

what young people are saying

VOICES
OF YOUTH

the bi-monthly newsletter of Voices of Youth
www.unicef.org/voy/

October 2002: The Girl Child & Gender Inequality



NEW ON VOICES OF YOUTH

- ❖ [Sustainable Development](#): A new discussion on the impacts of HIV/AIDS and Water to support the World Summit on Sustainable Development

SPOTLIGHT

- ❖ [Homepage redesign](#): For the first time *Voices of Youth* will benefit from a dynamic, constantly updating homepage that reflects the fast paced world of young people today. The new homepage will make it easier to both navigate the site and take advantage of *Voices of Youth's* myriad resources and discussion boards.

UPCOMING ON VOICES OF YOUTH

- ❖ [Live chat!](#) In November 2002, *Voices of Youth* and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) will hold a chat with young people in over 10 countries on child and youth rights and responsibilities. The specific focus of the chat will be participation and girls' education.
- ❖ [Commercial Sexual Exploitation](#): Very soon, *Voices of Youth* will have an additional case study, discussion questions, and other information for young people interested in commercial sexual exploitation.
- ❖ [Intergenerational Dialogue](#): In collaboration with the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), *Voices of Youth* is developing a new discussion board on communication between young people and adults.

QUOTATION OF THE MONTH

"...we forget that sometimes the women we are fighting for do not know what their rights are or they are blinded by their tradition which are mostly very against woman's right. most woman who get abused do not know what they can do to help themselves, so unless we do something to make them realised that they have every right to fight for their own right, freedom and comfort, we can argue about giving them the right forever and never get the result that we want."

young girl, 15, Cambodia

DECEMBER TOPIC HIV/AIDS

THE GIRL CHILD AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Since 1998, *Voices of Youth's* Girl Child discussion board has received more than 2,000 messages from young people in 110 countries worldwide. The variety and insight of messages posted demonstrated young people's firm understanding of the complex nature of gender inequality.

Young people recognized the wider impact of gender discrimination, citing illiteracy, lack of opportunities, sexual exploitation, the burden of housework, unequal salary structures, and low self-esteem as just some of the potential consequences.

They also discussed the origins of gender inequality, highlighting the link between discrimination and cultural and societal norms, school based curricula, traditionally ascribed gender roles, and local customs.

Young people stressed the importance of education, employment opportunities and a supportive home environment as keys to ending gender discrimination. They also called for partnerships between adults and young people, in the home, the school and the community.

The fact that girls' participation reached 90% on the Girl Child discussion board, as opposed to 63% on the rest of the site, demonstrates the continued belief that gender related issues are targeted at girls and women.

OVERVIEW

Overall, young people were outraged and disturbed that young girls still suffer from discrimination. Participants extended their support to the global girl child community, pushing each other to believe in themselves and their ability to achieve their life's dreams. They also emphasized the girl child's ability to act as an agent of change when she is equipped with knowledge of her rights, a voice, opportunities and a supportive environment.

They also discussed girls as both future mothers and future policy makers and leaders, and celebrated her potential in both arenas.

The following is a brief summary of young people's comments and reflections.

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AS COMPARED TO THE BOY CHILD...

Female participants tended to compare themselves and their potential to that of boys, as opposed to declaring their own objectives and goals.

Are we the same? Many young people stated that boys and girls had identical strengths and weaknesses, both intellectually and physically. Advocates of this viewpoint often cited girls' ability to excel in sports, and denounced the unequal burden of housework placed on the girl child as a prime example of gender discrimination.

Or are we different? Others felt that boys and girls were inherently different, and that the objective was not equality in all areas, but equal rights and acceptance. Still others recognized the need to view oneself in his/her own context, and not to consistently compare.

"...men and women indeed do different things sometimes, but society should treat both sexes the same. they should be treated on the same level for two basic reasons; first, they are both humans, and second, they are both part of the society- both can create change, both can contribute to the development of society, and one CANNOT exist without the other."

young boy, 18, The Philippines

Why don't we talk about the situation of the boy child? Young people, primarily girls, questioned whether or not focusing the discussion solely on the

situation of the girl child amounted to discrimination against boys.

- ✓ Young people advocate for a more integrated discussion of child rights that emphasized the global situation of all young people—both girls and boys.

Boys also reaffirmed their own right not to be discriminated against and to be protected from abuse or violence. They called for acceptance between the sexes, and an acknowledgement of their mutual reinforcement.

DISCRIMINATION, EXPLOITATION & VIOLENCE

Sexual abuse: Young people identified rape, prostitution and sexual abuse in the home as the most egregious examples of gender discrimination.

