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BRINGING GIRLS  
INTO FOCUS



DIVISION OF POLICY AND  
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# Introduction

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The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, remains the world's most comprehensive framework for achieving gender equality, reflecting a consensus between 189 governments and many non-governmental organizations. It is the most pro-woman global agenda in history.<sup>i</sup> The Platform calls for gender mainstreaming<sup>1</sup> to address twelve critical areas of concern. Among these twelve, area L refers to “the persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child”:

*The girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded.*

*If women are to be equal partners with men, in every aspect of life and development, now is the time to recognize the human dignity and worth of the girl child and to ensure the full enjoyment of her human rights and fundamental freedoms...<sup>ii</sup>*

On the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Platform, UNICEF is focusing on progress and ongoing challenges for girls. This paper makes the case for more careful analysis if we are to understand the realities of girls' lives, and what the world has delivered for them in the last fifteen years. Using data in areas including education, child marriage, and child labour, it calls for closer examination of gender disparities in childhood and adolescence, suggesting a tentative picture of persistent and, in some cases, deepening gender inequality which is only apparent when data are analyzed more carefully.

Many of the main objectives of the BPFA have not been met. Girls on average do not enjoy the same protection or access to services as boys in most areas. In those

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<sup>1</sup> The UN Economic and Social Council defined gender mainstreaming in 1997 as: “a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.”

This report is based mainly on analysis of data drawn from UNICEF databases containing statistics from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) on selected indicators, including undernutrition, primary and secondary education enrollment/attendance, comprehensive knowledge of AIDS and child marriage. It also makes use of reports of UNESCO, World Bank, and other organizations using MICS, DHS, and other statistics. Qualitative studies have also been consulted to support messages derived from the statistical data.

few circumstances where girls are ahead of boys, such as secondary education, this applies to a relatively small number of countries. This is not to say that inequality for boys is less important. But the focus here is on the more prevalent disadvantage of girls and its dynamic.

Data show progress at aggregate level on gender parity in areas such as education. However, in the examples examined in this paper, gender gaps often widen when considering other forms of exclusion, such as poverty, ethnicity or minority status, social vulnerability, disability, and rural/urban location. We also see gender disparities increasing in the areas we measured across nearly all populations as children reach adolescence. This raises the question of whether the gains made for girls in early childhood are being sustained through the life cycle.

A range of data suggests that girls are especially vulnerable at pubescence and sexual maturity. Adolescent girls are more vulnerable than boys to sexual debut through coercion, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), labour exploitation in the household and other informal spheres, traditional practices that compromise their physical and social well-being, school dropout, child marriage, sexual and intimate partner violence, and disinterest in their educational attainment.<sup>iii</sup> For too many girls, the Convention on the Rights of the Child's definition of the child as a person under 18 does not reflect the reality of their lives, as they find themselves prematurely in the role of wife, mother, worker, or caretaker. This compromises their physical and emotional health and denies them their rights to schooling,

play, and rest, all of which serve to further entrench their disadvantage. It is clear that the negative cultural attitudes about girls and discrimination against them have not been eliminated since 1995.

Subject to discrimination on the basis of both their age and sex, girls hold an ambiguous and sometimes contradictory place in international, national, and local laws and norms. Few major international agreements consider the specific human rights of girls.<sup>iv</sup> The Beijing Declaration of 1995, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development 1994, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000 that reiterates the rights of women and girls to protection in conflict, and Security Council Resolution 1820 of 2008 on women, peace and security which complements it, are among the few exceptions.

That we have failed and continue to fail the world's girls is not a new observation. For example, in 2005, the Commission on the Status of Women noted that for critical area L, while UN agencies had invested significant effort into education and protection of adolescent girls from HIV infection, there was little sign of action elsewhere.<sup>v</sup> Five years later, gender parity in education continues to elude the global community, and women and girls continue to be disproportionately impacted by HIV infections, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Part of the reason for this is our continued failure to fully understand the situation of girls and the dynamics behind the denial of their rights. This paper aims to begin a process to improve that understanding. ■

# Gender disparities grow over the life cycle and deepen with puberty

## Gender gaps increase as girls reach adolescence.

While gender disparities appear in data relating to early childhood, they are small compared to the gaps that we see for data relating to adolescence. Under-five mortality, underweight prevalence, and primary school enrollment data show much smaller gender gaps than those seen for secondary education, child marriage, and adolescent reproductive health, sexual and gender-based violence, and child domestic labour. This is not to compare like with like: these are different indicators. But it suggests that disparities grow over the life cycle. (Figures 1-5 illustrate gender gaps in 5 indicators for selected countries with available data.)

Child mortality and underweight prevalence have decreased among boys and girls in all regions of the world. Research on gender gaps in mortality and underweight prevalence among children under five suggests that while there are pockets of discrimination, in general girls tend to fare more or less equally compared to boys.

Some of the most detailed studies have focused on India, where girls have higher rates of mortality, despite evidence that globally it is usual for boys to have the higher mortality rate in childhood. However, a closer look at these studies suggests that more complex factors than just sex may be at play. For example, one study of India's unprecedented economic growth in the 1990s showed that even as nutritional status for children improved overall, the improvement for boys was markedly higher leading to greater gender inequality.<sup>vi</sup>

A recent report by the Food and Agriculture Organization analyzing data on infant mortality during major declines of GDP in several developing countries showed infant mortality for girls rising five times higher than that of boys compared to pre-crisis rates.<sup>vii</sup>

As with child survival and nutrition, gender gaps in primary education have also decreased. According to data from 2000 to 2007, more girls are going to school in all parts of the world, and, in three regions—East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Central and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States—the percentage of girls and boys enrolled in or attending primary school is equal or nearly equal. In Eastern Africa, the percentage of girls is actually slightly higher. Gender disparities disfavoring girls persist in West and Central Africa, much of South Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa. The gap in West and Central Africa, at 8 percentage points, is the largest and is 5 percentage points in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa.

