

Family life

Girls spend much more time on domestic, non-economic work than boys, and have less time for school and play



Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that: “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”

Article 19

1. States Parties shall take appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any person who has the care of the child.

1. Introduction

“My parents used to think that I was their property. They used to abuse me, using words which I cannot repeat without making me cry.”

ADAM HINTON

13-year-old Bangladeshi girl.¹

“I am the one who does all the housework... I do the cooking and take care of the household items. [My brother] just eats and goes outside to play.”

10-year-old Ethiopian girl²

The family is the place where children are meant to feel safe, and where they learn how to grow into mature and responsible adults, where they form their first relationships and hopefully follow the positive role models shown by their parents. It is here too where they learn the skills of growing up in our modern and globalised world.

But it is also the place where millions of children, especially girls, face violence and abuse, and where girls are socialised to believe that they have a lower status and fewer rights than their brothers.

This has consequences for all areas of a girl’s life and continues into womanhood. She is less likely to go to school, and more likely to work longer hours than a boy. She has less time for play, which has been recognised as a right for all children. She may be subject to female genital cutting and early marriage.

None of this will change unless attitudes towards girls change. For this to happen, boys

need to see girls as equals, not as inferior beings. And their families need to treat them as equal too.

“I never ever understand why boys and girls are not equal to each other. In rural areas elders think that girls are born to give birth and to marry and for cleaning the house. Girls who live in rural areas... are not sent to schools. Their parents are not aware of the changing world yet.”

Girl, aged 15, Turkey.³

2. Life in the home

“We are five children, two older boys and three younger girls. But we the younger sisters are the housemaids every Saturday and Sunday while our two older brothers have no work during weekends because they thought that as boys, they have no responsibility to do household chores.”

Barbie, aged 15, Philippines.⁴

Discrimination against girls within the family is probably the most difficult of all to deal with. It is also the foundation of the deep-rooted belief that girls are somehow of less value than boys. As it happens within the home, it is often hidden, and almost impossible to legislate for. We have seen in the previous chapter that such discrimination begins at birth or before, and continues throughout a girl’s life and into womanhood. It is the bedrock on which other forms of discrimination are built and from which violence, including violence in the home, stems. There is evidence that by the age of five or even earlier, both girls and boys have internalised the gender roles they are expected to play and the status that this gives – or does not give – them within the family and the wider community.⁵

In many countries, a girl begins her domestic duties at a very young age; duties that a boy is simply not expected to undertake. These are often arduous, fetching or carrying water from many miles away, pounding rice or maize, sweeping, cleaning, looking after siblings from early morning until late at night. In South Asia,



LORNA ROACH

Girls in Pakistan spend much more time on domestic work than boys, especially if they are not enrolled in school.

women and girls spend three to five hours more than men in a week on activities such as fetching wood and carrying water, and between 20 and 30 hours a week more on housework. Another study of a number of countries in the South, including Kenya, South Africa, Pakistan and India found that “girls spend much more time than boys on non-economic work, and these differences become substantial among those who are not enrolled in school”. It also noted that: “Young men in urban Pakistan and urban India and in rural Kenya appear to spend little time performing domestic chores whether or not they are in school.”⁶ This domestic labour on the part of girls and young women is often not counted as ‘work’ – and yet in the 1990s a study in Australia suggested that the value of such ‘domestic’ work is equivalent to 58 per cent of GDP.⁷

In many parts of the world, girls have very few opportunities to make decisions about their own lives. They often have little dialogue with their parents, and are told what to do and when to do it first by their fathers (and sometimes their brothers) and then by their husbands. The men in the family control their time and their lives. A study in Egypt showed that adolescent girls “have much less free time, are much less mobile, much less likely to earn a wage, and have heavier domestic responsibilities” than boys.⁸ It found that such attitudes did not vary significantly by socio-economic background, or

Daily timetable from the Gambia (data from 1999)¹²

Time	Girl not in school	Girl in school	Boy in school
6 AM	Rises, bathes, prays	Same	
7 AM	Sweeps compound, fetches water, washes dishes	Same	Rises, bathes, prays, revises lessons
9 AM	Cooks lunch	Goes to school	Goes to school
9:30 AM	Takes lunch to mother on farm, works on farm	In school	In school
2 PM	Working on farm	School day ends, lunch in school, extra studies until 6 PM	Same, if studies end early, plays football
6 PM	Working on farm	Takes food to mother on farm, helps her	Fetches water, bathes
7 PM	Returns home, cooks dinner	Cooks dinner, bathes	Various (play, study)
8 PM	Dinner, washes dishes	Dinner, washes dishes	
9-11 PM	Various (rests, plays, talks to friends, does more housework)	Goes to teacher for extra studies	Goes to teacher for extra studies
12 AM	Goes to sleep	Goes to sleep	Goes to sleep

Kane, E. and M. O’Reilly deBrun. 1993. Bitter seeds. (Draft). Washington, DC: World Bank.

decrease with increased schooling.⁹ Evidence from Nepal, Peru and Zimbabwe demonstrates that girls also have less school time than boys.¹⁰ Girls also tend to spend longer hours than boys on all work activities regardless of age.¹¹

It is not surprising then that in many countries, girls have less time than boys to play or visit friends.

