

Achieving the Rights of Girls and Gender Equality



“Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the (Sustainable Development) goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities... The systemic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda is crucial”.

UN General Assembly, A/Res/70/1,
“Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



- Girls across the world are undervalued, undermined and underestimated – simply because of their age and gender. This double burden of discrimination prevents them from fulfilling their human rights, making decisions about their lives and achieving their full potential. Despite the commitments made by governments 25 years ago in the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as in Agenda 2030's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and numerous reinforcing legal frameworks, girls' lives continue to be constrained by harmful gender norms and stereotypes. These are often enforced by fear and violence and rooted in entrenched discrimination.
- Girls face gender-based violations of their human rights in every area of their lives, across all contexts and regions, and often irrespective of socio-economic status, although girls in the poorest households often experience the impacts of gender inequality more intensely. Hundreds of millions are denied the opportunity to reach their full potential, including the estimated 12 million girls who are still married each year¹ and 15 million who are unlikely ever to be at school². Tremendous rewards are reaped where gender discrimination is challenged, where girls are confident of their social, physical and economic wellbeing, and where boys see this as normal. Benefits flow to the whole society when girls realise their rights.
- Girls can be powerful agents of positive change in their families and communities. They are catalysts for development where they have power, freedom, support and a valued voice, including through movements in which boys, men and women are their allies. They can drive changes for gender equality, which is central to the achievement of the SDGs and the realisation of human rights. Governments and other key actors must invest more systematically now, at all levels, to ensure that girls grow up realising their rights and are empowered as they grow.
- Governments must also urgently intensify efforts to meet their obligations to girls under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and complementary legal and policy frameworks. Cooperating partners, international and regional actors and civil society should intensify their focus on supporting countries at all income levels to ensure the rights of girls and build more gender-equal societies. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes the commitment to "adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls". It has adopted goals for universal education, health, and an end to violence against children in all contexts. Governments must hold themselves accountable to girls, as to other citizens, for progress in meeting these commitments and goals. They should enable girls' systematic and meaningful participation in accountability mechanisms under international, regional and national frameworks.

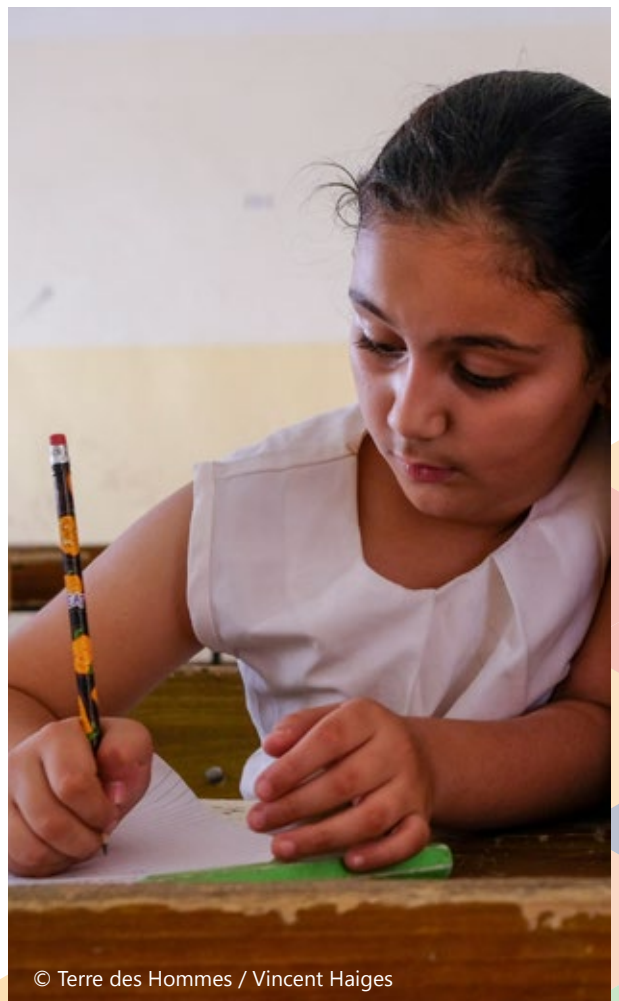
Girls' rights are human rights, underpinned by the universality and non-discrimination principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the specific provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which requires countries to end discrimination based on gender. The Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 recognised, for the first time, that global gender equality is a prerequisite to sustainable development, committing to a global goal to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" – and to end all forms of discrimination against them – by 2030. This commitment and global goal was built on years of development of international norms, including the Beijing Platform for Action adopted in 1995. This was the first international policy framework to explicitly call out the distinct rights violations faced by girls.