Despite this progress, girls still account for a majority of children out of school. UNICEF estimates that 101 million children of primary school age were not in school in 2007 and more than half were girls.<sup>viii</sup> Boys are still enjoying the larger share of the world's achievements toward MDG 2<sup>2</sup>, despite the huge efforts of the international community, UNICEF included, to target girls' education.

However, from an education point of view, in later life the picture changes and is more varied by region. The BPFA calls for

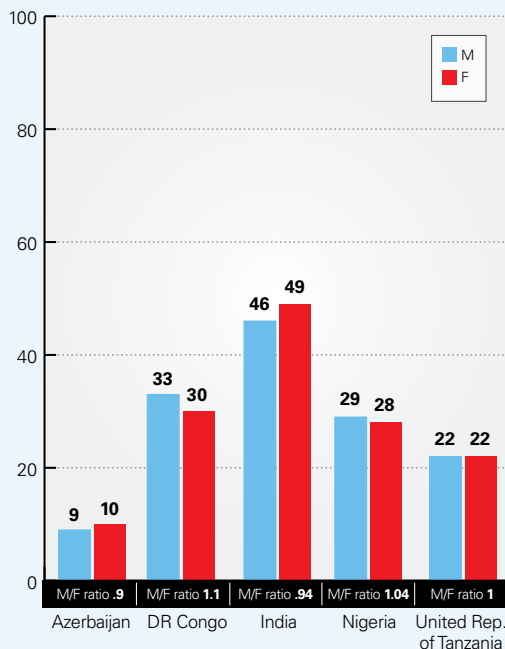
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<sup>2</sup> Millennium Development Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education.

# A comparison of gender gaps in early childhood/school age and adolescence indicators

The male/female ratios indicated above are the male to female values of the given indicators. Ratios equaling 1 indicate parity between males and females. In general, a value less than 1 indicates disparity in favour of girls/women and a value greater than 1 indicates disparity in favour of boys/men. However, in the case of the child marriage and underweight indicators, the lower the ratios, the greater the disadvantage for girls and young women.

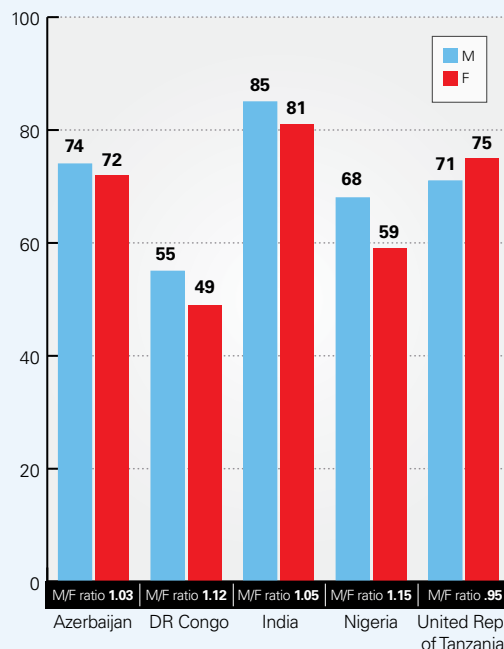
**Figure 1:** Proportion of under-five children moderately and severely underweight



Even where underweight prevalence in children under 5 is relatively high, gender gaps are small for a selection of 5 countries with available data.

**Source:** DHS and other national household surveys, 2003-2007.

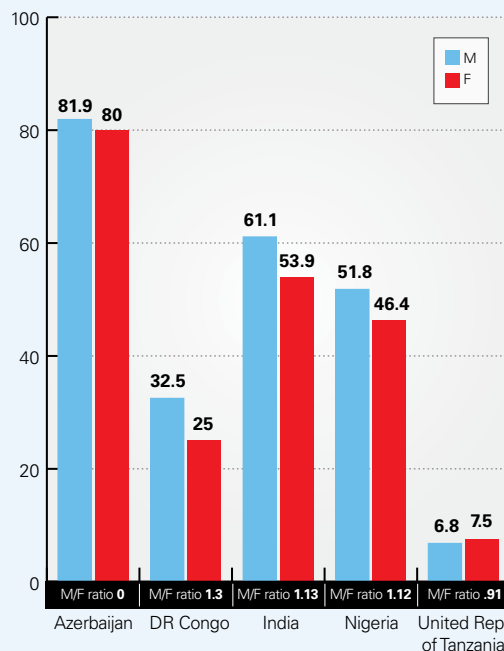
**Figure 2:** Primary school net enrolment ratio or net attendance rate



Gender gaps are relatively small in the 5 countries indicated here for enrolment and attendance in primary education.

