



Conclusion

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In their extreme old age a childless couple was granted a daughter. This made them very happy and they prayed to the gods every morning and evening to bless their child. The prayer was granted. As their daughter grew up it soon became obvious that she was a remarkable child. She could run further and faster than anyone in the village, her manners were good, she sang rather well, and she excelled in her studies. There was only one thing wrong, which spoiled everything. This was not a defect. The gods hadn't cheated. She was indeed blessed with great ability. But everyone in the village was critical of her. "To be so damned good," they said, "is not womanly."

Suniti Namjoshi *The Gods*

"Exploitation is focused more on girls than boys because we are seen in some countries as not having much value or status compared to them. In fact we have AS MUCH status and should be treated right."
Girl, 18, Australia¹

This is the first time that a global report series on girls and young women has been published. 'Because I am a Girl' shows clearly how discrimination against girls and young women remains deeply entrenched and widely tolerated throughout the world. The struggle for women's rights has made little impact on girls who continue to be undervalued in society and within their families. Society's power structures allow this gender discrimination to continue. Wherever they live in the world, girls have to make choices – sometimes forced, sometimes of their own free will – which further disadvantage them. Or they lack the power to make the choices in their lives that will empower them; choices that their brothers are able to make

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about where to live, whether to marry, who to marry, about work, children and family life.

As a result, girls are disadvantaged in comparison to boys. They are more vulnerable particularly in times of conflict, disaster and when they and their families are poor. Even today, with all the technologies and tools for development at our disposal, girls are still less likely to go to school than boys, and are more likely to be illiterate and innumerate when they grow up. In many families, they are considered of less value than their brothers. Girls are often married too young, work longer hours for less pay, and are more likely to be poor than their brothers. They are often subject to violence and abuse throughout their lives. In richer countries, while they feel themselves to be equal to boys and even do better at school, when they grow up their earnings are still less than their brothers' and they are still under pressure to aspire to standards of passive beauty and behaviour.

All this, despite numerous advances. The most remarkable have been in education. Recent figures show that girls are gaining access to education and literacy at a faster rate than boys, though the rate for boys and young men is still higher than that for girls and young women. In 1990, globally, literacy for young men between 15 and 24 was 88.2 per cent while for young women it was 80.1 per cent. By the period 2000-2004, this had increased to 90.4 per cent for young men and 84 per cent for young women.²

The trend is most evident in Africa, where the increase for young women in the same period has been from 55.0 per cent literacy to 78.4 and in Southern Asia, where it has increased from 51.0 to 63.3. The gap between girls' and boys' enrolments has also narrowed, though at secondary and tertiary levels there

are still far more boys than girls.³

In addition, significant progress has been made in many areas of health: women's life expectancy has risen at a rate 20 per cent higher than that of men during the past 20 years; the average fertility rate has fallen by a third.

Since the 1980s the numbers of women in the paid work force have grown faster than the numbers of men in every region of the world except Africa. In Latin America the growth rate for women has been three times that of men, while in the European Union 80 per cent of all growth in the labour force has been attributed to women's participation.

Despite these improvements, inequality between girls and boys remains deep-rooted and starts early. One adolescent girl from Pakistan said: "It's very painful, in everything from eating to education boys are given more importance. We are never allowed to go to the market. They would rather send a small boy alone instead of sending four females."⁴

Even in the field of education, in 2005, 94 countries failed to meet the first Millennium Development Target of having equal numbers of girls and boys in primary and secondary education. Forty-four million girls did not attend school.⁵ Discrimination affects a girl throughout her life cycle – and beyond, to her children and grandchildren.

And yet research is also clear that when girls reach their full potential, through improved status, better health care, and education, it is the most effective development tool for society as a whole. As a country's primary enrolment rate for girls increases, so too does its gross domestic product per capita.⁶ Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, was at pains to emphasize this point in a number of his speeches: "Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and the empowerment of women."⁷

In addition, there is increasing recognition that investing in the 1.3 billion young women and men between the ages of 12 and 24 who live in the developing world, can bear important dividends for the future. In its 2007 *World*

Development Report, the World Bank notes that: "Developing countries which invest in better education, healthcare, and job training for their record numbers of young people between the ages of 12 and 24, could produce surging economic growth and sharply reduced poverty."

The importance of education for girls

Girls' education in particular is linked to improved health for themselves and their children, reduced fertility, better opportunities for earning an income, and prevention against HIV/AIDS. One World Bank study concluded: "Promoting gender equity in education and employment may be one of those few policies that have been termed 'win-win' strategies".⁸ A UNICEF report noted: "It is impossible to overstate the links between health and education, especially women's education."⁹

The link between girls' education and development

- **Increasing the share of women with secondary education by one percentage point boosts annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percentage points on average, according to a 100-country study by the World Bank.**¹⁰
- **Other World Bank studies have concluded that an extra year of education beyond the average boosts girls' eventual wages by 10–20 percent.**¹¹
- **Data show a striking correlation between the under-five mortality rate and the educational level attained by a child's mother. In selected countries, under-five mortality is highest among children whose mothers had no education, lower if the mother has had some primary schooling, and still lower where she has benefited from some secondary education.**¹²
- **A recent 63-country study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that more productive farming due to increased**