"...Yo pienso que todas las niñas del mundo deben ser respetadas, y a su vez, deben tener el apoyo de la comunidad cuando son causantes de la violencia intrafamiliar."

young girl, 15, Colombia

They proposed the following as measures to curtail the prevalence of sexual abuse:

- ✓ Early education for all
- ✓ Educate boys to respect girls and women
- ✓ Emphasise the harmful consequences of rape on girls, societies, and communities as a whole
- ✓ Stricter and harsher laws for offenders
- ✓ Safe and supportive environment and institutions

Verbal abuse: Bullying and teasing constitute a common and harmful form of gender discrimination.

"In my own experiences in school, major barriers toward equality are the words which I hear everyday in the hallways. 'Slut, whore, ho.'..."

?, 15, USA

- ✓ Language echoes the gender perspectives of a given society, and is thus as a good place to begin addressing gender related issues.

EMPLOYMENT

Most participants agreed that women suffer discrimination in the work place.

Young people from Western Europe and North America focused on unequal salary structures and barriers to career development for women.

“...je trouve que l'inegalite entre les sexes est tres injuste . par exemple pour le meme travail les femmes seront moins payes que les hommes car elle sont femmes . mais je crois qu'il faut surtout faire evoluer les mentalites.”

young girl, 12, France

- ✓ Changing the way people think about girls is essential to ending gender inequality.
- ✓ Give women equal opportunities in the work place and they will show what they are capable of.

SPORTS

Discrimination against girls in sports was a constant source of discussion.

Young people felt that society, and teachers in particular, saw girls as unable to compete or achieve athletically. Girls advocated for their right to participate, and spoke of achieving equality in the sports arena as a principle coup and objective.

“...But the 90's have taken over and what a way we have come. We have begun to play professional basketball & get recognized in sports as well as academics. So "Girl Power" is in full effect.”

young girl, 13, USA

EDUCATION

Participants stressed the long-term and far reaching benefits of education to the struggle against gender discrimination.

“...education makes girls and boys aware of the concept of equality and prepares them emotionally and financially to make it implementable in practice.”

young girl, 21, India

When girls are educated they:

- ✓ have more career and life opportunities
- ✓ learn about their rights and their bodies
- ✓ are better able to avoid commercial sexual exploitation
- ✓ gain self-confidence

- ✓ learn the life, technical and practical skills to demonstrate their capacities and challenge stereotypes about women

TEACHERS & CURRICULUM

“...the best way to fight this is to educate the young girls so that they KNOW that they are not being treated right. Many of these women just feel that that is the way things are, and that they cannot change.”

young girl, 15, Australia

- ✓ Gender sensitive curricula, and teachers who promote gender equality are needed to motivate girls to realize their own potential.

Young people recognized the impact of the school environment and lessons learned on a girl's self-image and self-confidence. One young girl stated “...many teachers are so sexist, that girls start to feel that they actually are worst then boys, but this is not true, everyone is equal.”

“One of the basic things that needs to be done is to change our Educational Curriculum our countries to suit the needs of our society that would contribute to broader societal transformation.”

young girl, 21, South Africa

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

Young people acknowledged that every country and community struggles with different barriers to gender equality.

Rural versus Urban: Participants from West and Central Africa and South Asia addressed the higher prevalence of discrimination against girls in rural areas. They attributed the difference to educational and employment opportunities, and to a different “state of mind”.

“On peut dire sans risque de se tromper que la discrimination basée sur le sexe tant à disparaître surtout dans les centres urbains. Mais elle perdure en campagne et cela prendra du temps pour qu'il change!”

young boy, 18, Cote d'Ivoire

IN THE HOME

Young people focused on the ways in which family practices may condone, perpetuate and constitute gender discrimination. Participants were particularly concerned with the long term impact of these practices, citing illiteracy, early marriage, poor health and lack of self-esteem and consequences.

“In a number of countries, girls are given less food than boy. Girls may also be given poorer quality food than their brothers. And because girls may receive less medical care than boys, girl malnutrition may go undetected, leading to serious health problems...”

young girl, 20, Republic of Korea

- ✓ Young people also recognize that a supportive family is the key to change and progress.

SOCIETAL NORMS & TRADITIONS

Participants saw gender inequality as “inherent in the society as a whole”, part of the social fabric of communities.

“...If this world would tear down all of it's stereotypes and "roles, and allow all of it's inhabitants, woman or men, to be what they truly are, they will be shocked by the true potential of humankind is. And there will be no question, no debate, about whether the sexes are equal.”

young girl, 13, Saudi Arabia

- ✓ L'inégalité entre les sexes peut changer si on arrive à changer la mentalité de la population.

young girl, 20, Burkina Faso

Young boys and girls gave specific examples from their own countries of norms or traditions that amounted to gender discrimination. They focused primarily on the following issue and their consequences:

- Sex selection
- Female genital mutilation
- Early marriage
- The burden of housework

“...in nigeria many children especially girls are being affected, like in the northern part of the country where girls are not allowed to go school because they will marry and go to their husband's house and there by becoming illiterates without future.”

young boy, 14, Nigeria

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Young people continually oriented the discussion around issues pertaining to a girl's physical appearance such as:

- Should a girl be judged by what she wears?
- If a girl wears revealing clothing, is she asking to be sexually assaulted?
- Should girls be subject to rules about what they can wear?