And yet, 30 years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 25 years after the commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action, and 5 years after the international community pledged to achieve gender equality once and for all – hundreds of millions of girls across the world still struggle to realise their rights and continue to face gender discrimination in almost every sphere of their lives.

Critical data and problem analysis³

As the data in this policy brief will show, girls across the world face widespread discrimination, violence and abuse due to their age and gender. At all stages of their childhood, they are vulnerable and subject to inadequacies in care, health, education and protection that are directly driven and exacerbated by discrimination and neglect relating to age and gender. Their rights are further violated when factors such as poverty, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression intersect, and where stereotyping and grossly unequal power relations prevail, often reinforced by gender-based violence.

From their earliest age, girls are more likely to be silenced and suffer discrimination because of harmful social norms and beliefs about their abilities, interests, roles and value in families and society. These beliefs dictate how girls and boys should behave, how the world views them and how they view themselves. This discrimination is seen in every country. But it is worse and harder to overcome for girls living in poverty or in humanitarian crises, for girls with non-majority ethnicities or religions, or those with a disability. Girls from marginalised groups are among the most excluded in any community. Yet girls are inherently powerful, resilient and able to achieve great things if allowed the opportunities.



Disadvantaged throughout childhood

From early on, a girl is often told that she is worth less than a boy. Children in all societies are given a clear sense of the expectations that society prescribes for their gender, although the ways in which this happens vary greatly.⁴ By the age of six, many girls believe that they are less smart than boys.⁵ In some communities where son preference prevails, boys receive better care than girls.⁶

Despite the success of many countries in meeting the Millennium target of reducing enrolment gaps in basic education, girls are still more likely than boys to never set foot in a classroom. Of the 25 million out-of-school children who are expected never to start school, some two-thirds are girls. More than half of these girls – 9 million – live in sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

“Parents see no need of educating girls as there is still a common way of thinking that the girl belongs only to the kitchen and to bear children only, hence the girls are given little attention when it comes to educating them.”

Thandiwe, 12, Zambia

A girl’s burden of household chores increases as she approaches adolescence. Worldwide, girls under 14 spend 30 - 50% more time than their male peers in household work, such as preparing food, fetching water, cleaning and

cares for others.⁸ These tasks significantly undermine their ability to attend or keep up at school. Research suggests that chores taking up 21 hours a week or more negatively affect children’s – especially girls’ – ability to attend and benefit from school.⁹

“Girls are mistreated more than boys; when girls arrive home right after school, they start working directly. When boys leave their backpacks, they start playing; they do not want to help the girls, they cannot be sent to buy things.”

Lenka, 11, Burkina Faso

Entering puberty, girls face heightened risks and disadvantages. A girl may feel a sense of shame about her body, as well as a loss of control over it. Her experiences of gender discrimination may become amplified across several areas of her life, including higher barriers to education and increased fears of gender-based violence.

In some countries, a girl’s first period is considered a sign that she is no longer a child and is ready for marriage and motherhood. Once girls begin menstruating, they may be kept from school to “keep them safe” or prepare them for marriage.