Even if they have the time, girls are often not allowed the same mobility outside the home or compound as boys. In Burkina Faso, for

example, a mapping exercise with three groups of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 – unmarried girls, married girls, and unmarried boys – showed that married adolescent girls had very few places outside the home where they were able to go and very little free time.¹³ The few women’s organisations were for adult women only. The exercise noted that: “Spaces for leisure activities are considered essential for boys’ development to help them become well-rounded and happy individuals; these spaces

are considered hazardous and inappropriate for married or unmarried adolescent girls.”¹⁴

Lack of female participation in sport is not just a Southern phenomenon. A report from the Harvard School of Public Health shows how girls in Massachusetts fail to participate in school sports, despite the fact that sex discrimination in school athletics is against the law. Only 36 per cent of Boston high school girls participated in one or more sports teams in 2001, compared to 55 per cent of high school boys. Statewide, 50 per cent of high school girls participated in one or more sports teams in 2001, compared with 58 per cent of high school boys. The figures were lower for African American and Hispanic girls than for white girls – 37 per cent of African Americans, 28 per cent of Hispanic girls, and 54 per cent of white girls. The report notes the adverse health effects of this lack of participation, including obesity (see also Chapter 4 – *Health* in this report).¹⁵

In some areas, however, the situation is slowly beginning to change. In Kenya, the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) is a project which aims to link sports with environmental clean-ups, AIDS prevention, leadership training and other community service activities involving approximately 20,000 young people.¹⁶ Part of its programme is to encourage girls to take part in sports as a way not just of exercising but also of occupying public space. When the girls’ programme began in 1996, it faced three main problems. First, many boys in MYSA didn’t think girls could play football. Second, most girls didn’t believe they could play football and third, their mothers, often the only income earner in their families, didn’t want their daughters playing football because they needed their help at home. Slowly, these obstacles were overcome and today there are over 3,500 girls playing on 250 teams in over 40 MYSA girls’ leagues. MYSA girls excel both nationally and internationally in football tournaments and in 2002 the first professional women’s team was formed. This has given many girls greater confidence in other areas of their life. As one participant said: “Before playing football I was fearful; now I am

not because I am used to mixing with people and I know what is good and what is bad.”¹⁷

Things are slowly changing in other parts of the world as well. A young Bangladeshi girl said: “In the past, a village girl did not have any right to talk about herself. Today, she can talk with her parents and also negotiate with them. She can say if they are doing something wrong.”

3. Child-headed households

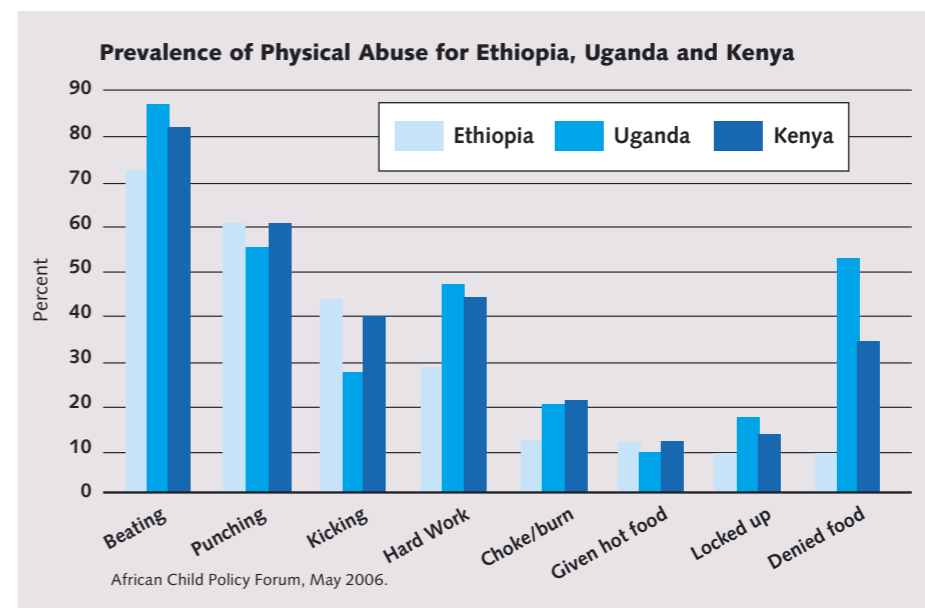
There tends to be an assumption that most households are headed by two parents, but increasingly there are many other combinations, including single parent households, those where a grandparent is in charge and those which are headed by children because their parents have died or left. This has a huge psychological effect on the children who have survived or remain.

“I find it very difficult at school because of the way I feel now. When I am in class I don’t feel so attentive because my parents are always on my mind. I feel very sad that I don’t have them in my life any more.”

Gather, aged 16, Uganda.¹⁸

AIDS will have orphaned many of these children. More than 80 per cent of these are in Sub-Saharan Africa, where by 2010 there will be an estimated 50 million orphaned children, and more than a third will have lost one or both parents to AIDS.¹⁹ In these cases, it is usually the eldest girl who is responsible for the home and for younger siblings and she is likely to have had to drop out of school. Girls in particular face the challenge of offers of support from older men, evidenced as a major risk factor in HIV infection in itself.²⁰

“If we lose our parents, we children feel very miserable, we have no support. In terms of getting support, there are older men who are HIV positive who will give some support for something. For example, they can pay for a term’s school fees but the time is going to come when they say: ‘Unless you become my wife, you are not going to continue with school.’” Prossy, aged 16, Uganda.²¹



Children orphaned by AIDS are also likely to suffer stigma and discrimination from other members of the community and may have HIV themselves.