Education opens the window to gender equality and better health and employment prospects for girls and young women.

female education accounts for 43 percent of the decline in malnutrition achieved between 1970 and 1995.¹³

- **A cross country analysis of women in 65 low and middle income countries concluded that "doubling the proportion of women with a secondary education would reduce average fertility rates from 5.3 to 3.9 children per woman". The same study concluded that: "the expansion of female secondary education may be the best single policy for achieving substantial reductions in fertility."**¹⁴

UNICEF notes: "It is imperative at this stage that the world's commitment to

girls' education does not falter. Postponing meaningful gender parity by a few more years will be costly, not only for the individual girls whose lives are affected, but also for the whole Millennium Development enterprise. Investing in girls' education is a strategy that protects the rights of all children to a quality education and can jump-start all other development goals – beginning with gender equality and the empowerment of women."¹⁵

So how can girls' education be fostered and supported? As we have seen, there are strong commitments from the United Nations, and in the Millennium Development Goals. But words on paper, as usual, are not enough. If more girls are to receive the education that they need, there needs to be more investment into the

most important factors in keeping girls in school – incentive programmes, social protection, community school projects, improved sanitation, a relevant and appropriate quality curriculum that delivers and education that fits their needs.

From policy to practice

The 2007 World Development Report from the World Bank points out that: “Knowing what to do is not enough – policies directed at young people often fail.” It gives three main reasons:

1. Many countries have policies on young people but fail to coordinate these across sectors, with the result that there are no overall priorities or lines of accountability.
2. Young people are rarely given a voice in designing and implementing policies. “Governments at all levels also need to be more open to listening to young people” says the World Bank.
3. There are few policies and programmes that can be hailed as success stories for young people. “More needs to be done to find out which policies and programmes improve youth outcomes and why,” continues the World Bank.¹⁶
4. We would like to add a fourth: that youth policies fail because they are often not gender disaggregated. Gender has become integrated into overall policies in many countries, but not, it seems, very often when it comes to young people. Girls’ and boys’ needs, as we have seen, are different, and this needs to be taken into account by governments, donors and international organisations.

A better deal for girls – An Eight Point Action Plan

Girls are getting a raw deal. While education is the main key to changing their situation, this report has identified a number of actions that would considerably improve specific areas of their lives. Here are eight priorities.

1. Listen to girls and let them participate.

Girls have the potential to articulate and secure their rights. This report has showcased a few of the voices of young women who are emerging from very difficult situations. There is a move towards the participation of children and young people in policy and decision-making. The voices of girls and young women need to be heard in these fora.

2. Invest in girls and young women.

Adequate resources must be made available at all levels in order for girls and young women to secure their rights. Their needs are often different from those of older women and from boys and men. This is an investment not just in half the population of the world, but in the future for all.

3. Change and enforce the law.

In many countries, discriminatory laws and practices relating to girls and young women prevail. Where this is the case, they should be reformed with a human rights perspective. Where laws to protect and support girls and young women already exist, they must be enforced.

4. Change attitudes.

The situation of girls is more likely to improve and at a faster pace if men and boys can be brought on board. Attitudinal change is key, and this needs to be worked on in the family, in school and in society as a whole. As long as women are considered second-class citizens, girls and young women will never be able to achieve their full potential.

5. A safety net for girls.

The poorest and most vulnerable girls and their families would benefit from comprehensive social support which could include regular and predictable grants, scholarships or stipends to encourage girls to go to school and supplementary nutrition.

6. Get specific data on girls.

It has become clear during the course of researching this report that more data on girls and young women is urgently needed. Statistics and material are collected either on children or on women in general. For a clearer picture of



Girls, like these youngsters in Nicaragua, have the potential to articulate and secure their rights – but resources must be made available for them to do so.

what is happening to girls in today’s world, data disaggregated by sex and age has to be collected and used.

7. Take a life cycle approach.

This report has shown that taking a life-cycle approach to improving the rights of girls means addressing discrimination at every stage from birth – or even before birth – until they are grown women. This has enabled us to see the pervasiveness of issues like violence throughout the life cycle of a girl, and to identify the critical points of vulnerability in her life.

8. Learn and document.

The research for this report has shown just how little we really know about the lives of young women and how best to improve them. Systematic documentation and learning on girls’ rights and best practice is needed. Subsequent reports in this series will take specific areas and look at them in more detail.

‘Because I am a girl’ has provided many examples of girls and young women who are determined to improve their lives and the lives of others like them. Improvements in equality between boys and girls come about when there is political will, cultural change and when society is committed to women’s rights. This commitment has often been fostered by dedicated groups of women – sometimes young women, and sometimes men and boys as well – who have pushed through changes their mothers and grandmothers would never have believed possible. It is time to support them; to ensure that when a child is born she is not discriminated against simply because she is a girl.

“...girl power is about being yourself, sticking up for your rights, and not being afraid of the challenges that the world throws at you.”¹⁷

Girl, 17, Canada