persistence of gender discrimination preventing them from enjoying their basic rights, although some progress has been made in the implementation of international treaties and conventions on the rights of the child with significant improvements in the lot of girls who are better educated, better cared for and protected in many countries. Recent research, however, demonstrates there is still more progress to be made.

The current crisis situations responsible for mass migrations of the populations involved have had a detrimental effect on women and girls, with for example disruption of education and healthcare.

The progress of the future society is still hampered by the obstacles faced by girls in the full development of their abilities. The SDGs will not be achieved by 2030 if half of the current youth are prevented from contributing to the implementation and decision making which will affect their lives in the future.

Education

- The number of girls never enrolled in primary school still stands at 15 million, compared with 10 million boys while numbers of girls entering secondary schools remains low.
- The barriers to education for girls continue to be early marriages and / or early pregnancies, domestic labour especially chores of collecting water, the risks of sexual violence on school routes and at school, the lack of separate lavatories, and exclusion taboos associated with menstruation.
- Girls are underrepresented in innovative scientific, mathematical and technical fields precluding them from high value work through undervaluing of girls' abilities or a sexist conception of the social role assigned to women and men.

Health, hygiene, sanitation

Despite the overall improvement in child health, the death rate of girls remains higher than that of boys in some regions. Early malnutrition and lack of understanding of adolescent girls' nutrition needs impact on later health. Lack of clean water and sanitation contributes to spread of disease.

Early pregnancy is probably the most serious threat to girls. Every year 16 million girls under 19 become mothers and 1 million are under 15 years old. These premature pregnancies, when completed, often result in complications and deaths during childbirth, or definitive lesions such as obstetric fistula and various infections.

The lack of information for youth about sexuality and the reproductive function penalises girls who do not know the consequences of sexual intercourse, whether they agree or not, and do not know how to prevent pregnancy and protect themselves from infections, including HIV. With regard to menstruation, the lack of instruction provided by schools and families prevents girls from properly managing the cycle and hygiene is often lacking without appropriate clothing accessories, water, and access to sanitary facilities.

Violence, sexual abuse and human trafficking

- Gender-based violence against girls is extensive: harassment, rape, domestic violence, mutilation, “honor” killing, forced marriage often prevent attendance at school.
- Female genital mutilation continues to be practiced illegally on girls with immediate risk of death from bleeding and infections. The consequences are heavy on the health of women in later life.
- Early and forced marriages are decreasing but affect about 15 million girls under 18 years of age per year. This often results in withdrawal from education and in early pregnancies.
- For refugee populations, natural disaster and conflict crises have a disastrous multiplier effect on early marriages: an assessment conducted in 2013, showed the percentage of young Syrian refugees in Jordan married before the age of 18 rose from less than 17 per cent before the conflict to more than 50 per cent after the conflict (UNFPA).
- 79% of girl victims of human trafficking are sexually exploited. This threat is particularly increased by the forced displacement of populations.

Girls with disabilities

Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination affect girls with disabilities. This must be countered with specific policies and programmes which enable access.

Sports

For girls, access to sports activities is not always easy even when there is no limitation or formal prohibition. Sport is not given priority for girls, often not just through lack of encouragement but also difficulty accessing facilities and equipment. Some sports are culturally not considered acceptable for girls to participate in.

Where things need to go

Many treaties and conventions exist concerning these issues with most States signing to protect girls including:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- CEDAW (1979) 189 States that have ratified CEDAW have to pay attention to its respect and organize watch and control on its application and cooperate with the CEDAW Experts. (girls: art 10 on Education and 16.2)
- Convention on the rights of the Child (1989) art. 13
- Resolution 67/146 UN General Assembly urging States to condemn all harmful practices affecting women and girl especially female genital mutilation.
- UNFPA: “Protecting women in emergency situations “and “Women and girls in forced and protracted displacements”

- UN – SADC (Southern Africa Development Committee): model law on eradication of child marriage approved in 2016.

Additional Action Required

Access to school

- In countries with high population growth, numbers of schools need to be expanded, particularly in rural areas, so that schools are easily accessible for all children and eliminates the dangers encountered especially by girls when distances are great.

Inclusive and good quality education

- The quality of the education must be evaluated, and the training of teachers ensured by the governments, taking care to prevent any kind of gender discrimination for the content and for the level of education, for both teachers and students.

Girls and higher education streams

- Girls should be encouraged to engage in STEM courses with the reward seen as better paid jobs.

Violence and safety in schools

- Awareness of school-based violence is needed and the fight against it must be organized, starting with the fight against sexist prejudices and education for tolerance;
- Schools must be equipped with safe and maintained sanitary blocks, separate for boys and girls.

Adolescent health, prevention of early pregnancy

- Develop school curricula and awareness campaigns for both girls and boys on health issues: nutrition, water use, sex and relationship education so that girls can manage their menstrual cycle and with good hygiene, and the risks of disease such as HIV.

Forced and early marriages, genital mutilation

- Families and communities should be educated on the harmfulness of mutilating practices. Alternative forms of income should be offered to the practitioners of excision;
- Encourage fathers to understand their role in preventing forced and early marriages.

Data collection

- In order to monitor the progress and effectiveness of measures taken to promote gender equality, it is essential to make available to States a data collection system disaggregated by gender;
- Establish a free national register of births so that the age of girls can be confirmed.

Where Soroptimist International stands

These are the principles that Soroptimist international strongly supports and will advocate for and on behalf of women and girls, believing Education of girls is a key:

- Soroptimists support all actions of governments, intergovernmental institutions and civil society to promote, improve and enable the schooling of girls, on an equal basis with boys, their attendance in school during the 12 years of primary and secondary education, and their access to STEM courses; Soroptimists encourage all governments to create or ensure girl-friendly physical environments in schools, such as proper sanitation facilities, clean water in schools, safe transport to and from school, provision of school supplies, and provision of school meals;
- Soroptimists encourage all Governments to take legal measures to prevent, control and sanction violent practices and particularly child domestic labour, mutilation, early marriage, harassment and rape;
- Soroptimists encourage and support health campaigns, especially in schools, to protect and improve girls' health and prevent early pregnancy and diseases such as HIV;
- Soroptimists will raise awareness of girls on their rights to defend themselves against gender injustices and discrimination; enabling them to find support and recourse against any form of violence when they are victims;
- Soroptimists encourage advocacy and global campaigns to raise awareness and more particularly educate and inform the youth of the world to fight against discrimination and gender prejudice;
- Soroptimist International is concerned about the decline in the status of women and girls who are forced into exile or living in regions in conflict and calls for special international protection for girls in this situation.