“If you are an orphan, you don’t have money to buy clothes, to pay rent for where you live, or to buy food, and you have young sisters and brothers to look after. You become the father and mother of the house.” Jamalie, aged 14, Uganda.²²

Thankfully, in other parts of the world, the number of orphans is dropping. In Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, orphan numbers have dropped by around a tenth since 1990.²³

4. Violence in the home

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 19

• States Parties shall take appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any person who has the care of the child.

“Those who abuse children should be mercilessly punished because they take the happiness of a pure human being, who has no fault for what happened.”

Girl, Romania²⁴

Violence against women and girls, just in the context of going about their daily lives, is widespread. At least one in three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime.²⁵ In 1993, the World Bank reported that women aged between 15 and 44 “lose more Discounted Health Years of Life to rape and domestic violence than to breast cancer, cervical cancer, obstructed labour, heart disease, AIDS, respiratory infections, motor vehicle accidents or war.”²⁶ (See chapter 6 – *Girls in exceptionally difficult circumstances*).

Studies estimate that between 20 and 50 per cent of girls and women have experienced violence at the hands of an intimate family member.²⁷ Half the women who die from homicides are killed by their current or former husbands or partners. In the UK, this is two women each week. In South Africa, a woman is killed by a husband or partner every six hours.²⁸ Much higher numbers have experienced psychological violence such as bullying or



ADAM HINTON

intimidation, or have witnessed another member of the family, usually their mother, being attacked.²⁹

The United Nations involved young people from all over the world in a report on Violence Against Children, published in 2006.³⁰ This and other surveys from around the world suggest that physical violence against children is also widespread. A review of research on physical victimisation of children in the Republic of Korea found that kicking, choking and biting by parents are alarmingly common with a “high rate of physical injury.”³¹ Once again, it is girls that are least able to defend themselves, not just because they are less physically strong but also because they are conditioned to bow to authority.

While it is difficult to find statistics for girls under 18, a recent United Nations report, *Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children* estimated that “as many as 275 million children may be exposed to violence in the home” and that millions more are likely to be affected.³² Girls are kept at home for protection, but it is at home that they may face the greatest risks of violence. In Costa Rica, a study carried

out by the Ministry of Health in 2004 indicated that incest was the cause of pregnancy for 95 per cent of girls under 15 years of age.³³ (See Chapter 4 – *Health*, and Chapter 6 – *Girls in exceptionally difficult circumstances*).

In Africa, one study in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda identified a high level of abuse of girls, generally by their mother or stepmother.³⁴ This included a number of behaviours such as caning, slapping, pinching, burning and overworking. Beating emerged as the most frequent form of violence, while giving hot and bitter food was the least common. In Uganda, 85.8 per cent of girls say they have been beaten, followed by Kenya at 80.8 per cent and then Ethiopia at 71.1 per cent. Punching and hitting the girl is the second most prevalent form of physical abuse with rates in Ethiopia and Kenya at 59.5 per cent.³⁵

Research suggests that girls who witness domestic violence or who are abused as children are also likely to be future victims of domestic violence. And those who are particularly vulnerable, such as girls with disabilities, are even more likely to be in danger of violence and abuse.³⁶

For a girl, like this one in Cambodia, work begins at a young age.

Rosa’s story

Rosa* comes from East Timor. She only went to school for two years because she had to help her mother, stepfather and five stepsisters at home. “I wanted to play with my friends around the house but I couldn’t as I was busy with housework helping Mother look after my stepsisters, collecting firewood, cooking, washing and feeding the pigs. I was scared of being beaten if my stepfather found me playing.”

Rosa shared a bedroom with her sisters. One night, when she was 13, she woke at midnight: “I felt someone pulling at my skirt button. I found that my stepfather was naked and lying next to me. After some time I managed to run out of the bedroom and my mother awoke and asked what had happened. My stepfather denied everything but eventually admitted his fault.”

The tradition was that her stepfather should give her a pig to make up for what he had done. One day, she found he had sold her pig. But when she complained, he beat her and chased her away. She went to her cousin’s house, but found that she was also in danger there. Her cousin beat her with an electric cable.

Rosa moved on to her godmother’s house but also faced mistreatment. She tried to commit suicide by eating camphor. Her godmother took her to the local clinic. There, Rosa was referred to Fokupers, an East Timorese Women’s NGO, that has been helping women and children affected by violence and abuse. She went to a house called Mahon, ‘Place of Shade’, where she was given counselling, play therapy, dancing, singing and life-skills training. The centre is now working with Rosa to help her move back to her family home.³⁷

* Her name has been changed to protect her identity.

Violence against girls is often of a sexual nature. Because of girls’ status in society, even if they have the courage to report the abuse, they may not be believed, as this girl, aged 13, from Bangladesh, reports: “If one of the girls is sexually abused by a relative and we report the wrongdoings, the parents and adults in the family do not believe us. We are scolded and called ‘bad girls’ and even beaten up for making up such ‘nasty stories’. If a girl talks about sexual abuse at home, she can be thrown out of home or she is treated so badly that she has to run away from home.”³⁸

Emerging evidence from Plan’s research in five West African countries – Benin, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Senegal – shows that violence against girls is commonplace and much of it is sexual in nature. Girls’ status at the bottom of the social structure exposes them to more violence, with the poorest girls from fragmented family settings experiencing the most. Girls have reported being subjected to insults, harassment, and in some cases rape at the hands of the boys, young men and adult men around them.³⁹

The Save the Children Alliance has involved children in a study related to sexual abuse. These are the recommendations of the young people from that study:

Ten recommendations from children against child sexual abuse⁴⁰

1. Sexual abuse is bad and should not happen.
2. Tell them to stop – it is hard to disclose.
3. It is too difficult to get out of sexual exploitation and exit the sex trade.
4. Listen to me and believe what I tell you.
5. Talk to me and be there if I need you.
6. I need to feel safe and protected and decide how my case is to be handled.
7. Love me, support me – we know what we need.
8. Help me get things straight.
9. Let my abuser face up to what he or she has done.
10. Don’t put a label on me and let me go on with my life.