**Source:** National household surveys and government administrative sources, 2000-2007.

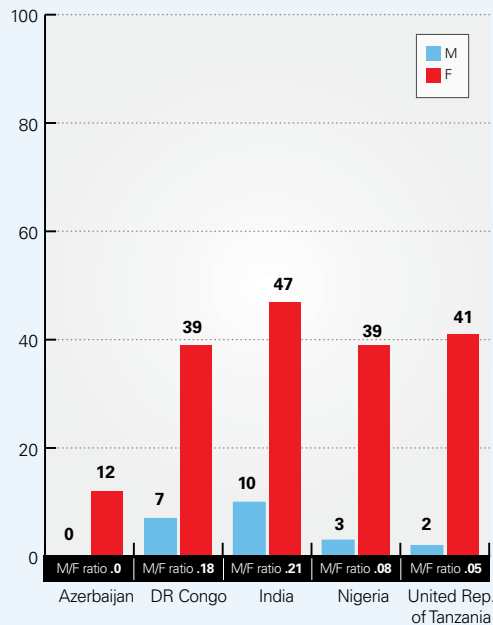
**Figure 3:** Secondary education net attendance rate



Disparities in secondary education net attendance rates vary from country to country, to the disfavour of girls in some cases and to the disfavour of boys in others. While gender gaps in attendance are relatively small for the countries indicated here, overall attendance rates are low for both boys and girls in most of the 5 countries.

**Source:** DHS and other national household surveys, 2004-2008.

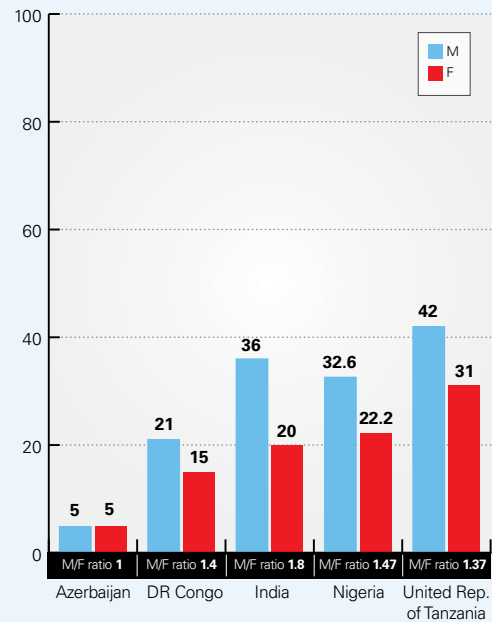
**Figure 4:** Percentage of women and men aged 20-24 that were married/in union before the age of 18 in a subset of countries with available data



Child marriage victimizes girls vastly more than boys and, even where its prevalence is relatively low, as in Azerbaijan, the relative disadvantage to girls compared to boys is quite large.

**Source:** DHS and other national household surveys, 2004-2008.

**Figure 5:** Percentage of men and women 15-24 years old who have comprehensive knowledge about AIDS



While girls' comprehensive knowledge of HIV is increasing, it still lags behind that of boys. In Azerbaijan, where no gap exists, knowledge is critically low overall. In Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, and Nigeria, the gender gap is much smaller than it is in India, where boys are 80 per cent more likely to have knowledge than girls.

**Source:** DHS and other national household surveys, 2005-2008.

**Note:** Comprehensive knowledge is defined by correct identification of two major means of preventing sexual transmission (through use of condoms and limiting sex to one faithful, uninfected partner), rejection of the two most common local misconceptions about HIV transmission (which will differ by location), and knowledge that a healthy-looking person can be HIV-positive.

Primary school data for all countries covers 2000-2007.

Azerbaijan, all other data from 2006; Democratic Republic of Congo, all other data from 2007; India, all other data from 2005-06; Nigeria, underweight data from 2003, all other data from 2008; United Republic of Tanzania, HIV knowledge data from 2007-08, all other data from 2004-05.

gender equality in both primary and secondary education, yet by 2005, only about one third of countries achieved gender parity in secondary education.<sup>ix</sup> Gender gaps disfavoring girls in secondary education are greatest in South Asia and West and Central Africa, but they also exist in Eastern and Southern Africa, Middle East and North Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States.<sup>x</sup> In East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, developed

countries, and some countries in other regions, boys appear to be disadvantaged, with lower proportions of boys enrolled in secondary education than girls. In some countries gender gaps in secondary education appear to be closing in an environment where overall enrolment and attendance rates remain low for both girls and boys.

This more varied picture may reflect the complex array of issues that children in

developing countries face as they move into adolescence. Schooling for older children is highly sensitive to local economic conditions, gender norms relating to work expectations, religion or ethnicity, and physical location and condition of schools. For boys, especially those from disadvantaged and excluded groups, work may be a reason for school dropout.<sup>xi</sup> Fears about girls' developing sexuality or an instinct to protect them from exploitation can lead parents to take their girls out of school.<sup>xii</sup>

Child marriage, a phenomenon which frequently leads to children dropping out of school, shows a clear pattern of gender discrimination against girls. Girls are vastly more likely to be married as children than boys. In a small number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of men aged 20-24 who were married or in union before the age of 18 approaches or surpasses 10 per cent. Yet the percentage for women is more than double in these and all other countries with available data. For example, in Nepal, where the percentage of men married or in union before the age of 18 is 16 per cent, it is over 50 per cent for women. In the developing world (excluding China), more than one-third of young women aged 20-24 reported that they were married or in union by age 18.<sup>xiii</sup>

