

GENDER AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

"Since in all societies discrimination on the basis of sex often starts at the earliest stages of life, greater equality for the girl child is a necessary first step in ensuring that women realize their full potential and become equal partners in development."

Article 4.15 - International Conference on Population and Development 1994

The Early Years

By age five, most children have learned to be boys or girls: to play with trucks or dolls; to wear blue or pink; to strike out or to cry.

The gender roles that a society assigns to its children will have a determining effect on their future: their access to food and education; their labour force participation; their status in relationships; and their physical and psychological health.

More attention is now paid to the early years of children's lives. This attention must include a gender focus if barriers to girls' development are ever to be removed. These barriers stem from both structural inequalities and conscious decisions by parents and others, including government, educators and the media. The "Girl Child" is defined by the UN as a female between the ages of 0-18.

Gender and Child Development

The social construction of gender roles affects the physical and psychological development of both boys and girls in a number of areas, many of them accentuated by the obstacle of poverty:

- ❑ **Access to Food** - In many countries, girls have lower nutritional health and less access to food than boys (this includes breast-feeding), which jeopardizes their health and future development.
- ❑ **Vulnerability to Illness and Access to Health Care** - Nutritional deficiency is only part of what increases girls' vulnerability to childhood illness. Other factors include exhaustion from a greater burden of labour or early pregnancy, and exposure to physical and sexual abuse. Compounding this vulnerability to illness is girls' reduced access to healthcare services and medical attention. A number of studies have shown that a girl's condition has to be more serious before she is taken to the doctor. In several developing countries, child mortality rates are higher among girls, which is indicative of a problem because the biological norm is for boys' mortality to be higher (including in utero) (4).
- ❑ **Education** - Girls are less likely to be educated, especially beyond the primary level. They are often kept at home as additional domestic, agricultural or informal labour. An increasing impediment to girls' education is the spread of HIV/AIDS, which forces many of them to leave school to care for sick family members. Even girls who are educated often end up in lower-paying jobs with less opportunity for professional development.
- ❑ **Susceptibility to Violence and Exploitation** - The role of violence in the subordination of women cannot be overlooked. A greater proportion of girls than boys are victims of abuse at the hands of family members, friends, educators and strangers. The role of violence in the exploitation of girls (whether for sexual or labour purposes) is under-examined but crucial to their development. Boys are socialized to engage in violent and risky behaviour, exposing them to injury and earlier mortality than girls.
- ❑ **Labour** - Most unrecognized labour is performed by women and girls. This means domestic duties such as caring for younger siblings, cooking, laundry and carrying water as well as informal and agricultural labour that is centred around the home. Girls' physical and educational development can be seriously compromised by having to perform hard physical labour, which their bodies are not prepared for, instead of attending school.

Socialization and the Development of Gender Roles

The word gender refers to the social and cultural aspects attributed to the biological distinction between men and women.

Gender is a learned attributed as opposed to a biological trait. In other words, though one may be born male or female, one learns to become a man or a woman.

Children internalize gender-role expectations early on in life (usually by the age of five), through a process referred to as socialization. Family, education, culture, socio-economic status, religion, region and ethnicity all play an important role in socialization.

All societies have implicit conceptions of gender, or stereotypes, which they use to differentiate the treatment of girls and boys.

- ❑ **The Media** - Television and other media are exerting an increasing influence on children's development. This is especially important when it comes to gender stereotypes and the social perceptions of how girls and boys should dress, talk and behave. The media continues to present images of men using strength or violence to establish their authority and images of women in traditional domestic or submissive and sexualized roles.
- ❑ **Self Esteem and Confidence** - While it is wrong to say that boys are more loved than girls, they tend to be more highly valued. A boy child is regarded as a financial investment that will yield returns in the long run. A girl child, on the other hand, is often considered a financial burden to be offloaded. Boys are also charged with carrying on the family line, while girls will eventually "belong to" another family. Though they are difficult to quantify, the possible psychological effects of this reality on girls' development must be acknowledged.

Ensuring Equitable Development

One of the most crucial issues in resolving social inequity is the education of girls. It has been proven to reduce fertility and infant mortality rates, promote better health, nutrition and quality of life among families, encourage greater economic productivity and labour force participation and improve overall social and economic development. Increasing girls' access to education must include the participation of all sectors of society.

The Role of the Family - Parents play a critical role in their children's development and are primarily responsible for the environment in which children are socialized. Concious decisions to favour and value male family members hinder girls' development from birth. While structural poverty plays a pivotal role in these decisions, parents' own biases and their unwillingness to work around the obstacle of poverty help to reinforce the subordination of girls within the family

Child Mortality Rate in Selected Countries		
Deaths per 1000 population (aged 2-5 years)		
	Girls	Boys
Haiti	61.2	47.8
Colombia	24.8	20.5
Costa Rica	8.1	4.8
Dom. Rep.	20.2	17.2
Peru	30.8	28.8
Mexico	16.7	14.7
Panama	8.7	7.6
Venezuela	8.4	7.6

Source: UNESCO 1997 (1)

The Role of Education - "Gender-bias in educational processes, including curricula, educational materials and practices, teachers' attitudes, and classroom interaction, reinforce existing gender bias." It has been demonstrated that boys participate more readily in class, and are listened to more attentively by educators. The education sector plays a role in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, but it can also be a crucial locus for changing them.

The Role of Government - Governments must, through different sectors, address the various barriers to girls' development. Some examples include: Recognition of girls' labour force participation, facilitation of girls' access to education through flexible hours, scholarships and labour-saving technologies like wells (which cut down on girls' burden of domestic labour) and redistribution of resources to address issues of girls' access to food and medical care (including contraception).

The Role of the Media - The media could have an enormous impact in the re-definition of gender roles by presenting different images of both women and men. In many ways however they have misused this potential, presenting us with images of violent male and female action heroes. The media must assume some responsibility for its own role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and devise an alternative reality.

References and Links

1. Integrating Girl Child Issues into Population Education. UNESCO 1997 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001102/110280eo.pdf>
Also view the sample curriculum and education guidelines at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001116/111641eb.pdf>
 2. Schott Foundation - Gender Equity in Education <http://www.schottfoundation.org/gender.html>
 3. Gomez, Elsa. "Sex Discrimination and Excess Female Mortality in Childhood." From *Gender, Women and Helth in the Americas*. PAHO.
- ❑ "Violence Prevention and the Girl Child" <http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/reports/gc01.htm>