Of the girls and women alive today, it is estimated that over 200 million have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), mainly in the Middle East and Africa. Every year, 3 million girls are still at risk of undergoing this violation. The average age for a girl to be

Girls themselves have confirmed the challenges they face during menstruation: a widespread context of silence and shame, often due to prevailing beliefs about female sexuality; a lack of accurate information at home or school about menstruation, with information based instead on cultural beliefs; extensive restrictions that prevent them from joining normal activities with their families, at school or socially; multiple barriers at schools including a lack of running water, bins for disposal and lack of affordable supplies of menstrual “napkins”.

Plan International UK (2017) “Learning Brief: Menstrual hygiene in Bangladesh”

Global gains from ending child marriage could reach more than \$500 billion per year.



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subject to FGM/C is at 10 years.¹⁰

Globally, about one girl in ten has experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forced sexual actions at some point in her childhood.¹¹

As a girl grows, she is likely to face sexual harassment and abuse, and may encounter punishment and bullying for deviating from prescribed gender roles. The threat and reality of gender-based violence can significantly affect a girl's mental and physical health and wellbeing. They may also severely limit her aspirations, freedom of movement and life opportunities.

Widespread evidence confirms that girls worldwide are subjected to high levels of school-related sexual harassment and gender-based violence.¹² Amongst girls and women aged 14 to 21 in the UK, for example, 66% have experienced unwanted sexual attention or harassment in a public place.¹³ Fear and the experience of gender-based violence are linked to lower school attendance and poorer learning outcomes. Corporal punishment or the failure to tackle bullying or sexual abuse can make violence seem normal and encourage predatory male behaviour in classrooms.

Girls in adolescence are often treated as sexual objects, while being expected to conform to traditionally defined roles as wives and mothers. A girl's right to make decisions about her

own body, about whether and when to have children, and with whom, is widely denied. Gender inequalities, founded in patriarchal tradition and sometimes linked to poverty and caste, drive efforts in many societies to restrict girls' mobility and sexuality.

Girls, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, become wives and mothers too early, which effectively ends their childhoods.¹⁴ Some 12 million girls are still married each year.¹⁵ Girls in marriage rarely have a say over when they will get pregnant and are more likely to experience violence, abuse and forced sexual relations. Approximately 16 million adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 and 2.5 million girls aged 12 to 15 give birth each year.¹⁶ Nine in ten births by adolescents occur within a marriage or union, highlighting adolescent pregnancy as both a cause and consequence of child marriage. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19-years-old. Girls under 15 are five times more likely to die due to pregnancy or childbirth related complications than those over 19 years.¹⁷ In some countries, marriage contributes to 10 - 20% of girls dropping out of secondary school.¹⁸

Ending child marriage could save developing countries trillions of dollars by reducing fertility and population growth and improving earnings and child health. The World Bank estimates that

global gains from ending child marriage could reach more than \$500 billion per year.¹⁹

“If we don’t do well our parents said that they will marry us off.”

Rhiaa, child, Bangladesh

A girl is more likely to experience intimate partner violence if she has a low level of education, if there is a significant age gap between her and her partner, if she has limited economic autonomy, where violence in the home is accepted or deemed a private matter by society or if the husband has multiple partners. Intimate partner violence can have devastating and ongoing effects on physical and mental health for girls and women. They may suffer injury, death, depression and increased risk of suicide.²⁰

Adolescent girls without access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services and information face compounding risks. In the 15 to 19-year age range, girls account for about two-thirds of people living with new HIV infections.²¹ Only a minority of sexually active adolescents with a sexually transmitted infection seek care in a health facility. Over 200 million girls and women in developing regions have unmet needs for modern contraception.²²

It is sometimes claimed that comprehensive sexuality education encourages young people

to become sexually active. Evidence shows it in fact delays sexual activity.²³ Without accurate, youth-friendly information about their bodies, contraception, sexual rights and positive relationships, girls’ ability to have control over their bodies and sexual relationships is seriously, sometimes fatally, compromised. Lack of such information may also impede boys from forming healthy relationships. Social taboos may lead to some girls being excluded altogether from SRHR services – for instance, unmarried girls, those from conservative religious or cultural communities, and survivors of sexual violence.

