

Reaching MDGs (Marginalized and Disadvantaged Girls) To Achieve the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals)

A Panel Discussion of Young People Devoted to Strategies to Reach Marginalized Adolescent Girls

Parallel Event, the CSW 51st Session
Organized by UNICEF, UNFPA, UNFIP, and the Population Council
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Summary

In keeping with the CSW theme of eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child, this panel featured 6 girls—from Africa, Latin America, and Arab States—all previously marginalized from mainstream community life, but now speaking from their own experiences and strategies to overcome the constraints they faced in fulfilling their rights to health, education, protection and participation.

Ms. Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, opened the panel by underscoring that too many national development frameworks fail to recognize the profound discrimination facing girls and appreciate them as valuable resources for their countries' development. She noted that adolescence is often viewed as the stage when life opens up for boys yet closes for girls: during this period, many girls are taken out of school, married at an early age, or have their first sexual encounter, often coerced or tricked. Opportunities to develop their full potential and be active citizens in their communities are cut short. Adolescence is therefore the last window of opportunity to tackle discrimination and violence in girls' lives. As traditional youth-serving programmes fail to reach marginalized girls who are often invisible within mainstream society, specific strategies for these girls are needed.

Ms. Golfidan Al Abassi, a girl from **Jordan**, spoke about "Hawaite", the Adolescent Empowerment Project in 6 Palestinian refugee camps. Through participatory action-oriented research (PAR) methodologies, the project gave marginalized girls such as herself the opportunity to participate with others on equal footing—they, with the boys, identified key problems in their own lives and some solutions to address them. For example, they noted that marginalized girls were subject to violence in schools and at home, and there was a dearth of programmes and centres for adolescent girls in rural areas. She stressed that if we want to reach marginalized girls, we need more creative tools—those that adolescents can control, learn from, and achieve their own results. Adolescent girls have different potential and capacities: if they are supported, they can achieve a lot.

Ms. Fatuma Roba from **Kenya** talked about her experience in defining girls' unmet needs for safety in Kibera, a slum in Nairobi and one of the largest slums in Africa. She stressed that girls need safe spaces (1) that enable them to participate in a protective environment without the fear of violence and abuse, and (2) that provide the opportunity to build innovative programmes in poor urban areas adversely affected by violence against women and girls (and their vulnerability to HIV infection). She, with other girls, did a social mapping and analysis of what safe spaces existed for girls; their findings highlighted that less than 2% of girls in Kibera actually participate in any type of youth-serving programme, and only 1% of girls in Kibera have access to a safe space. To address this, the Binti Pamoja Center (Daughters United) created safe spaces for girls to explore their issues (e.g., violence against women, HIV/AIDS, poverty, unequal access to education and lack of RH services, etc) and find possible solutions to address them. The center also helped spearhead an economic literacy curriculum for the girls living in the slums. Overall, the

whole project has led to increased self-confidence and assertiveness of the girls involved, as well as improved communication with parents and the community on SRH issues.

Ms. Mariam Kouyate of **Mali** emphasized the importance and effectiveness of dedicated programming to reach marginalized girls, such as migrant girls, out-of-school girls, and domestic workers. Problems they encountered were many: early pregnancy, illiteracy, lack of information, and violence. These resources should be used for strategies to specifically identify marginalized girls, such as community-based approaches, focus groups, awareness raising activities, and centers for girls. Specific actions included literacy programmes; vocational training in batik, soap making and other economic activities; peer education; and advocacy training. The girls, now literate and with their own businesses, have raised awareness about key SRH issues such as early marriage and HIV/AIDS in their communities. She and others like her have become role models, living out the dream that literacy can take one very far (even to the United States to speak at the UN).

Ms. Veronica Nampota, a girl from **Malawi**, spoke next. Her core message was that convention HIV and youth-serving programmes are not reaching the most vulnerable; as the HIV epidemic becomes increasingly young and female, special strategies are needed to effectively reach, protect, and empower girls. The realization of girls' development rights—including meaningful participation and equal opportunities—is essential to the fight against HIV and AIDS. She underscored that a holistic approach—that takes into account health, education, life skills, and participation—was needed for marginalized girls. Features that made a difference for the girls included (1) specific attention to girls' participation through girls only clubs and leadership training; and (2) SRH education, services, and life skills coupled with livelihood programmes were critical ingredients to change the situation for marginalized girls. Due to their participation in the project, the girls are being recognized and respected by their communities, and have been able to delay marriage because of their economic empowerment and ability to make their own decisions.

Ms. Esther Morales of **Guatemala** highlighted the importance of social support for indigenous girls; the resources to support marginalized girls come from the communities themselves. In all settings, there are groups of girls who need and welcome such support so they can become leaders in their communities. She described the typical life of a socially isolated Mayan girl when she reaches puberty: early school abandonment, heavy workloads, limited mobility and autonomy, vulnerability to violence, and early marriage and pregnancy. Therefore, to help young girls like her navigate these changes and reduce their isolation, girls clubs were formed to provide a safe place to meet peers and adult mentors, who encouraged them to stay in school and offered support on sensitive subjects. Now, she is a confident young woman who likes to teach, organize, and mobilize others. Her life is an example that with minimal investment and increased social support, indigenous Guatemalan girls can live better lives that benefit not only themselves but the community at large.

Finally, **Ms. Tsholofelo Sefularo** of **Botswana** talked about the importance of girl-boy partnerships to promote gender equality, in particular to mobilize boys for support girls' empowerment. She described the Girls-Boys Education Movement (GBEM) that supported peer-based life skills education in school, as well as advocacy and lobbying about children's rights. Their activities resulted in policy changes, such as to retain adolescent mothers in schools, and government-supported research to be conducted in schools. She implored the Commission to develop programmes targeting the family where initial socialization of boys and girls take place, as well as advocate for gender-sensitive curriculum. She concluded by reminding the audience, "A WOMAN is a SISTER to a man, a DAUGHTER to a man, a FRIEND, a WIFE, and every man has a MOTHER."