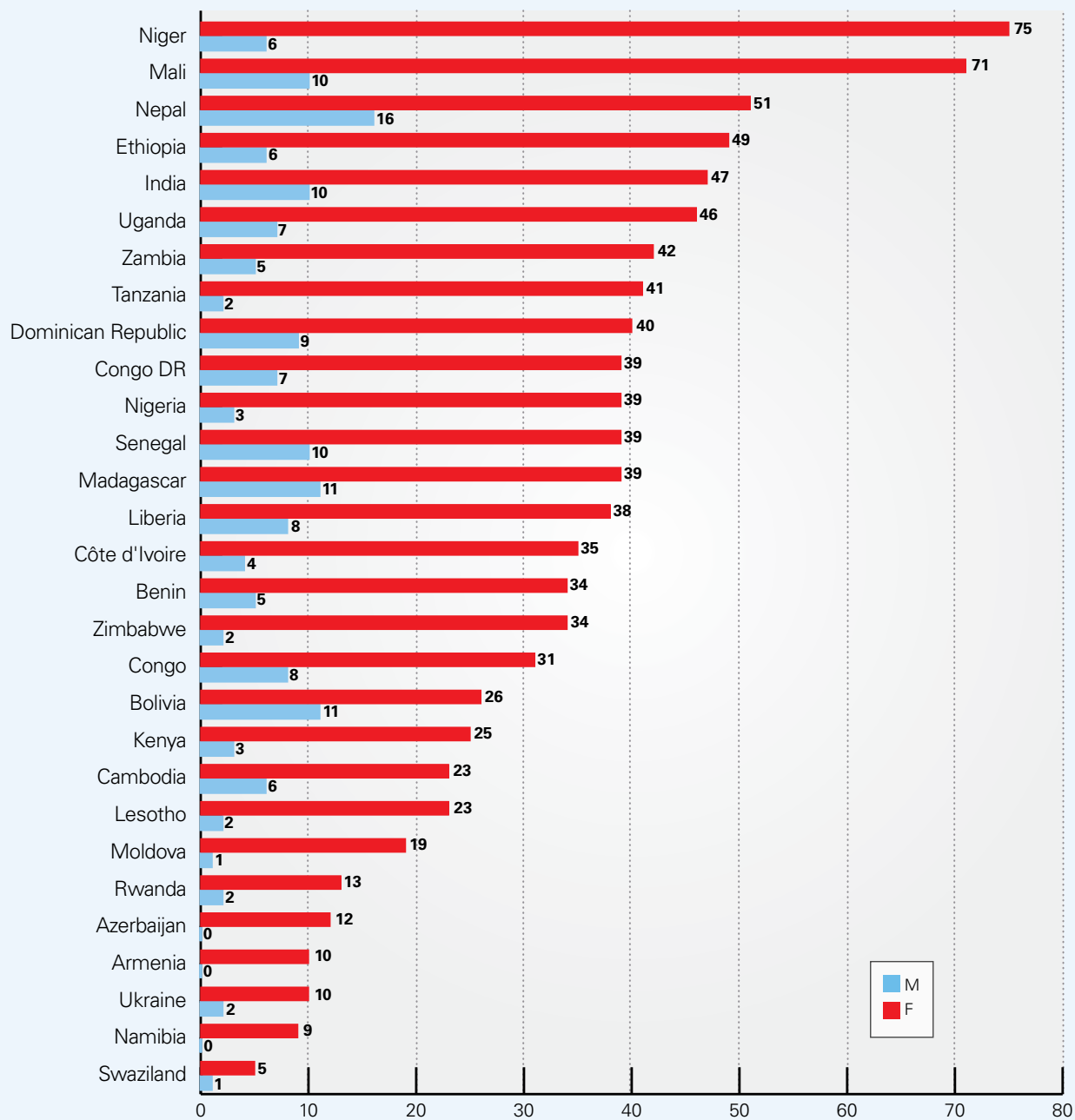
Child marriage exposes girls to risks boys do not face. Pregnancy and childbirth are more dangerous at younger ages and are the leading cause of death for girls between 15 and 19 in developing countries.<sup>xiv</sup> Marriage can also expose girls to a higher risk of contracting HIV: a study in Kenya and Zambia showed married girls to be 75 per cent more likely than sexually active unmarried girls to have the virus.<sup>xv</sup> One

suggested reason for this is that married girls are generally less able to control their sexual behaviour, owing to their lack of power relative to their husbands.

Globally, it is estimated that in 2008, 40 per cent of all new HIV cases in people 15 and older were within the 15-24 age cohort.<sup>xvi</sup> Countries with comparatively high prevalence for HIV have considerably higher rates among adolescent girls and young women aged 15-24 years than their male counterparts.<sup>xvii</sup> In the nine southern African countries hit hardest by HIV, prevalence among adolescent girls and young women aged 15-24 is on average three times higher than for males of the same age. This greater vulnerability is more than a consequence of greater physiological susceptibility to HIV transmission through heterosexual sex. It is also a reflection of women's and girls' social, economic, and legal disadvantage.<sup>xviii</sup> Research from a number of African countries suggests that rape plays a critical role in transmission in the region and helps drive the feminization of HIV and AIDS. For example, a recent survey from Lesotho found that 47 per cent of men and 40 per cent of women believe women to have no right to refuse sex with their male partners.<sup>xix</sup> DHS data from Uganda in 2006 shows that one-fourth of all women aged 15-49 reported that their first sexual intercourse occurred against their will.<sup>xx</sup> UNAIDS also notes the high prevalence of intergenerational partnerships, in which girls are more vulnerable to coercion and risky sexual practices.<sup>xxi</sup>