“One day when I was 14, a boy of 18 years promised to buy for me school materials like pens, sanitary pads and books if I had sex with him. I didn’t know that if I have sex with him I will get pregnant. I had sex three times and then I realised that I’m pregnant. I stopped going to school. I wanted to go back to school but my parents told me to marry.”

Girl, 16, Uganda

Adolescence is also an age when girls can play both formal and informal roles in the wider community. But they are often not afforded the opportunities and may be held back by mounting household burdens, social isolation or a lack of confidence. These factors also influence girls’ participation in the economy. Three in four young people aged 15 to 24, who are not in employment, education or training, are girls or young women.²⁴ While many jobs in the future will require sophisticated digital and ICT skills, girls are currently five times less likely than boys to consider a technology-related career.²⁵

Unemployment affects young women more than young men in almost all regions of the world.²⁶ Much of the work that girls and young women do is unseen, unpaid and undervalued. Where girls and young women do work, their jobs are



often informal and unprotected. Girls are more likely to be paid less and be the first to be made redundant.

Gender inequalities can heighten risks and vulnerabilities for girls during crises and emergencies.²⁷ In fragile and conflict-affected settings, girls are at greater risk of dropping out of school; of suffering from gender-based violence and discrimination; of being exposed to STIs; of dying from childbirth; of marrying early; of becoming pregnant; and of losing what livelihoods they may have. In crisis situations, they are especially vulnerable to being sexual exploited and trafficked.²⁸

Unequal gender power relations underpin the multiple disadvantages of girls

The many outcomes that undermine the human rights of girls are the result of deep imbalances of power which maintain the dominance of males. These gender inequalities are widely normalised and still often unspoken. They are also reflected in the design and implementation of – or failures to implement – laws, budgets and programmes. Girls, both as a group and as differentiated individuals, fail to receive recognition of their specific needs and vulnerabilities in the design and delivery of services. Policies that govern service delivery often fail to distinguish the needs and rights of children, let alone those of girls at different ages.

Data and other information used for national planning are largely produced without reference to the impacts of age- and gender-based inequalities, and of additional forms of discrimination faced by girls. Country data are almost non-existent, for example, on births to girls in the early years of adolescence.²⁹ The lack of visibility for girls is also evident in many national assessments, such as SDG progress reports, and policies such as those to address the impacts of the climate crisis.³⁰

Without examining power structures in each cultural and political setting, including the influence of religious beliefs and practices, the persistence of gender inequalities cannot be well understood. Nor can the reasons why these inequalities have not been resolved in practice by the policies, laws, budgets and programmes which ostensibly aim at eliminating gender bias. The neglect in policies of the hierarchies that sustain gender inequalities holds back the world's progress towards achieving SDG5 on Gender Equality,³¹ and results in gender considerations being weakly integrated in other SDGs. As a consequence, inequalities continue on an unprecedented scale, to the detriment of all.

“We want laws and programs to recognise our specificities as girls and women and to protect us with equality.”

Giovanna, child, Brazil

Girls as agents in claiming their rights

Girls are the experts of their own experience, priorities and needs. They know best what they need to survive and thrive. Yet, girls around the world continue to be excluded from decisions that vitally affect them – their needs remain invisible and their voices unheard.

Girls face distinct age- and gender- related barriers to their ability to influence decision-making. From an early age, girls are widely discouraged from speaking their minds. Families often deter them from engaging in politics and other public decision-making spaces, generally considered to be a “male domain” with “good leaders” often defined with a patriarchal lens and traditionally masculine traits. They may face restrictions to their mobility which shut off their access to public spaces. Girls who do take on high profile leadership roles, such as human rights defenders, often face social isolation, harassment and violence.³² Seldom are there

strong female role models in public decision-making positions – to inspire girls – and in critical economic and information spaces, where power lies.