5. Sexuality

It is a common belief that a family's reputation sinks or swims on the basis of its daughters' sexuality. Preserving her virginity until marriage is key to the honour of the whole family and to her economic as well as her social worth, hence the age-old practice of hanging out the sheets for all to see the blood from the breaking of a virgin's hymen after the wedding night.

In some cultures, girls who are believed to have infringed family and social codes have been murdered by the male members of their family. This is sometimes known as 'honour killing'. A girl may have a boyfriend that her family does not approve of, she may refuse to have an arranged marriage, she may be a lesbian, or she may have been raped. Such killings have been reported in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Turkey and Uganda and Northern countries such as Britain or Sweden, into which people from these countries have immigrated.

Girls growing up in most parts of the world are expected to conform to certain norms which have to do with gender and sexuality. Their sexuality is also expected to develop in such a way that they will become sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex, not their own. But a significant proportion of the girls growing up around the world find that they do not fit either or both of the above expectations.

For many lesbian girls homophobia begins at home. A teenager from Croatia reports: "When my parents assumed I might be non-straight, they said it wasn't normal and I was a sick liar living a double life. Even though I had always been a perfect daughter, they said they were deeply disappointed in me. Sorry I was born. They said they couldn't look at me or talk to me ever again if I was lesbian or bisexual – that I would not be their daughter anymore. Then I denied it all and moved on with my 'double life' in favour of keeping peace in the family."¹⁸

Concealment is a common survival strategy. And not without reason. In some cases disclosure leads to being forced out of the

family home, or threats of violence, rape and even death. It is not uncommon for families to mete out fierce punishment to youngsters who do not follow the 'correct' gender path. Such violence is often justified as being for the girl's own good. Rape is sometimes used against those who show no interest in getting married. This is what happened to this young Zimbabwean in her family home under her parents' orders: "They locked me in a room and brought him everyday to rape me so I would fall pregnant and be forced to marry him. They did this to me until I was pregnant."⁴²

Not all the stories are bad, not all families unsupportive. "I am lucky my family loves me, knowing that other families do not accept their own flesh and blood because of their sexuality," says one teenage contributor to a website for young lesbians. "I am happy that my family sticks together no matter what!"⁴³

Others may find the process of family acceptance is long – but they get there in the end. One young lesbian of Chinese-Malaysian origin tells the story of how at the age of 15, she tried to 'come out' to her parents but they kept telling her she just needed to 'meet the right man'. Finally, several years later, and after she had completed university, she tried again. She said to her mother: "I know that my sexuality will spoil your reputation among relatives and your friends. But mom, I love you. Tell me, do you want me to get married with a man just to make you happy? Or do you want me to find my own destiny?" Since then, she says, her mother has accepted the fact that her daughter is a lesbian.⁴⁴

6. Female genital cutting

African Charter On The Rights and Welfare Of The Child

Article 21: Protection against harmful social and cultural practices

1. States Parties to the present Charter shall take appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child in particular:

- (a) those customs and practices prejudicial to the health or life of the child; and
- (b) the customs and practices discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex or status.

About 140 million girls have undergone female genital cutting and two million are subjected to it every year. Several basic human rights are violated by the procedure of female genital cutting, primarily the right of physical integrity, the right to freedom from violence and discrimination, and in most severe cases, the right of life.

Female genital cutting (FGC), often referred to as female genital mutilation or female circumcision, is an operation to remove part or all of a girl's external genital organs. It is performed on infants and on adult women but mostly on girls between the ages of four and 12. There is a growing tendency to perform female genital cutting on younger and younger girls.

It is practised in about 28 countries in Africa and some minority groups in Asia. In some countries, like Somalia and Guinea, 98 per cent of women have undergone female genital cutting. In others, like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, it affects only five per cent of women. There are also a number of immigrant women in Europe, Canada, and the United States who have undergone FGC.⁴⁵

Types of female genital cutting

Type I – the removal of the clitoris

Type II – the removal of the clitoris and surrounding labia

Type III – known as infibulation, where all external genitalia are removed and the opening is stitched so that only a small hole remains

Type IV – a variety of unclassified traumatic procedures of cutting, stretching, or piercing performed on the external genitalia, such as cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue or scraping of tissue surrounding the opening of the vagina

About 15 per cent of all women who have undergone FGC have been infibulated. In Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan almost all are of this type.⁴⁶

Female genital cutting is a traditional practice that is believed to keep women chaste and make girls marriageable. If a girl is not cut, her future prospects as a wife and mother are in jeopardy. One woman in a village in Egypt was asked why people supported the practice. She said: "It is a norm that has to be fulfilled. The girl must be circumcised to protect her honour and the family's honour, especially now that girls go to universities outside the village, and may be exposed to lots of intimidating situations."⁴⁷

FGC is an irreversible act which violates the rights of girls and women and is an infringement of their right to physical integrity. It often leads to a wide range of complications. While the procedure is being performed it involves severe pain and a risk of haemorrhage that can lead to shock and even the death of the girl involved. There are also reports of abscesses, ulcers, delayed healing, septicemia, tetanus, and gangrene. Long-term complications include urinary infections; obstruction of menstrual flow leading to frequent reproductive tract infections and infertility; and prolonged and obstructed labour. One study, carried out by the World Health Organisation involving 30,000 African women, found that excised women were 31 per cent more likely to have a caesarean delivery, had a 66 per cent higher chance of having a baby that needed to be revived and were 55 per cent more likely to have a child who died before or after birth.⁴⁸

"As a result of this study we have, for the first time, evidence that deliveries among women who have been subject to FGM [FGC] are significantly more likely to be complicated and dangerous," said Joy Phumaphi, WHO assistant director-general for family and community health.⁴⁹ In addition to the physical complications, there are psychological and sexual impacts including severe trauma, depression or frigidity.