Gender inequality is a factor in access to condoms, which are critical for prevention of HIV and other STI transmission and for reducing adolescent pregnancy. A study from Brazil found that only about 45 per cent of adolescent girls and young women

**Figure 6** Percentage of women and men aged 20-24 that were married/in union before the age of 18 in a subset of countries with available data



**Child marriage affects girls far more than boys.**

**Source:** DHS and other national surveys, 2002-2008.

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aged 15-24 reported always using condoms in casual sex compared to nearly 65 per cent of boys and young men in the same age group. This data may be skewed by the unreliability of self-reported data on sexual behaviour.<sup>xxii</sup> But taken alongside research from sub-Saharan Africa and the United States which suggests that the likelihood of unprotected sex and sexual coercion increases as the age gap between adolescent girls and young women and their sexual partners grows, it is also reasonable to assume that imbalances of power are being reflected here.<sup>xxiii</sup> This corresponds to findings from other regions of the world, where girls and women report that men usually decide about the use of condoms. In South Africa, condom use is lower because of women's fear of violence, while in Morocco, a women's insistence on her partner's use of protection is interpreted as a sign of infidelity.<sup>xxiv</sup> In Benin, nearly 20 per cent more adolescent girls aged 15-19 than their boy peers believe that they have no way to protect themselves from HIV.<sup>xxv</sup>

More broadly, evidence from both developed and developing countries reveals the greater vulnerability of girls to sexual and physical violence in intimate relationships. One study from the United States showed that, while adolescent girls and boys in secondary school reported similar rates of violence in their dating relationships, more girls reported being victims of extreme violence and forced sexual contact. Girls reported that their partners started violence 70 per cent of the time, while boys reported their partners as having initiated violence just 27 per cent of the time and with only minor injuries as a result to themselves.<sup>xxvi</sup> ■

## Double jeopardy: gender discrimination compounds other forms of discrimination

**While aggregate data may indicate gender parity has been achieved in some areas, disaggregated data show gender disparities persist for the poor and marginalized.**

It is becoming increasingly apparent that disaggregated data is merely a first step. Much more careful analysis of existing data, perhaps even more than collection of new data, is needed, especially on ethnic and social marginalization, physical disability, rural/urban differences, and their relationship to gender dynamics in childhood.

For example, one World Bank study found that poverty produces larger inequalities in school completion to grade 6 than rural residence or gender gaps. However, in South Asia and North Africa and West and Central Africa, where gender gaps are already large in aggregate in this respect, they widen considerably more when comparing the poorest and richest households.<sup>xxvii</sup> In other words, it appears that, despite what has frequently been assumed by those working on development, different disadvantages interact in ways that are multiplicative rather than merely additive.

In Chad, for example, boys are more than 3 times as likely to reach grade 6 than girls in the poorest quintile, while in the richest households, they are only one-fifth more likely to reach grade 6 than girls. In Pakistan, boys from poorer households are over twice as likely to reach grade 6 than their female peers but girls and boys from the richest quintile have an equal likelihood

to reach this grade level.<sup>xxviii</sup> Thus it is not simply a case of double disadvantage. Poverty and gender discrimination do not sit alongside one another. Instead it is a case of compound disadvantage, where the interaction of poverty and gender discrimination produce outcomes for girls that are markedly more than the sum of their parts.

The impact of child labour on school attendance also disadvantages poor girls. According to a multivariate analysis conducted for 18 developing countries by UNICEF, when unpaid household chores are factored into the number of hours children worked, the impact of child labour on girls' school attendance is always negative and more severe than for boys. Having an educated mother or being in the richest 20 per cent of the population were the two factors most positively associated with school attendance for girls and boys.<sup>xxix</sup> For child marriage, UNICEF estimates, based on data on 75 countries, that girls from the poorest households are more than 3 times more likely to be married as children than girls from the richest quintile.<sup>xxx</sup>

Conflict and resource scarcity also compound discrimination against girls. Worldwide, it is estimated that half the primary-school-age children not in school are in conflict-affected and fragile states. Of the 43 million children in 2006 living in conflict-affected states and not attending

school, it is estimated that more than half were girls.<sup>3xxx</sup> Sexual abuse, unhygienic conditions, and the parental desire to protect children affect girls more than boys in conflict zones, refugee camps, and areas hit by disasters, and underlie non-attendance at school.<sup>xxxii</sup> Whenever water, food, and sources of energy due to deforestation or price fluctuations are scarce, girls spend less time in school and are with women spending more hours securing basic household necessities.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

According to one recent analysis of girls' school participation and ethnolinguistic groups across 120 countries, those countries with multiple ethnic, language, and caste groups have lower primary completion rates (PCRs) for girls, a larger gap between male and female PCRs and lower overall achievement.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In India, for example, 37 per cent of girls aged 7-14 belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes<sup>4</sup> do not attend school, compared with about one quarter of boys from the same groups.<sup>xxxv</sup>

In Guatemala, at every age, indigenous girls are less likely to be enrolled in school than non-indigenous girls or indigenous and non-indigenous boys. At age 7, the national compulsory age of primary education enrolment, just over half of all indigenous girls are in school, compared with 71 per cent of boys and 75 per cent of non-indigenous girls. Declines in enrolment begin

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**3** This estimate is based on the fact that most of the conflict-affected countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, followed next by South Asia, and that all have large gender gaps disfavoring girls in education. See Save the Children, *Rewrite the Future*, 2005, p.4.

