

## *‘Educate a girl, you educate a nation’<sup>1</sup>*

Discrimination against girls and women in the developing world is a devastating reality. Today, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2013, is the second International Day of the Girl Child; a day designated by the United Nations (UN) for promoting the rights of girls and addressing the unique challenges they face. The observation calls for greater awareness of the inequality faced by girls worldwide, solely based on their gender, and subsequently calls for more opportunities for girls through improving access to education, nutrition, legal rights, medical care and protection from discrimination, violence and exploitation such as forced child marriage. Each year, the day is given a theme, with this year’s theme focussing on girls’ education, with specific emphasis being placed on the need for new technology but also innovation in partnerships, policies, resource utilization, community mobilization, and most of all, the engagement of young people themselves.

Girls around the world are discriminated against every day, and gender-based discrimination is one of the most ubiquitous forms of discrimination that children face. Some of the major human rights violations affecting children disproportionately affect girls, for example child trafficking, child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), physical and sexual violence and being prevented from fulfilling their right to an education.

Gender discrimination against girls often begins at birth. In many countries boys are considered far more desirable than girls, either because they can inherit their father’s business and land, which girls cannot, or because girls are considered to be a financial burden. Often they are simply considered to be second-rate to boys. Girls are often seen as having their place in the home, rather than in education or the workplace where men continue to dominate. This means that in countries such as India and China, female babies are sometimes aborted, or are killed or neglected to such an extent that they die soon after birth. It is estimated that 60 million girls are missing around the world due to prenatal sex selection, infanticide or neglect<sup>2</sup>. Girls are also reportedly more likely to be victims of physical and sexual violence, with an estimated 20% of women admitting to having experienced sexual abuse as a child<sup>3</sup>.

Child marriage is a marriage where one or both of the spouses is under the age of 18; however it predominantly affects girls who are often forced to marry men who are much older than them. It is deeply rooted in gender discrimination, encouraging early pregnancy and giving preference to boys’ education. The consequences of child marriage include restricted education, increased risk of domestic violence and sexual abuse, early pregnancy and social isolation. It is believed that globally 36% of women aged 20 to 24 were married or in union before they turned 18, with an estimated 14 million adolescents between 15 and 18 giving birth each year<sup>45</sup>. Girls in this age group are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as women in their twenties. Girls are

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children Fund, MDG Update: Accelerate Progress for Children, UNICEF, 2013

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Population Fund, State of World Population 2005: The promise of equality: Gender equity, reproductive health and the Millennium Development Goals, UNFPA, New York, 2005, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, World Report on Violence and Health, WHO, Geneva, 2002, p. 64

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Children Fund, State of the World’s Children 2006: Excluded and Invisible, UNICEF, New York, 2005

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Population Fund, State of World Population 2005: The promise of equality: Gender equity, reproductive health and the Millennium Development Goals, UNFPA, New York, 2005, p. 50

also far more likely to be trafficked than boys, with boys constituting 5% of all trafficking victims in 2009 in comparison with girls who constituted 17% of the 1.2 million children trafficked worldwide<sup>6</sup>.

With regards to girls' education, while improvements have been made over the past two decades, girls continue to be deprived of this basic right, especially in developing countries, due to religious, cultural, economic and social barriers. Research shows that 54% of children that were out of primary school worldwide in 2007 were girls, and the results are far worse for secondary education. Even where girls are enrolled in school, perceived low returns from education, household chores and other responsibilities may keep them from attending school or from achieving adequate learning outcomes<sup>7</sup>. The world male literacy rate currently stands at 88.6%, in comparison with 79.7% for females<sup>8</sup>. This means that out of all the illiterate adults in the world, two-thirds are women.

Improving girls' access to education can have a dramatic effect not only on the wellbeing of the girls themselves but also of their families and communities, as it yields high and long-lasting returns. Studies have shown that educating girls can make more dramatic, positive changes for both the individual and society than any other single intervention. It can address some of societies' deeply rooted inequalities through providing girls with the knowledge and empowerment to make decisions and influence community change in key areas. There is also evidence that girls' education, especially at the secondary level, can have an overwhelming transformative force for societies and for girls themselves, as it is a positive determinant of almost every desired development outcome, from reductions in mortality and fertility, to poverty reduction and equitable growth, to social norm change and democratization. Girls' education can play a crucial role in reducing fertility rates and slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS in developing countries, as girls are far more empowered and aware of the importance of contraception, thereby contributing to social development and economic growth. Women who are educated are more likely to get married later, survive childbirth, have fewer and healthier children who are better looked after, and they are more likely to encourage their own children to complete their education. Girls' education is also an important step in overcoming poverty. Increasing the time a girl spends at school has a measurable impact on their own future children's health, education and adult productivity. The smallest of projects in the smallest of villages aimed at improving gender equality and girls' education can have a dramatic effect on the community.