Circumcision celebrations in the Gambia
It always happens on a Monday. On the Sunday, the drumming and dancing go on all night. The mother of one of the little girls, aged six, cradles her child's head gently on her lap and fans her against the heat. The baby and five girls are spoiled and feted, given new dresses. The mothers tell the children – those who are old enough to enjoy stories – that where they are going there is a tree which has money instead of leaves.

But at the heart of the party, as at the centre of all good stories, there is pain. For the little girls are going to be 'circumcised'. In her compound, where only the girls and their grandmothers are able to enter, the circumciser, ngaman, will take a razor, and cut off the children's clitorises and labia minora with a razor blade.

"My husband and I didn't want our daughters to be circumcised," says one woman, "but I knew they would be bullied and ostracized if they were not. I felt I had no choice. Everyone would know if they had not had it done, and if they came too near a compound where the circumcision was being performed, they could be brought in and circumcised then and there against their will."⁵⁰

In many countries, FGC is considered to be an important part of culture, and attempts by outsiders to come in and ban the practice have been seen as an attack on culture or religious practices. Programmes that have been implemented by local organisations and NGOs, more engaged with the culture and able to communicate in local languages, have proven to be more successful.

Legislation can also help – 14 countries in Africa – Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Niger, Senegal, Tanzania, and Togo – have enacted laws against FGC. But these need to be enforced. In most of the countries where legislation exists, it has not

helped to bring down the prevalence of FGC substantially. Clearly, a specific law prohibiting the practice is necessary, but it is not enough. The law by itself has limited reach. It is only one important element creating a favourable environment for change. The risk of FGC being conducted clandestinely can be an unwanted side effect of legislation.

Legal Protection Against FGC – When the Law Works⁵¹

Community based actions are strengthened because the law

- gives back up and justification to local partners who can intervene as spokespeople of the government
- protects non-excised girls and helps families to resist the social pressure to have them excised
- demonstrates formally that the abolition of excision is a governmental objective and not an initiative of 'outsiders'
- hinders conservatives such as religious leaders from broadcasting pro-excision opinions through the media

In Burkina Faso, the law is rigorously applied. Between 1996 and 2005 there were more than 400 convictions.⁵² Those convicted face a fine of up to \$1,800 and a possible prison sentence of up to three years. The Government has also undertaken public information campaigns and introduced the topic into the school curriculum. A telephone helpline has been set up and there are initiatives to find alternative employment for women who carried out the practice. As a result of all this, the number of girls undergoing FGC is dropping. A survey carried out in 1999 showed that 63.7 per cent of women wanted the practice to end.⁵³ The government in Burkina Faso has managed to create an environment that is conducive to change on this very difficult issue.

There have also been Africa-wide initiatives against FGC. In February 2003, for example, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against women initiated the Inter-African Committee,

which held a conference in Addis Ababa on zero tolerance for FGC.

And local people have introduced alternatives to FGC. They still hold an initiation ceremony, which ensures that the girl is welcomed into society, but she is no longer cut. This also means that those who practice FGC could have an alternative means of earning a living. In Kenya, for example, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Association, a local organisation, has designed an alternative rite of passage known as 'Cutting Through Words'. The first 'Cutting Through Words' ceremony took place in the Kenyan village of Gatunga, east of Nairobi, in 1996. Using song and dance, girls appealed to their elders to stop the cutting. They prepared an alternative 'coming of age' celebration which included spending a week in seclusion, visited only by female relatives who taught them the skills they would need as women. Similar ceremonies have now been adopted by a number of other Kenyan communities, including the Maasai in the Rift Valley Province and the Abagusii of Western Kenya.⁵⁴

But in some countries, there is no real progress as the practice is portrayed as a religious duty. In Egypt, it has risen by 0.3 per cent to 97.3 per cent, in Sudan from 89 to 90 per cent and in Côte d'Ivoire it has increased two per cent to 44.5 per cent.⁵⁵

Several Northern countries have legislation against FGC including Sweden, Norway, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. In a landmark case in the UK in October 2006, a young woman from Sierra Leone was allowed to claim asylum based on the fact that she would face FGC if she went home.⁵⁶

Zainab's case

Zainab Fornah, aged 19, had her asylum appeal upheld by the law lords in Britain on the grounds that she was fleeing female genital cutting. The unanimous ruling found that she should be granted asylum because as a Sierra Leonean woman she belonged to a "particular social group" in danger of persecution

under refugee law. Ms Fornah fled Sierra Leone in 2003 aged 15 after her family was killed and she was repeatedly raped by rebel soldiers in Sierra Leone.⁵⁷

One law lord, Lady Hale of Richmond, said the decision was significant for the "many other women in the world who flee similar fears". The Guardian newspaper said: "The judgment may prove relevant to female genital mutilation cases relating to other countries, as well other forms of gender persecution defended on the grounds that they constitute a 'cultural' or 'traditional' practice. The ruling comes at the end of a long process and several appeals. Last year, two of three appeal court judges ruled against Ms Fornah, saying that the practice of female genital mutilation – 'however repulsive to most societies outside Sierra Leone' – was accepted 'as traditional and as part of the cultural life' in Sierra Leone."⁵⁸

Marthe's story

"When I was seven years old, my mother wanted to send me for excision, but my father who is a pastor refused to do so, she was so confused and unhappy to see her daughter non-excised that she left the house for three months. At that time I was so confused and I did not understand what was happening around my situation, my father kept firm on his decision and I was not excised. Two of my young sisters also are not excised; finally my mother also accepted my father's decision.