**4** Scheduled castes and tribes are defined as people groups that suffer extreme social, educational, and economic backwardness arising out of historical practices of untouchability and out of agricultural marginalization, lack of infrastructure, and geographical isolation. This definition is adapted from that of the Indian National Commission on Schedules Tribes. <http://ncst.nic.in/index.asp?langid=1>, accessed 15 December 2009.

at age 12 and are especially pronounced for indigenous girls. At age 16, just 25 per cent of indigenous girls, compared to 50 per cent of non-indigenous girls and boys and 45 per cent of indigenous boys, are in school.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Here we see ethnicity and gender interacting with the dynamics that become active as girls reach adolescence, and again the consequences for girls are severe. Ethnicity and social exclusion may also correlate with higher rates of violence against girls and women. Research from eastern India suggests that women from scheduled castes experience higher rates of violence than women from other groups. Thus ethnicity can be a key factor, whether positive or negative, interacting with gender discrimination.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Basic disaggregated data compared across regions show the profound negative effects of neglecting gender inequality, while also suggesting the potential positive effects of targeted interventions. For example, in the area of comprehensive knowledge of HIV among young people aged 15-24 years, a key intervention to halting the epidemic, young women and men in many parts of the world have gained greater knowledge of modes of transmission of HIV. Yet available data for Bangladesh, Egypt, Malawi, and Nigeria, in Figure 7, show that Bangladesh and Egypt lag well behind these two African countries and that poor girls and young women in all four countries are more vulnerable than girls from wealthy households as well as boys. The gender gap for both wealthy and poor households is considerably higher in Egypt and Bangladesh than in the African countries.

In Bangladesh, young men are almost four times as likely as young women to have knowledge about AIDS among the poorest households, while in the case of the richest households, young men are only almost twice as likely to have this knowledge compared with young women. In Egypt, young men from the poorest households are 5 times as likely as young women to have comprehensive knowledge of AIDS. In Nigeria, while young men from the richest wealth quintile are 20 per cent more likely to have knowledge about AIDS than young women from this income group, this gap widens among young men and women from the poorest households, with young men being twice as likely to have this knowledge than their female peers. Similar gaps are apparent in the case of Malawi. That girls and women who are married as children tend to have lower rates of comprehensive knowledge of HIV than those who marry later, suggests another form of double jeopardy.<sup>xxxviii</sup> ■

# Overlooked and forgotten: Causes of discrimination against adolescent girls have been unrecognized because of social norms accepting girls' inequality

## Insufficient data, biases in data collection, and neglect of the particular issues this group of girls faces contribute to the underestimation of their disadvantage.

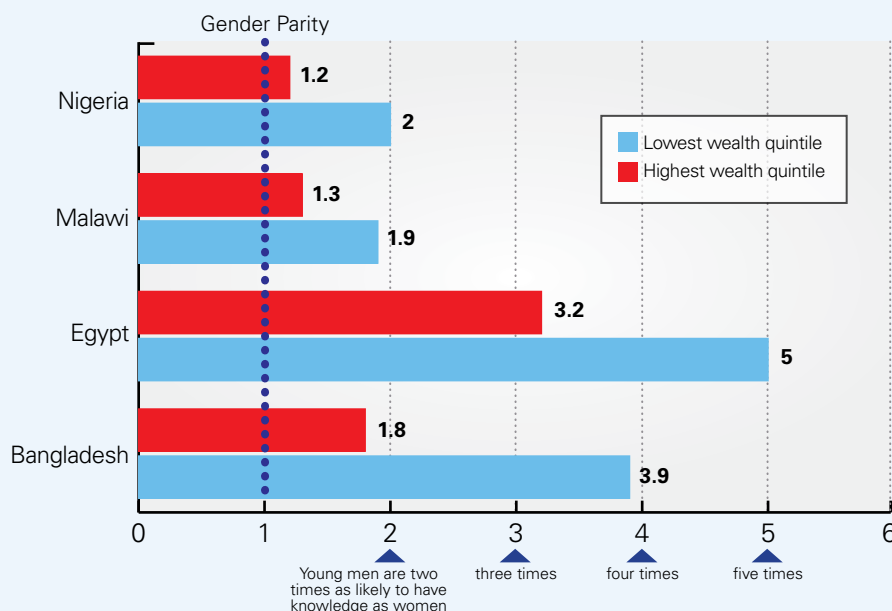
The pronounced disadvantage of adolescent girls has been underpinned by a belief that gender norms are given and unchangeable, when in reality they are neither neutral nor inherent. Yet, by adolescence, many girls have internalized attitudes and behaviors that harm them, attitudes which are reinforced by those around them, both child and adult, male and female.