Childreach International is currently working in Bangladesh, India, Morocco, Nepal, Tanzania and the United Kingdom, with a number of projects focusing on improving children's, especially girls', access to education. We work in genuine partnership with local communities in the developing world to secure children's most basic rights.

One of Childreach International's projects is Save the Girl Child in Hisar, Haryana State, India. India is moving towards a gender-imbalanced society following decades of sex-selective abortions, which have reduced the number of girls and women to a far lower number than expected. Haryana

---

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2012, UNODC, New York, 2012

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, UNGEI at 10: A Journey to Gender Equality in Education, UNICEF, New York, 2010

<sup>8</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, CIA, 2013

has one of the worst sex ratios in the country, with only 830 women per 1,000 men.

Women in Haryana have far lower literacy rates than men, lower participation in the workforce and they have almost no role in decision-making, including regarding their own bodies, healthcare and reproductive choices. Since November 2011, our project Save the Girl Child has run in several areas of the Hisar district of Haryana with a current coverage of 630 married women through Girl's Action Groups which are specifically taught issues including child rights such as the right to education, HIV/AIDS awareness, the criminality of aborting a foetus because of its gender and the dangers of child marriages. These Action Groups work to raise people's awareness about these issues. They keep an eye on children who are not in school and encourage their parents to send them to school and to not physically abuse them. The groups also perform plays with social messages to the community and work to stamp out gender-related misconceptions and prejudices. Women who were originally housewives have been encouraged to find work; school-going adolescents have had a platform for the first time to express themselves and be listened to; the girls are more aware and understanding of the dangers of child marriage and the need for education, which they are spreading to their families and friend and condom use has increased by 30% and oral pills by 35%.

We also run our My School My Voice programme in India, Nepal and Tanzania, which gives children the chance to have their voices heard, to speak out about the issues affecting them and to let them and the world know the rights they are entitled to.

We are also currently looking for funding for our child trafficking project in Nepal, which will encourage girls to stay in education, rather than travelling abroad to seek employment, where they risk being trafficked and exploited. In order to keep 10,000 children in two districts, Nuwakot and Sindhupalchok, in primary education, the project will design age-specific curricula which will be tailored to meet their learning capacities; encourage schools to recruit local-language speaking teachers to stop children dropping out due to language barriers; facilitate door-to-door dialogue with parents to make them aware of the importance of keeping their children in school and encourage local councils to provide girl-only scholarships which will ease the financial burden on families. The project will also encourage the formation of Child Clubs, which have had a positive influence on reducing school drop-out rates in the past. We will also assist mothers of primary school-aged children to earn additional income, which will reduce the financial strain on families and empower the women to be more vocal about their rights. We have previously run a child trafficking project in Bangladesh in 2010 with our partner organisation BISAP. The aim of the project was to reduce child trafficking through increasing children and adolescents' awareness of their rights and how to protect them against child trafficking. Overall the project was hugely successful, with 90,000 people in 90 unions of 8 Upazillas becoming more aware of the dangers of trafficking.

Childreach International has also been partnering with Girlguiding for their 2013 programme Girls in Action. Girls in Action provides all sections of Girlguiding with an opportunity to learn about issues that affect other girls and young women in the UK and around the world. We are working with Girlguiding to inspire girls around the UK to take action by advocating, raising awareness and volunteering to make a real difference. Our project with Girlguiding is called In Her Shoes and focuses on girls and gender inequality in India by following the diary of Priya Singar, a young girl in India who is standing up for herself through a children's Balsena club (children's collective), where she learns about her rights and actively claims them. The project quizzes guides about what India is like, introduces the ups and downs girls like Priya face with a game of Snakes and Ladders, and

informs the girls about Balsena club. It then gives a more in-depth look into the similarities and differences between India and the UK, and what it is like to be a girl in India. Activities such as cooking chapattis, learning self-defence moves and discussing the impact of illiteracy on a girl's life are part of the project. This not only gives Girlguides an insight into the life of a young Indian girl who faces discrimination every day, but also encourages the guides to stand with Priya and work towards stamping out gender inequality, both in the UK and around the world.

The activism of one educated girl championing the right to freedom from abuse, exploitation and other forms of injustice can empower all the women in a community to have a say over their life choices, by giving them the confidence to speak up for their rights. The fulfilment of girls' right to education is first and foremost an obligation and moral imperative but it is also the tool that can break the pattern of gender discrimination and bring lasting change for women in developing countries. Yet, unfortunately, the transformative potential of girls' education is yet to be effectively realised globally.

If you want to support girls' education and secure this basic right for girls around the world, text UNLOCK £3 to 70080 to donate £3 a month. Become part of our movement for change and unlock a child's potential.