Adolescence is a vital formative period in a woman's life, crucial to the positive development of feelings of confidence and value. The development of civic participation and political leadership skills in girlhood provides the foundations for continued leadership in both political and economic spheres into adulthood.

When girls are supported to be active in civic and political spaces, they often gain the skills they need to be drivers of positive change in their families and communities. Girls are a powerful catalyst for a more equal world.³³ Their voices and experiences are an essential contribution to civic and political discussions at every level – from local school boards to national policy-making. Supporting girls' participation in civic and political spaces is key to ensuring resilient and sustainable communities, in which boys and adults alike understand their participation to be normal.

Using a gender perspective in policy to deliver progress for the rights of girls

In order to make gender equality and girls rights' a reality, public policy needs to take a gender perspective across all sectors and provide the opportunities and resources necessary for effective implementation. Policies have differing impacts on girls and boys, women and men and individuals of diverse gender identities. The needs of these groups also vary and may call for different policy solutions. How policies are designed, reviewed and implemented has the capacity to perpetuate or eliminate gender inequalities and power imbalances, in ways that are crucial to both girls and women.

Key considerations in applying a gender perspective to public policy are:

- ➔ Start with analysis differentiated by both gender and age, in order to better understand the economic and social differences between girls and boys, women and men and individuals of diverse gender identities. Use this also to uncover the potential gender and age implications of public policy that may seem neutral on the surface. Such analysis can help account for the experiences and values of diverse groups and is sensitive to the multiple forms of exclusion that children, especially girls, face in each society.
- ➔ Understand how policies may perpetuate or worsen prevailing roles and stereotypes among girls and boys and children of diverse gender identities, and how policies may unintentionally affect gender roles and relations within households.
- ➔ Question how public institutions may be failing to focus specifically on children and gender – and how this affects the development and implementation of public policy. Advancing girls' rights and gender equality in a policy context will require decision-makers to seek and hear the views and voices of girls and young women. Public service institutions will often need to change their working methods significantly to enable this response, and build their own capacity to apply gender considerations across their programmes.
- ➔ Ensure that sectors adopt gender-and-age-responsive budgeting, with project designs and budget decisions assessed and monitored for their impacts on different groups of girls and women. Link public budgeting in turn to funding and capacity for the improved collection and disaggregation of data, including by age, gender and other intersectional characteristics.

Examples of policy interventions

Some examples of specific policy interventions which are having impact or showing promise for securing the rights of girls and promoting gender equality are the following:

- ➔ Rwanda's National Policy against Gender-Based Violence, which seeks to address gender-based violence through a multi-sectoral strategy that includes prevention, community awareness-raising, protection and treatment. It is backed by legal reforms and a Gender Monitoring Office. Government bodies in Rwanda are expected to provide a Gender Budget Statement as part of their funding submissions.³⁴
- ➔ Although prevalence remains high in large parts of Africa and the Middle East, major reductions in FGM/C have been recorded in some countries since the mid-1990s, such as Kenya and Liberia.^{40 41} These improvements have been helped by government action to reform legislation, coupled with sustained efforts to engage community and religious leaders and to provide public education on the risks to the health of women and girls.
- ➔ Cash transfer programmes in countries such as Mexico and Malawi, which have been shown to improve girls' sexual and reproductive health, including by increasing school attendance and reducing their exposure to risky sexual practices and violence. Such social protection policies can also help prevent child marriage, especially where combined with activities such as life-skills learning.³⁵
- ➔ The gender-responsive education sector planning (GRESPE) approach, which has been adopted by several African governments as a tool to identify and address the barriers to equal access and outcomes for girls and boys in schooling.⁴²
- ➔ Measures to strengthen the awareness of local governments officials and parliamentarians for gender mainstreaming in decision-making. These can be based on the use of gender-responsive Young Citizen Score Cards to promote more inclusive basic services and protection initiatives, such as safe houses for girls in parts of India.^{36 37}
- ➔ The Southern African Development Community (SADC)'s model law on eradicating child marriage and protecting children already in marriage. This is serving as a basis for countries such as Mozambique and Malawi to review and strengthen their legal frameworks.⁴³ Follow up has included SADC parliamentarians, young people, traditional leaders and civil society. A model law on combating gender-based violence in the region is also being developed.
- ➔ School and community-level girls' clubs in parts of Asia and Africa. These have been found to increase knowledge and confidence among girls and to reduce gender-discriminatory attitudes and practices, such as restrictions on their mobility outside the home.^{38 39} These could be scaled up by governments through national programmes.





