

# GENDER EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

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# Gender Equality: A Cornerstone of Development

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Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. Women are entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation. The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality is acknowledged as being a key to achieving the other seven goals.

Yet discrimination against women and girls - including gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequities, and harmful traditional practices - remains the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality. Women and girls bear enormous hardship during and after humanitarian emergencies, especially armed conflicts. For more than 30 years, the Fund has been in the forefront of advocating for women, promoting legal and policy reforms and gender-sensitive data collection, and supporting projects that improve women's health and expand their choices in life.

## GIVING SPECIAL ATTENTION TO GIRLS AND ADOLESCENTS

Because discrimination on the basis of sex often starts at the earliest stages of life, greater equality for the girl child and the adolescent girl are necessary first steps to ensuring that women have equal rights later in life. Disparities in the way girls and boys are raised and treated are at the root of many sexual and reproductive health problems and development challenges. For boys, adolescence can be a time for expanded participation in community and public life. Girls, however, may experience new restrictions, and find their freedom of movement limited. Socially constructed gender roles may give girls little say about their own aspirations and hopes, and restrict them to being wives and mothers.

In addition, young women face more reproductive health vulnerabilities than men. Biologically, women's risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections during unprotected sexual relations is two to four times that of men. Of particular concern are the dramatic increases in HIV infection among young women, who now make up 60 per cent of the 15- to 24- year olds living with HIV. Globally, young women are 1.6 times more likely to be living with HIV than young men.

Negative gender-based norms and practices can be gradually transformed through educational, social, legal and other processes that promote equality of girls and boys. Without such action, unequal gender relations and power imbalances are likely to persist throughout adult life. Steps to be taken to reduce gender inequities in the lives of young people, paying particular attention to the vulnerabilities, pressures and risks faced by young women.

## THE PROBLEM OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Social expectations often put pressure on girls to marry and begin bearing children before they are ready. Despite a shift towards later marriage in many parts of the world, 82 million girls in developing countries who are now between the ages of 10 and 17 will be married before their 18th birthday. Child marriage jeopardizes the health and limits the opportunities afforded to women, usually disrupts their education and often violates their human rights. Married adolescent girls often find it difficult to access reproductive health services.

Some 14 million women and girls between ages 15 and 19 - both married and unmarried - give birth each year. For this age group, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death, with unsafe abortion being a major factor. Early childbearing is linked to obstetric fistula, a devastating and socially isolating condition that leaves women incontinent. Teenage mothers are more likely to have children with low birth weight, inadequate nutrition and anemia. And they are more likely to develop cervical cancer later in life.

### THE RISK OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Adolescent girls are also exposed to various forms of gender-based violence from harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation to the growing problem of sexual trafficking. The first sexual experience for many adolescent girls is forced, often by people they know, including family members. This can lead to long-term physical and psychological damage. Dire poverty may result in young girls being 'sold' to traffickers or being forced into sexual relations as a survival strategy.

### ADDRESSING GENDER INEQUITIES THROUGH EDUCATION

Educating girls is a powerful lever for their empowerment, as well as for reducing poverty. Girls who are educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller, healthier families. Education helps girls to know their rights and claim them, for themselves and their families. Education can translate into economic opportunities for women and their families.

The importance of education in reducing gender inequities is highlighted in by its inclusion in the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs call for the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.

### ENDING WIDESPREAD VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

"Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms... In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture."  
—*Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, paragraph 112*

Gender-based violence both reflects and reinforces inequities between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims. It encompasses a wide range of human rights violations, including sexual abuse of children, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, trafficking of women and girls and several harmful traditional practices. Any one of these abuses can leave deep psychological scars, damage the health of women and girls in general, including their reproductive and sexual health, and in some instances, results in death.

Violence against women has been called "the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights abuse in the world." Accordingly, the Vienna Human Rights Conference and the Fourth World Conference on Women gave priority to this issue, which jeopardizes women's lives, bodies, psychological integrity and freedom. Violence may have profound effects – direct and indirect – on a woman's reproductive health, including:

- Unwanted pregnancies and restricted access to family planning information and contraceptives –
- Unsafe abortion or injuries sustained during a legal abortion after an unwanted pregnancy
- Complications from frequent, high-risk pregnancies and lack of follow-up care
- Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV
- Persistent gynecological problems
- Psychological problems

Gender-based violence also serves – by intention or effect – to perpetuate male power and control. It is sustained by a culture of silence and denial of the seriousness of the health consequences of abuse. In

addition to the harm they exact on the individual level, these consequences also exact a social toll and place a heavy and unnecessary burden on health services. Violence against women is inextricably linked to gender-based inequalities. When women and girls are expected to be generally subservient, their behavior in relation to their health, including reproductive health, is negatively affected at all stages of the life cycle.

The chart below shows, women may face different forms of violence at different stages of their lives.

### Gender Discrimination throughout a Woman's Life

Phase	Type
Prenatal	Prenatal sex selection, battering during pregnancy, coerced pregnancy (rape during war)
Infancy	Female infanticide, emotional and physical abuse, differential access to food and medical care
Childhood	Genital cutting; incest and sexual abuse; differential access to food, medical care, and education; child prostitution
Adolescence	Dating and courtship violence, economically coerced sex, sexual abuse in the workplace, rape, sexual harassment, forced prostitution
Reproductive	Abuse of women by intimate partners, marital rape, dowry abuse and murders, partner homicide, psychological abuse, sexual abuse in the workplace, sexual harassment, rape, abuse of women with disabilities
Old Age	Abuse of widows, elder abuse (which affects mostly women)

Source: Heise, L. 1994. Violence Against Women: The Hidden Health Burden. World Bank Discussion Paper. Washington, D.C. The World Bank

### VIOLENCE AT HOME

Most domestic violence involves male anger directed against their women partners. This gender difference appears to be rooted in the way boys and men are socialized -- biological factors do not seem to account for the dramatic differences in behavior in this regard between men and women.

Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence. Some husbands become more violent during the wife's pregnancy, even kicking or hitting their wives in the belly. These women run twice the risk of miscarriage and four times the risk of having a low birth-weight baby. Cross-cultural studies of wife abuse have found that nearly a fifth of peasant and small-scale societies are essentially free of family violence. The existence of such cultures proves that male violence against women is not the inevitable result of male biology or sexuality, but more a matter of how society views masculinity.

### GENDER AND VIOLENCE

Studies of very young boys and girls show only that although boys may have a lower tolerance for frustration, and a tendency towards rough-and-tumble play, these tendencies are dwarfed by the importance of male socialization and peer pressure into gender roles. The prevalence of domestic violence in a given society, therefore, is the result of tacit acceptance by that society. The way men view themselves as men, and the way they view women, will determine whether they use violence or coercion against women.

### SEXUAL ASSAULT

The majority of sexual assault victims are young. Women in positions of object dependence on male authorities are also particularly subject to unwanted sexual coercion. Rape in time of war is still common. It has been extensively documented in recent civil conflicts, and has been used systematically as an instrument of torture or ethnic domination.

Possible victims have been offered legal, medical and psychological support, and medical referrals when necessary. Attention has been paid to involving communities, and to creating support networks for gender-based violence victims that include both police and health-care providers, along with counselling services.

Strategies to address gender-based violence include:

- Ensuring that emergency contraception is available for victims of sexual violence
- Strengthening advocacy on gender-based violence in all country programmes, in conjunction with other United Nations partners and NGOs
- Advocating for women with parliamentarians and women's national networks
- Integrating messages on the prevention of gender-based violence into information, education and communication projects
- Conducting more research on gender-based violence

## THE GENDER DIMENSIONS OF THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

Increasingly, HIV/AIDS is striking women. Today, more than 20 years into the epidemic, women account for nearly half the 33 million people living with HIV worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, 76 per cent of the young people (aged 15-24 years) living with HIV are female.

Despite this alarming trend, women know less than men about how HIV is transmitted and how to prevent infection. What little they do know is often rendered useless by the discrimination and violence they face, and their relative powerlessness to refuse sex or negotiate safe sex, especially in the context of marriage.

Reversing the spread of HIV must address the critical role that gender relations plays in sexual and reproductive life, and how it affects HIV prevention. Indeed, the changing face of the epidemic brings into sharp relief the gender and social inequalities that shape people's behaviors and limit their choices.

## GENDER INEQUITIES ARE A ROOT CAUSE

Many HIV strategies assume an idealized world in which everyone is equal and free to make empowered choices, and can opt to abstain from sex, stay faithful to one's partner or use condoms consistently. In reality, women and girls face a range of HIV-related risk factors and vulnerabilities that men and boys do not—many of which are embedded in the social relations and economic realities of their societies. These factors are not easily dislodged or altered, but until they are, efforts to contain and reverse the AIDS epidemic are unlikely to achieve sustained success.

In many places, male identity is very much linked to sexual performance: men feel pressured to have many sexual conquests to 'prove' their masculinity. Safer sex, which entails a reduction in the number of possible partners, avoiding "one night stands" and greater selectivity in sexual partnership may therefore be felt as a threat to masculinity. Young men, in particular, may feel pressured to take risks to assert their male identity.

Much sexual risk-taking by girls and young women is marked by unequal gender relations, and unequal access to resources, assets, income opportunities and social power. Far more must be done to ensure sustainable livelihoods for women and girls, particularly those living in female-headed households, if they are to be able to protect themselves against HIV infection and deal with its impact. Boosting women's economic opportunities and social power should be seen as part and parcel of potentially successful and sustainable AIDS strategies.

## The Multiple Links between Violence against Women and HIV

Violence against women is both a cause and consequence of AIDS. Research has confirmed a strong correlation between sexual and other forms of abuse against women and women's chances of contracting HIV. Male (or female) condoms are irrelevant when a woman is being beaten and raped. Moreover, forced vaginal penetration increases the likelihood of HIV transmission. In addition, the fear of violence prevents many women from asking their partners to use condoms, accessing HIV information, and from getting tested and seeking treatment, even when they strongly suspect they have been infected. Many women are in danger of being beaten, abandoned or thrown out of their homes if the HIV-positive status is known. If HIV-prevention activities are to succeed, they need to occur alongside other efforts that address and reduce violence against women and girls.

UNFPA is part of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). Its goal is to accelerate progress in closing the gender gap in primary and secondary education and to ensure that by 2015, all children complete primary schooling, with girls and boys having equal access to all levels of education. In all regions women are gaining access to literacy and education, and at a faster rate than men. About 90 countries are on track to meet global goals for ending gender inequality in primary education by 2015. At the core of this inter-agency programme, funded by the United Nations Foundation, are these fundamental building blocks:

- Creating an environment conducive to keeping girls in school through the secondary level; or at least ensure they are literate.
- Ensuring that the particular reproductive health needs of adolescents are addressed and youth-friendly services provided.
- Working with communities, including local political and religious leaders, to increase public awareness of the reproductive and sexual health issues affecting adolescents.
- Providing life skills and counselling so that adolescent girls are aware of their rights and know about available services.
- Developing vocational training and income-generating programmes for adolescent girls to increase their status, independence and opportunities.
- Mobilizing the support of decision makers at all levels to support programmes aimed at improving adolescent sexual and reproductive health.
- Contributing to equitable and sustainable development by reinforcing the capacity of national governments to engage girls in the social, economic and political life of the country.