"Currently I am 18 years old and I have one child. When I got pregnant, people in my community couldn't understand because it was said that if the girl is not excised she can't give birth. I gave birth without difficulty.

"Now I am a peer educator in my association where I conduct educative talks with my friends.

"When I compare my situation to the excised girls' one, I claim myself very

proud and happy to be so and encourage parents not to excise their daughters; I think parents do it by ignorance.”

Marthe, 18 years old, Guinea⁵⁹

7. Early and forced marriage

“In some of our communities, when a girl starts showing signs of maturity she becomes the focus in that community and the next thing to happen is to initiate her in the secret society without even asking her consent and finally giving her hand in marriage to whoever her family pleases. They don’t consider the age. All they know is that their child is well matured and should be married. Sometimes the men they get married to are much older than their parents in fact, but as tradition demands they just have to obey. Often and again girl children are often forced to marry to chiefs especially if they are beautiful and reside in a village.”

Konima, aged 18, Sierra Leone.⁶⁰

“To stop this inhuman attitude towards girls, there should be stringent laws against the practice of child marriages, and both the governments and the civil societies should initiate awareness raising campaigns at every community on gender equity and the evil consequences of child marriages.”

B. Savitha, aged 14, India⁶¹

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Article 16

1. The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.

Child marriage is defined as “any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years before the girl is physically, psychologically and physiologically ready to shoulder the

responsibilities of marriage and child bearing”.⁶² As such young married girls are a unique, though often invisible group.⁶³ The practice is most common in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, but also occurs in other parts of the world. The numbers of girls who are married are difficult to estimate as so many marriages are not registered, but more than 100 million girls under 18, some as young as 12, are expected to marry over the next decade.⁶⁴ The numbers of boys who marry under 18 are much lower.⁶⁵

A number of international human rights instruments cover early marriage. In addition, most countries have officially declared 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage. But these laws are rarely applied, and few prosecutions are ever brought against those who break the law. In some cases, the only outcome of a lawsuit would in any case declare the marriage invalid, which would leave the young wife with little or no legal protection.

Married girls aged 15-19⁶⁶

	Percentage
Sub-Saharan Africa	
Dem Rep of Congo	74
Niger	70
Congo	56
Uganda	50
Mali	50
Asia	
Afghanistan	54
Bangladesh	51
Nepal	42
Middle East	
Iraq	28
Syria	25
Yemen	24
Latin America and Caribbean	
Honduras	30
Cuba	29
Guatemala	24

UN Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Marriage Patterns 2000.



A 15 year old girl gets married in Pakistan. Many from the poorest families are married much younger.

- Recent findings from UNFPA and the Population Council show that married girls:⁶⁷
- Are likely to have less education and fewer schooling opportunities than unmarried girls
 - Have less mobility than unmarried girls or older married women
 - Have less household and economic power than older married women
 - Have less exposure to the media than unmarried girls
 - Have limited social networks
 - May be at greater risk of gender-based violence than women who marry later
 - Face greater reproductive health risks than unmarried women and married young women who have already had a child.

Parents may marry their daughter at a young age because it is customary, but also simply because they cannot afford to keep her, and feel that marriage to an older man who has money will give her a better life. A study of five very poor villages in Egypt found young girls being married to much older men from other, oil-rich Middle Eastern countries using marriage

brokers. In West Africa, a UNICEF study shows that poverty is encouraging early marriage even among groups that do not normally practise it. In Eastern Africa, it is seen as an option for girls orphaned by AIDS. Once married, a girl is seen as being protected from harm – in Northern Uganda, young girls are married to militiamen for precisely this reason. In Afghanistan, the uncertainty of war has also led to increasing numbers being married early.⁶⁸

Early marriage in selected countries⁶⁹

Rajasthan, India The custom survives of giving very small children away in marriage. On the auspicious day of *Akha Teej*, the mass solemnisation of marriages between young boys and girls is performed. From the parents’ point of view, this is the tried and tested way of organising the passing on of property and wealth within the family. A small but significant proportion of the children involved are under 10, and some are mere toddlers of two and three years old. The girls then go on to live with their husbands when they reach puberty.

West Africa A study by UNICEF in six West African countries showed that 44 per cent of 20 – 24 year old women were married under the age of 15. The need to follow tradition, reinforce ties among or between communities, and protect girls from out-of-wedlock pregnancy were the main reasons given. In the communities studied, all decisions on timing of marriage and choice of spouse were made by the fathers.

Bangladesh Many Bangladeshi girls are married soon after puberty, partly to free their parents from an economic burden and partly to protect the girls’ sexual purity. Where a girl’s family is very poor or she has lost her parents, she may be married as a third or fourth wife to a much older man, to fulfil the role of sexual and domestic servant.