No: Some felt that girls should have the right, as do boys, to wear whatever they please, and that society should respect girls independent of their clothing.

Yes: Still others felt that in the world we live in today, girls who dress revealingly are inviting sexual abuse and violence, as well as detracting from the image of girls as thinking beings with more to offer than just a body.

“...girl power is about being yourself, sticking up for your rights, and not being afraid of the challenges that the world throws at you, not being a over-rated sex symbol, and prancing around half naked. if they had real girl power then they would use their talent to achieve their goals not their looks.”

young girl, 17, Canada

ABORTION & CONDOMS

Abortion and condoms spawned some of the most contentious debates. Seeing the life of the mother and the child as separate issues, most young people argued over which should be given precedence.

They called for abstinence and for safe sexual practices, and pleaded with their peers to use condoms “if you cannot control your sexual urges”.

Young people also considered these issues through a gender and cultural lens, stating:

“Please ladies let's be real, men are allowed to have sexual with as many partners as they please. Women on the other hand are crucified by the church, their parents, and even their friends if they have multiple sex partners...”

young girl, >21, USA

WHAT CAN YOUNG PEOPLE DO?

Young people feel they can make a huge difference in their own lives and in the struggle to end gender inequality.

They outlined the following as key points of action:

- ✓ *Support:* Young girls asked each other to strive to be the best they can be, and to support each other in their goals and dreams.
- ✓ *Communicate:* Participants felt that talking openly about the issues and barriers amongst their peers was a first step. One young girl stated “I just realized that I can change the lives of girls by talking and spending time with them.” (Mika, 21, Japan)
- ✓ *Intergenerational dialogue:* Open dialogue with parents, teachers and adults was seen as a necessary mechanism for change.
- ✓ *Speak out:* Girls must make themselves heard, and have faith in their own beliefs:

“Il s'agit la d'un travail de changement des moeurs qui doit s'effectuer dans les deux sens, chez les hommes qui doivent changer leur visions des choses sur les femmes et chez les femmes qui doivent "prendre les armes " afin de se fair entendre et de prouver de quoi elles sont capables...”

young boy, 13, Algeria

- ✓ *Know your rights:* The greatest weapon is knowing your rights and how to protect and promote them.
- ✓ *Acceptance:* It is not about being better or worse, but knowing that we all have something to contribute in our way.

“Isn't the message for all of us, as we pick up our shattered dreams, that to make bold claims about A being better than B is not helpful. Rather, it promotes antagonism... Let's try to work together in peace and harmony.”

young girl, 17, France

WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?

Young people recognized that their community, family and government leaders needed to take action against gender discrimination.

They placed specific emphasis on the following:

- ✓ The need for universal primary education
- ✓ Teachers and curricula that are gender sensitive
- ✓ Freedom to choose what they study

- ✓ Laws that protect girls and women, and gender sensitive law enforcement
- ✓ National promotion of respect for women
- ✓ Creation of institutions that promote gender equality and offer safe and supportive environments for women; such as clubs and volunteer groups.
- ✓ Provide child care so young girls can be free from the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings.
- ✓ Support from the family, especially the mother
- ✓ Acknowledgement of the situation of the girl child
- ✓ No pity—Positive Reinforcement

“...Help centres where a girl can seek help should be opened so... Women should be given equal job opprtunities and their should be no sex discrimination in the workplace,with the same amount of remuneration as men,hence she can be an active contributor to the the house and her familys needs and thefore not be called a burden any longer.”

young girl, 16, India

CONCLUSION

“The achievement of goals for children, particularly for girls, will be advanced if women fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, are empowered to participate fully and equally in all spheres of society and are protected and free from all forms of violence, abuse and discrimination.”

Article 23, “A World Fit for Children”

Echoing “A World Fit for Children”, young people on *Voices of Youth* are calling for girls and women to reach their full potential. They see young people as key players in the struggle to overcome gender inequality, and recognize that society as a whole, and its leaders, must take steps to change the world’s “state of mind”.

Young people stress the importance of lifeskills, education and opportunities, and see themselves as partners in the struggle to end gender discrimination.

“Change must take place through evolution; through educating the young people of today, we can only hope that the adults of tomorrow will make the right choice.”

young girl, 16, The United Kingdom