A recent report by the International Center for Research on Women using DHS data highlights the importance of a "tipping point," the age at which the first significant increases in the number of child marriages occur. This tipping point is identified in the report as being

13 or 14 for most countries, although it is 12 for Ethiopia and 15 for Burkina Faso. The report found that primary education can help girls and their families avoid child marriage. However, when older girls are married they tend to become invisible to programmes targeting children. They become, in effect, adults in the eyes of those who should be defending their rights as children. This finding suggests that interventions need to be better tailored and targeted to the specific needs of girls at different ages.<sup>xxxix</sup>

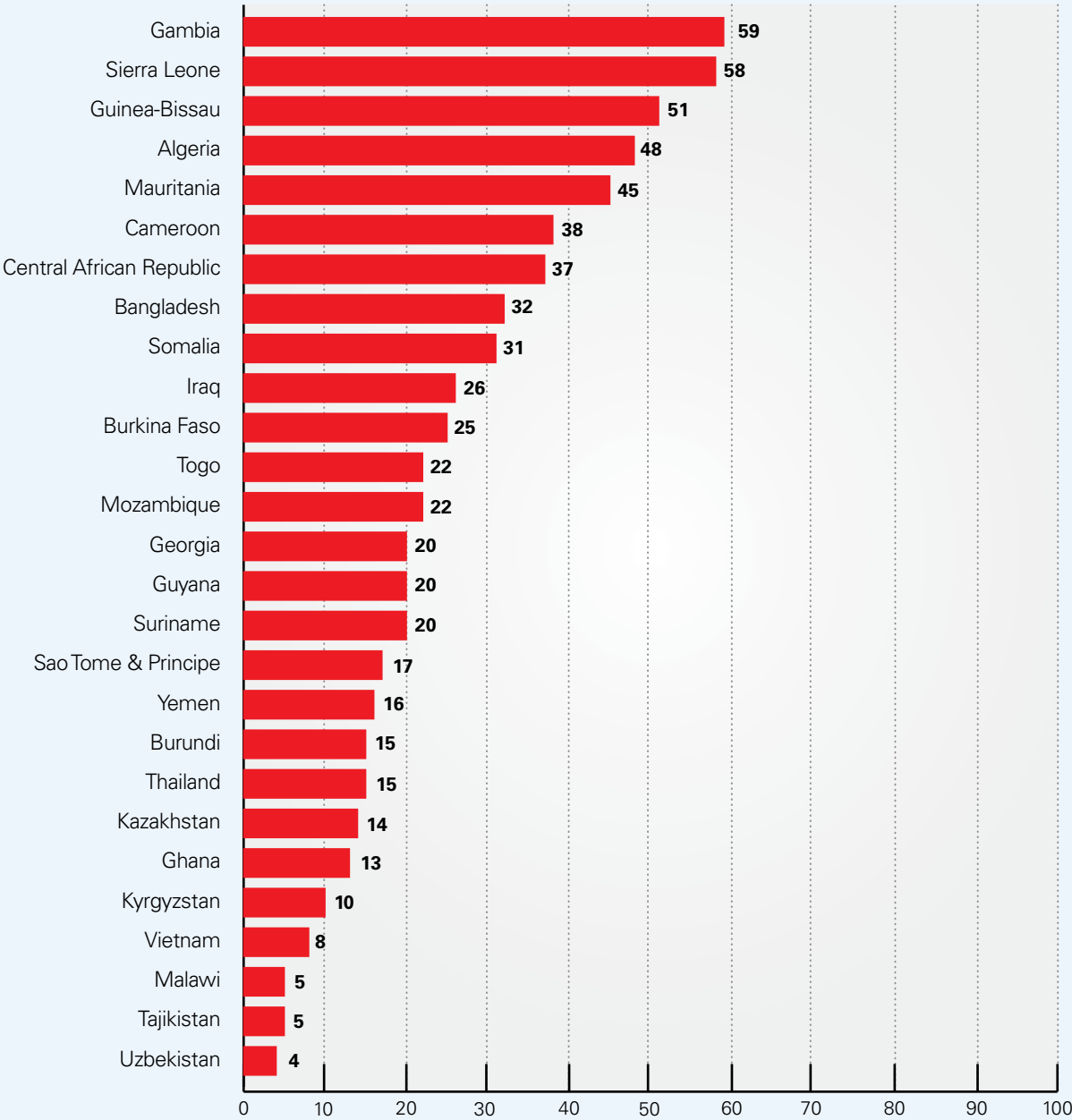
Even outside the context of marriage, the dominance of adult men in formal settings such as schools and hospitals means that girls are at risk of sexual abuse and rape. Male teachers have been identified as the perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse in research undertaken in many countries, including several in sub-Saharan Africa,

**Figure 7** Male to female ratio of comprehensive knowledge about AIDS among young people aged 15-24 by wealth quintile



Source: DHS, 2004-2008.

**Figure 8** Percentage of currently married/in union women aged 15-19 whose husband is ten or more years older



In a number of countries around the world, large proportions of girls are married to much older men which may impact power relations and can subject girls to the control of men and their families.

**Source:** MICS, 2005-2007. Please note that in the case of Burkina Faso, Burundi, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mauritania, Sierra Leone and Togo, 10 per cent or more women declared that the husband’s/partner’s age was not known. The actual percentage of currently married/in union women aged 15-19 whose husband or partner is ten or more years older may therefore be higher than the percentages presented here.