Albania Families in rural areas, reduced to abject poverty by the post-Communist

transition, encourage their daughters to marry early in order to catch potential husbands before they migrate to the cities in search of work, and to avoid the threat of kidnapping on the way to school.

Niger A study conducted in a rural area of Niger in 2003 found that 68 per cent of girls were married before their first menstruation, and 52 per cent had a child before they reached the age of 16. Of those who had been married before the age of 16, only 16 per cent had received some education. Those who had married later had a much higher rate of schooling, with 42 per cent having received some education.⁷⁰

Lalmuni's story

Marriage in Nepal is a family affair. When 14 year-old Lalmuni's parents decided she should be married, she knew it would be the end of her education. She was also worried about becoming pregnant and giving birth at such a young age. But her parents were adamant: the marriage would go ahead.

In desperation, Lalmuni took her problem to her 'Child Club', one of 600 such clubs around the country. Her friends decided to meet Lalmuni's parents and to persuade them to change their minds. This was a highly unusual step for a group of young girls. Outsiders, especially a group of teenage girls, usually have no say in such matters.

Lalmuni's parents listened to what her friends had to say but were unconvinced. Her father said: "We would have to give a lot of money in dowry if the girl marries at an older age. Are you going to give us this money?" But the girls did not give up. They patiently explained the risks Lalmuni would face through an early marriage. They pointed out that although the family might save some money, this would be at the cost of their daughter's health and education, and it would affect her for the rest of her life. Lalmuni's

parents were profoundly affected by her friends' concern for her well-being. Eventually they changed their minds and let her continue her education. Today, Lalmuni is still attending school and is an active member of the Child Club.⁷¹

There needs to be legislation by government against early marriage and advocacy and media work on the subject. Parents need to understand the dangers of marrying their daughters too early and both girls and boys should understand their rights. Of course, both women's status in society and poverty are contributory factors to girls' early marriage. One ambitious programme by the local governments of Rajasthan, Karnataka and Haryana states in India aims to increase the value placed on girls by their families and society and thus prevent early marriage. In Haryana, a small sum of money is put into a savings account for a girl at her birth. If she is still unmarried at the age of 18, she can collect the amount plus the years of savings and use it for her dowry.⁷²

Ethiopia's revised Family Law and new penal code, enacted in 2003, established explicit punishments for early marriage and other harmful traditional practices. In the Amhara region, a series of Early Marriage Committees has been established, composed of religious leaders, women's associations, Community-Based-Reproductive-Health Agents (CBRHAs), health and village administration officials, parents, teachers, and girls themselves. CBRHAs, girls, and teachers report upcoming early marriages to the committee. The chain of intervention then goes through the department of women's affairs at the district level, which responds with legal action through the police or through representation provided by the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association. In some Early Marriage Committees, the community members respond immediately through direct intervention with the parents of both bride and groom, and call in local police if needed. One NGO, Pathfinder, has together with its partners prevented more than 9,000 early marriages in

Amhara region.⁷³ In Bangladesh, the government offers stipends for girls' school expenses if parents promised to delay their daughters' marriage until at least age 18.⁷⁴

Laws against early marriage are necessary, but they are not always followed. Still more than a fifth of women in the poorest regions of the world already have a child by the time they are 18. In Western and Middle Africa and South Central and South-east Asia, 58 per cent of women are married before they are 18.⁷⁵

8. The role of boys and men

"There is a need to bring change in the attitude of the men-folk and they should treat girls and women equal with boys and men. Girls should get organised in each village and insist on getting equal opportunities for education as well as recreation and in the decision making in the family."

Vandana, 15 years, India⁷⁶

It is gradually being recognised that life will not change for girls and women unless it also changes for boys and men. When girls face violence at home, it is often from the male members of their families, be they fathers, stepfathers, husbands, brothers or uncles. When they are able to have the courage to stand up for what they want, it is often with the support of an older brother. In many societies, fathers still rule their daughters' lives, deciding whether they can go out, when and to whom they should get married, and how their lives are shaped. Just as girls learn their roles from their mothers and other female members of the family, so boys learn from their fathers and from their peers.

One study in the United States found that culture often has a negative effect on boys. Boys are trained to value their differences from girls and to see these differences as positive. Their findings showed that:

1. Schools are 'anti-boy.' Elementary schools emphasise reading and restrict the activity of young boys, who are generally more active and slower to read than girls. Teachers

often discipline boys more harshly than girls. Sensitivity isn't modelled to boys, so they don't learn it.

2. Fathers tend to demand that their sons act tough, mothers tend to expect boys to be strong and protective and their friends enforce the rule that a boy doesn't cry. And after being taught not to be 'sissies,' boys are then chastised for being insensitive.
3. Boys hear confusing messages, for example, to embrace an androgynous sex role and yet not become too feminine. At the same time, many boys lose the 'chums' of their boyhood as they enter adolescence. For many teenage males, distrust of other boys replaces intimate same-sex friendships, recent research suggests.
4. Media images have become more hyper-masculine – emotionless killing machines, such as Sylvester Stallone, have supplanted strong yet milder heroes like Roy Rogers. Many boys learn to hide behind a 'mask of bravado.'

Family and fresh air, up in the Ecuadorian Andes.



