Striving for gender equity

IN FOCUS: STRIVING FOR GENDER EQUITY

Working to end discrimination against girls in Europe and Central Asia

As countries in the Europe and Central Asia Region increasingly transition into knowledge economies, barriers to social inclusion and cohesion – including the inequalities that still suppress the hopes of millions of girls and young women here – must be tackled head-on. Valuing the untapped potential of every girl and every young woman is the key to realizing the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Boys face their own challenges too. Many in Europe and Central Asia are unable to complete secondary school, and face pressures to earn money or migrate for work, leading to high rates of mental health problems. The Region has some of the world’s highest adolescent suicide rates for boys, contributing to lower life expectancy for males in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Engaging boys and young men as vital members in their communities, and as advocates against discrimination and exclusion, can spell positive results for all.

UNICEF invests in the power of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, to give all children a fair chance of a quality education; amplify the voices of girls and women; and prevent and respond to child marriage and all forms of violence against children.

Jeta* was 18 when she married a man she barely knew, having completed only the compulsory grades of education. Her parents told her the arranged marriage was a good idea – he was from Albania’s capital city, Tirana, and he was relatively rich.

But when Jeta became pregnant and the couple learned the baby would be a girl, the husband was furious. Years of physical abuse ensued.

The situation was too much to handle. Jeta and her daughter Fabliona* eventually escaped, finding shelter in the House of Colours, a facility supported by UNICEF and NGO partner ARSIS, to assist mothers and children in crisis. A social worker there linked them to legal assistance, psycho-social support, housing, and employment for Jeta and kindergarten for Fabliona.

“She helped me so much, she was a like a mother, she gave me so much strength,” Jeta says.

*All names changed to protect identities.

Toward 2030

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Equity and sustainable development in Europe and Central Asia are threatened by gender-bias, which reinforce negative gender roles and limit a girl’s opportunities in life. The impact of persistent barriers to education and health is particularly harsh on girls disadvantaged by poverty, disability, social exclusion or the challenges associated with migration.

One of the gravest impacts of gender discrimination can be seen in sex selection. Girls are, literally, missing from some populations. Such discrimination reinforces a preference for sons in parts of the Region, which tends to become stronger as families grow. Azerbaijan, for example, has rates of gender-biased sex selection during pregnancy that are second only to China’s. Studies in the Region show that families have a deep desire for at least one son because sons carry the family name and often its wealth into the future; and many families would go as far as a third or fourth pregnancy specifically to have a boy.

Gender gaps are seen in education in the Region. As a result of persistent gender stereotyping, girls may not reach their full potential in school and society. Studies show that even the brightest girls internalize restricted expectations and tend to see their future as defined by restrictive, socially defined roles for women and men. Girls tend to pursue careers primarily in health, education and the social sector. In comparison, more boys have the ambition to enter the more lucrative ICT, trade and marketing sectors. If countries are to grow their economies, every girl and boy needs to be encouraged and supported to pursue their skills and interests.

While enrolment rates are similar for girls and boys until lower-secondary school, gaps appear at the upper-secondary level. Boys are more likely to be out of school in some countries, but the largest gender disparity in the Region is seen in Tajikistan, where almost half of all girls of upper-secondary school age are out of school, compared to less than a third of boys of the same age. In other countries, clear disparities also exist among girls from minority communities – for example, Roma adolescent girls are far more likely to be out of secondary school than Roma adolescent boys in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), Montenegro and Serbia.

There are clear links between the perpetuation of child marriage and school drop-out, with a girl who is married before she is 18 less likely to be in school than her peers, and a girl who drops out of school more likely to be married or co-habiting. Instead, investing and acknowledging the value of education for a girl is critical for her ability to realize her dreams and aspirations, rather than endure premature responsibilities as a mother. The child-marriage prevalence rate ranges from 3 to 15 per cent across the Region, but national averages often hide high rates of child marriage among adolescent girls in marginalized communities. In Serbia, a recent survey found that 43 percent of Roma girls aged 15 to 19 were married or living with a partner, which is twice as high as the global prevalence rate. Child marriage is also a concern in parts of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Turkey, where it is linked to the intersection between gender and social exclusion and migration, barriers to secondary education for girls, and lack of access to youth-friendly health services.

Child marriage is also a particular threat to girls. Migrating parents may see the early marriage of their daughters as a way to tackle fears for their security and safety. In these situations, marriage is perceived as the less worse option available for a girl and her family, effectively ending her childhood and limiting her ability to realize her full potential. Marriage is not a similar solution for boys, nor are there similar concerns related to social norms and family honour for boys.

Key government commitments on gender, ratified by the governments of Europe and Central Asia

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

- **Article 2:** Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979

- **Article 1:** […] “discrimination against women” shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women […] of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

- **Article 2:** States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, and agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women.
While the average adolescent fertility rate for the Region continues to hover at around 17 births for every 1,000 females aged 15 to 19 (higher than the 10 per 1,000 Europe average), averages in Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Romania and Tajikistan – countries where child marriages occur – are at least twice as high. Adolescent pregnancy does not only have negative consequences for the mother; infants are more likely to be born with low birth weight and other problems. Communities and societies can feel the consequences for generations.