Bangladesh, and Samoa. Fear for their daughter's security and cultural attitudes drive parents' removal of girls from school and the inability of girls to obtain healthcare in countries like Afghanistan, where a strong preference for girls and women to see female medical personnel exists.<sup>xli</sup>

Violence against girls and women is frequently under-reported and under-recognised. For many women, the violence they experience is so widely accepted that they consider it normal from an early age. Even in those circumstances where violence is not accepted as normal, gender-based violence may be hidden by families, women and girls themselves out of shame. More than 50 per cent of women surveyed in 68 countries reported that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under certain circumstances. Neglect of children was the most common justification given for wife-beating across almost all regions. The highest proportion of girls and women holding this belief live in Africa, followed by South Asia. In four countries of the Middle East and North Africa, an average of 58 per cent of women aged 15-49 justified wife-beating. Unsurprisingly, in general, higher rates of education among women correlate with lower levels of acceptance of gender-based violence. However, it is perhaps less appreciated that the belief is as common among 15-19 year old girls as among older women.<sup>xliii</sup>

In the context of child labour, more attention to the situation of girls is suggesting that even the assumptions guiding data collection and analysis have been blind and biased to the impact of gender inequalities on work. Historically, it has been assumed that child labour affects more boys than girls. However, over the past 10 years, cooperative efforts between the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and the World Bank have led to more gender-sensitive data

on child labour. In 2008, the ILO's adoption of a more precise definition of child labour to take into account unpaid child work within the household helped to bring greater consistency to definitions of child labour, and revealed that the assumptions about the gap between the comparative burden of child labour between boys and girls were in fact wrong, and that this burden is more or less evenly shared.<sup>xliii</sup>

Using household-level data from MICS, UNICEF has found that including unpaid household chores in estimates of child labour raises the overall estimate of child labour among girls by more than a quarter compared to just one-sixth for boys, showing the disproportionately higher levels of girls' work in the household. The adjusted calculation including household chores also caused the gender gap in child labour that had disfavoured boys to decrease by more than one-half, bringing some countries closer to gender parity.<sup>xliv</sup> Another UNICEF study found that among children aged 7-14 in 18 sub-Saharan African countries, the rate of child labour is the same among girls as among boys, at about 38 per cent.<sup>xlv</sup> Recently, an ILO study using household-level surveys from 16 countries in all major world regions suggested that "if a combined measure of work is built to include economic and non-economic activities, there are more girls working than boys for all countries and regions" under consideration. For older children between 15 and 17, girls' participation in unpaid household labour is much higher than for boys, and girls' number of hours worked, a proxy measurement for intensity of work, is also greater. The involvement of girls and boys in household chores increases with age, but the rate of increase is nearly twice as high for girls.<sup>xlvi</sup> This is another example of the imperative of deeper and more considered analysis, and the dangers inherent in one-dimensional use of data. ■

## Conclusion

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This paper has not presented a comprehensive picture of the reality for girls fifteen years after Beijing. However, it has presented the case that this reality is perhaps more complex, and at times more troubling, than has in the past been assumed. It has also argued that achieving clarity on that reality requires a much more careful and considered approach to data and evidence than has always been the case in the past. Too often those working for gender equality, or in development more broadly, have failed to look beyond disaggregation. This paper suggests that disaggregation, while important, is not enough, and our failure to go beyond to the type of analysis that is required undermines our efforts to deliver the promise to girls that the world made in the Beijing Platform for Action.

One conclusion arising from this, then, is that the task of understanding the ways in which girls experience multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion, and the ways that these can interact, is urgent. There is also some evidence to suggest that the converse may be true, and that there are positive factors which can have the similar kind of multiplier effect, except in the right direction, that multiple negative factors can have in interaction with one another.

It is also possible to draw some tentative conclusions from the limited picture that this paper presents, particularly where these conclusions are backed up by our experience of what works at country level. First among these is the need for targeted interventions and special provision and protection for adolescent girls. Too often adolescent girls' studies and labour within the household are discounted, undervalued

or unrecognized. Married girls are taken to be adults and lose the special provisions of childhood. Adolescent girls in all parts of the world—developed and developing—are vulnerable. Interventions need to understand and reflect the dynamics of sexual maturation, which clearly shapes social norms and discriminatory practices affecting girls. Making schools girl-friendly, including efforts to provide hygienic conditions for menstruating girls in Eastern and Southern Africa, to name but one, is a good example of how adolescent girls have been considered in programmatic interventions.<sup>xlvii</sup> At the same time, adolescent girls need special protection. Schools and health facilities need to be designed with gender sensitivity, and providers require training, guidance, and rules to help adolescent girls and boys more effectively.

Second, broader efforts at poverty reduction and improvements in classic development areas such as health or education need to better appreciate the perspective of girls who suffer a range of discriminations and exclusions that are better described as multiplicative than multiple. For example, while prioritizing girls' education makes sense, appreciating the interaction between gender and ethnicity for girls from minority groups makes even more sense.

Lastly, that the realities for the world's girls are more complex, and the discriminations they face more compound, makes the case that within our overall efforts for gender equality, it is not only that girls need to be at the centre, but that the diversity of girls' circumstances around the world needs to be appreciated. Gender equality will not be achieved without priority not only to girls,



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but in particular to those girls who face the burden of different forms of discrimination and exclusion.

As the world marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BPFA, we must recommit ourselves to ensuring that the rights of the girl child are fulfilled, as outlined in critical area L, and no longer overlooked. Women's rights cannot be seen in isolation from those of girls. Girls' rights are closely linked with women's rights. Promoting their rights today is a critical element in achieving their rights as women in the future. The duty to identify and challenge discriminatory

patterns and address the gender bias girls face must be recognized and prioritized. Non-discrimination is the right of every girl. We know this to be both a moral and a legal imperative, and this is reflected in such instruments as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international instruments, which underpin the BPFA. Acknowledging this imperative means acknowledging that to act is not our choice but rather our obligation. ■

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