5. Boys are often victims of ruthless jeering and insults. Many find that words don't stop the taunting but punches do, because anger is the only emotion that earns them respect.⁷⁷

Addressing these issues for boys will help girls as well. And the same is true for programmes that promote girls' rights. In Pakistan, a project with boy scouts encourages them to take action to promote and protect the rights of others, especially girls. Each boy takes part in training on Meena, a multi-media package developed by UNICEF, and then collects data from 10 households on health, sanitation and the education of their children.⁷⁸ In return, they give that household information on a number of issues, including the education of girls. They then monitor progress. If successful, the project will be rolled out to 100,000 households and more than 500,000 people.⁷⁹

In Latin America, where sexist attitudes often make life difficult for girls and force boys to behave in certain ways, Programme H (the Spanish word for men is *hombres*; in Portuguese it is *homens*) works on changing the norms about what it means to be a man. It has been developed with young men from low-income communities in Brazil and Mexico, who are part of the process of change. This is Joao, aged 19: "There's this guy who's a friend of mine, and he had a girlfriend, and she got pregnant and he abandoned her when she was pregnant and he never liked to work, he doesn't do anything, just takes from his mother. My point of view is different. I think about working because I want to have a family, a really good family. I want to be there when they need me, accepting my responsibilities. Even if I were to separate from the mother of my daughter and have another wife, I'm not gonna forget about my daughter. She'll always be the first... But lots of young guys, they don't think about working, just think about stealing, using drugs, smoking. Here that's normal. But not me. I stay away from that, drugs and smoking and stuff. They can think I'm square, so I'll be square then."⁸⁰

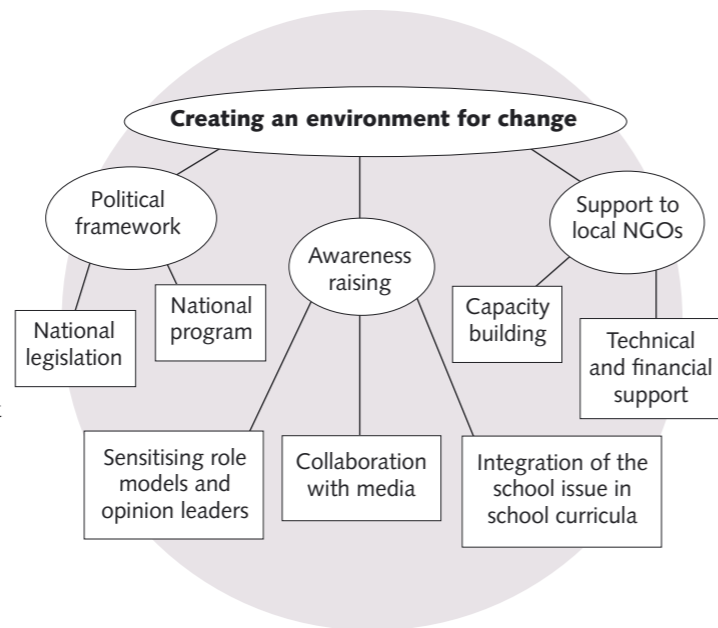
These campaigns also take place in the developed world. The White Ribbon

campaign, where men wear a white ribbon to show their opposition to violence against women, was started 15 years ago and has taken off in Canada and Europe as well as countries like Brazil.

9. What still needs to be done?

The many initiatives detailed in this chapter show that on all these issues, steps are being taken to bring about change. But early marriage, female genital cutting and violence against girls in the home are still happening all the time, all over the world. Rights-based legislation which is enforced by government together with a raft of action on public awareness all help to move matters forward. What would have the most effect would be for girls' status in society, and in their own families, to become equal to that of their brothers. This involves attitudinal change.

A recent report from Plan on Female Genital Cutting in West Africa mapped the elements necessary for change on FGC, which would also apply in other challenges faced by girls. It shows that a variety of approaches are needed in order for change to happen:⁸¹



So what can enable girls to reach their potential? Conclusions based on evidence in this chapter are that:

- Programmes in school and in the community which stress the rights and status of girls have succeeded in changing attitudes in the family. These must be for girls and boys alike
- With continued efforts and supportive legislation, female genital cutting can be phased out. As demonstrated in Kenya, it could be replaced with alternative initiation rituals and support for cutters in finding other work
- Despite legislation being in place which bans early marriage, it is not enforced by governments. Likewise where it exists, existing legislation on violence and sexual abuse must be upheld if these violations are to diminish
- Girls and young women say they need safe places to go when they are in danger and the ability to share their situation in confidence

10. Girls' voices

"Every girl child in some corner cries in silence because of marriage in early ages. You may not be among those who cry for freedom, those who wish to study further but are forced to marry an old ugly man for money. But I have seen and faced forced marriage, and I understand how horrible it is. I escaped a forced marriage, because I always went against my parents and society. Sometimes you just need to stand on your own."

Girl, 20, Sri Lanka⁸²

"When the grandmother came to get the baby for circumcision, we said no. My uncle supported us. The child was their last-born and he said: 'I don't want anything to harm my baby'. That baby is now 12. She still lives with me and she has not been mutilated."

Sunta Javara, Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices⁸³



LIBA TAYLOR

"We are experts of our own lives. In many ways, we are the victims of violence. As a major right in the UNCRC, participation is our right. We are capable of expressing what is right and what is not and we can even help in implementation and monitoring of the government's work... There are no excuses for violence against children, not even traditional practices and customs."

Children's Statement on the UN report on Violence against Children, October 2006

Girls and boys come out to play at Kevebakka estate pre-school in Sri Lanka.

"Parents must bring up their girls as an asset not a liability. They must give her equal rights, opportunities and privileges as the male child. A girl who has been a victim must be supported and needs tremendous care, rehabilitation and counselling."

Girl, 17, India⁸⁴