Calls to Action: ensuring that every girl is able to realise her rights

In the year of the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Joining Forces alliance is calling on governments and cooperating partners, international and regional actors, in alliance with civil society to:

➔ **Support and enable the safe and meaningful participation of girls and young women in policy and decision-making at all levels, and in all contexts, and ensure that the voices of girls are heard,** including by providing safe, fully accessible platforms and mechanisms for all girls who wish to organise and express their views and perspectives. This should include gender-responsive and participatory budgeting, policy development and programme reviews;

➔ **Fully ratify all international instruments, including optional protocols, that guarantee the realisation of rights of girls** and withdraw any treaty reservations that weaken national commitment to securing girls' human rights;

➔ **Identify, challenge and change patriarchal laws and harmful social norms** in order to transform the factors that limit girls' potential and drive the violations of their rights;

➔ **Provide adequate resources and expertise to ensure that all policies, programmes, laws and administrative practices are based on gender equality in both design and in practice,** and take fully into account the rights and varying needs of children as individuals, differentiated by gender, age and other intersectional characteristics. Governments should also

establish independent gender monitoring and review bodies for all policies that systematically support the meaningful engagement of girls;

➔ **Ensure that government policies, development cooperation and national and international humanitarian response programmes take a rights-based approach to promoting gender equality in all areas of intervention, focusing on the poorest and most marginalised girls and women, and those placed at heightened risk due to humanitarian and environmental crises,** and analysing and addressing the root causes and structural drivers of all existing forms of gender-based discrimination;

➔ **End all forms of gender-based and sexual violence and discrimination against girls, including child marriage, other forced unions, and the practice of FGM/C,** by investing in known solutions that address the root causes of these human rights violations. These include effective legislation and transforming harmful social norms by working together with local leaders, girls and women activists, and by engaging boys and men in sustained action for change. Improved services and support are also needed for girls who are already married, child mothers and their children;

Invest adequately and systematically in girls' rights, for example:

- ➔ Increase public funding to ensure **access of all adolescents and youth, especially girls, to comprehensive and age-responsive sexual and reproductive health information, education and services**, including in humanitarian and environmental crisis situations;
- ➔ **Implement gender awareness programmes** for all public sector decision-makers to strengthen local and national capacities, and consistently use terminologies and procedures that advance, and do not undermine girls' rights and gender equality;
- ➔ **Give deliberate attention and funding to the rights and needs of girls across the public sector, in both development and humanitarian interventions and**

in the design, improvement and analysis of data and research.

Ensure that the design and monitoring of public policies and reporting on progress towards national SDG targets and to Human Rights treaty bodies are disaggregated by gender, age, sub-national contexts, for disability and other intersectional characteristics, in order to reflect the specific needs of girls as individuals, as well as a group that is widely 'left behind'; and

- ➔ **Implement gender-transformative education and community information systems**, including by eliminating violence and gender stereotyping in schools, designing gender-responsive curricula, through the provision of school sanitation facilities and age-appropriate information for all girls on menstruation and contraception.

NOTES

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Joining Forces is an alliance of the six largest international NGOs working with and for children to secure their rights and end violence against them.

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www.child-rights-now.org