**Our Aim**

UNICEF aims to promote the potential of every girl and boy, in everything we do across the Region, and at every stage of their development. We promote equitable development, protection and inclusion for girls and boys from their earliest days, and throughout childhood and adolescence. As well as valuing girls and young women, we work to address the underlying causes and the factors that allow gender discrimination to continue.

**Our actions**

UNICEF works to counter gender discrimination at every stage of a child’s life, valuing the growth and potential of girls in particular. We help new mothers and fathers to appreciate the prospects for both sons and daughters. Having both parents actively involved in raising their children is a critical investment, especially in a child’s early years, and a way to break down rigid, socially ascribed gender roles for girls and women, boys and men. Women in the Region perform up to eight times more unpaid care work as compared to men. However, active fathers can be the best role models within the family, and serve as a strong ally for their girls. In Romania, men make up 24 percent of the 10,000 parents reached with inclusive, non-discriminatory and positive parenting skills.

In Bulgaria, home-visiting services supported by UNICEF have improved the health of women and young children in three regions, and increased the involvement of fathers in the care of young children. More than 60 percent of children under the age of three in these regions are now being reached by such services. When fathers are engaged in the support and nurture of their children, the baby’s well-being improves and household work can be more equally shared.

We promote adolescent girls’ access to inclusive education throughout primary and secondary school to address school dropout, and mitigate against the risks of child marriage and its perception as the only option for girls. We work with all partners to address child marriage wherever it occurs, promoting girls’ continued education and mobilizing those who influence families and wider society to place a higher value on girls’ full potential.

In southeast Turkey, for example, UNICEF is leading the UN’s work with the Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality to identify causes and cases of child marriage, and engage communities, schools and local government to address the issue. Elsewhere, in Montenegro, UNICEF-supported community mobilization has trained young Roma women and men to run workshops for their peers on the harm caused by child marriages.

Investing in and valuing girls’ skills in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is also a priority. Through the ‘IT Girls’ initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, girls learn computer programming, digital communication and website development with support from UNICEF and partners. Girls thrive through mentorship and life-skills programmes throughout the Region.

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**Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989**

- **Article 2**: States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind.

**Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), 2011**

- **Article 4**: Fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination: Parties shall take the necessary legislative and other measures to promote and protect the right for everyone, particularly women, to live free from violence in both the public and the private sphere.

The Convention recognizes that some groups of women are at greater risk of violence, and states need to ensure that their specific needs are taken into account. States are also encouraged to apply the convention to other victims of domestic violence, such as men, children and the elderly.

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Twelve-year-old Liza* sits beside her drawing in the office of a psychologist she used to see at a UNICEF supported shelter in Moldova. Liza was sexually abused by her father. “Liza was placed here through emergency assistance, she was given medical, social and psychological assistance, including psycho social support and she was seen by a doctor,” explains psychologist Rodica Moraru.
In Kyrgyzstan, there is systematic monitoring of girls’ school drop-out rates in urban areas. Adopting a whole school approach, some schools’ sanitation facilities have been rehabilitated to support girls’ menstrual hygiene management while teachers are learning to tackle the taboo, stigma and bullying aimed at girls in their classrooms.

In situations of emergencies, UNICEF works to prevent violence against women as well as adolescent girls and boys. For example, in Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Italy, UNICEF works with government and civil society to help provide psychosocial support, access to healthcare and legal assistance for refugees and migrants who have experienced gender-based violence.

The most egregious form of gender discrimination in the Region, including in emergencies, is gender-based violence. In order to reach girls and young women, specific programmes reinforce adolescent girls’ safety and resilience, offer life-affirming programmes in safe spaces and build toward the full potential of girls through mentorship and skills building.

An unfinished agenda

UNICEF promotes opportunities for both girls and boys through changes in policies, services and mindsets. But there remains a pressing need for collective action to prevent gender discrimination that limits the prospects of girls across the Region. UNICEF will continue to work with its partners to ensure that every child can reach her or his full potential, free from the barriers presented by limited expectations and inaccessible or low quality services.

Making the connection between intimate partner violence and violence against children

There are close connections between intimate partner violence and violence against children. They share many of the same causes, patterns and consequences, and often happen at the same time, and in the same households. There are also clear overlaps between witnessing violence meted against the mother at home, and experiencing physical abuse as a child. Children who witness or experience abuse are also at greater risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence during adulthood. Adults who have suffered childhood trauma are more likely, in turn, to inflict harsh discipline on their own children. But this cycle of family violence can be replaced with appreciation and understanding of non-violence in relationships and in child discipline techniques - valuing respect and the dignity of all.

Legislation is an opportunity to address gender-based violence

In Armenia, the adoption of a law on domestic violence in July 2018 is an opportunity to better protect women and children against violence through measures being developed for its implementation.

In Romania, UNICEF is working with the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men within the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection to promote policy and legislation in line with the Istanbul Convention.

In Uzbekistan, a Presidential Resolution has endorsed a plan of action to prevent domestic violence. UNICEF and other UN agencies are supporting the development of a draft law on the prevention of domestic violence and the establishment of a centre for social rehabilitation for victims.