Girls’ Rights

Can the movement achieve lasting change?

A movement to protect and expand girls’ rights around the world is gaining support from governments, international donors and advocacy groups. Improving girls’ lives is not only a moral issue — research shows it also speeds economic development. Activists are pushing to end child marriage, educate all girls, improve their reproductive health and reduce violence and discrimination against them. Although girls’ mortality and school enrollment rates have been improving, obstacles remain. Nearly 120 million girls do not attend primary school, and 15 million girls under 18 marry each year, often under duress, ending their schooling and putting them at risk for domestic violence and health complications. In some countries girls’ progress is threatened by religious extremists, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram in Nigeria. Activists say that to have lasting effects, girls’ rights campaigns must establish effective on-the-ground programs that change societal attitudes as well as local policies.
**THE ISSUES**

- Should education be compulsory for all girls?
- Should the legal age of marriage be 18 worldwide?
- Should governments impose tougher punishments for gender violence?

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Pioneering Research
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Girls’ Rights

THE ISSUES

After seeing her younger sister Mercy married off at age 11, Memory Banda made a vow to herself: She would resist early marriage and stay in school. But she lived in rural Malawi, a landlocked East African country where half of the girls marry before age 18, sometimes forced to do so by impoverished families enticed by the “bride price” grooms pay a bride’s family in many African cultures. 1

In 2011 Banda met Faith Phiri, the co-founder of a local nonprofit called Girls Empowerment Network (GENET), which was working to stop child marriage and improve girls’ economic and social well-being. Banda joined GENET’s campaign and began sharing her story, along with other girls, about how early marriage threatens girls’ access to education and futures. 2

“I challenged my family and explained that early marriage was not for me [and] that education and freedom of my rights would be the path of my life,” Banda said. 3 Since then, testimonials from girls like Banda and lobbying by local and international advocacy groups helped lead Malawi in February — after five years of debate — to raise the legal age of marriage from 15 to 18. 4

In recent years, girls like Banda and grassroots organizations like GENET in countries across the globe have become the beneficiaries of aid, advocacy, legislation and development programs intended to improve girls’ lives. Armed with new research showing that focusing on girls’ needs helps fight poverty, the groups advocate ending early marriage, educating girls, improving their reproductive health, reducing gender violence and addressing other challenges faced by girls, particularly in developing countries.

As a result, enormous progress has been made in girls’ lives in the past 25 years. The mortality rate for girls under 5 has fallen by half since 1990, and 90 percent of primary-school-age girls are being educated — up from 77 percent in 1990. 5

* The paying of a bride price or dowry by a bride or groom’s family is common in many countries. When the bride’s family pays the dowry, it can pose a financial burden for poor families. When the groom’s family pays the bride price, it can encourage poor families to marry their daughters off early.

United States 40 years to achieve in increasing girls’ school enrollment has taken Morocco just a decade,” said the World Bank’s ‘2012 World Development Report.’ 6

But girls still have a long way to go before they have full access to education, are safe from violence, abuse and discrimination and can no longer fear female genital mutilation (FGM), or being forced into early marriage or trafficking. Some girls’ rights proponents question whether the high-profile advocacy campaigns are bringing about real change.

“There is a lot of progress in awareness of girls’ issues. But walking the walk is different than talking the talk,” says Sharon Goulds, editor of the annual “State of the World’s Girls” reports, published by Plan International, a 75-year-old, U.K.-based nonprofit group that fights child poverty. 7 “It is not quite so obvious that real change is happening. I worry that girls have just been a fashion for the last five years.”

Worldwide, 250 million of the world’s 580 million adolescent girls live in poverty, and more are vulnerable to violence and health risks. 8 Nearly 60 percent of the estimated 200 million young people who do not attend primary school are girls, and nearly a third of adolescent girls have experienced violence at the hands of a partner. 9 In addition, 15 million girls under 18 marry each year, many with little or no choice. 10

Pregnancy among adolescents, who typically are not physically or mentally prepared to bear and raise children, is a major cause of death among new mothers in developing countries. And child brides are vulnerable to disease,
health complications and domestic violence, usually at the hands of their much older husbands.

Some girls are victims before they even start their lives. An estimated 160 million female fetuses or newborns have been aborted or killed in China, India and other parts of Asia over the last three decades, largely due to a cultural preference for boys. And worldwide, more than 125 million girls and women have experienced FGM, or the removal of portions of their external genitals, a traditional practice in some cultures. (See sidebar, p. 348.)

The new push for investing in girls’ needs has been fueled by research, begun in the 1990s, showing that keeping girls in school and delaying marriage and childbearing help reduce poverty while improving girls’ health and human rights and preventing gender-based violence — all of which contributes to overall economic development. “Funders and many in the global leadership community increasingly understand that investing in girls and women demonstrably impacts families, communities and countries — educationally, economically and politically,” says Kathryn Harper, senior manager of external relations at Let Girls Lead, an advocacy group based in California that supports GENET’s work in Malawi.

Focusing on girls’ needs in reproductive health and education programs has been part of U.N. agency mandates since the early 2000s, and dozens of new campaigns and programs focusing solely on girls, particularly adolescents, have been established around the world. They include:

- The Girl Effect, a campaign to get countries and organizations to invest in the needs of adolescent girls in order to help end poverty. The campaign was founded by the Nike Foundation in 2008 in collaboration with the NoVo Foundation, headed by billionaire Warren Buffett’s son Peter and his wife Jennifer. The program is supported by the U.N. Foundation and the New York-based Coalition for Adolescent Girls, a group of more than 40 international organizations working on girls’ issues.
- Girls Not Brides, a global partnership working to end child marriage. It was established in 2011 by more

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**Child Marriage Occurs Mainly in Africa, South Asia**

Niger had the world’s highest child-marriage rate in 2013, with three in four women reporting that they were married before age 18. The practice was most prevalent in Central and West African countries — such as Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Mali — and in Bangladesh in South Asia. Malawi, on Africa’s southeastern coast, also has a high rate but raised the legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 in February.

*Prevalence of Child Marriage, by Country, 2013*

Female Child Mortality Declines

The mortality rate for girls under age 5 fell by 50 percent worldwide from 1990 to 2013. But the rate for girls in the developing world remains high — 48 per 1,000 live births, almost 10 times the rate in developed countries.

Death Rates for Girls under age 5 Per 1,000 Live Births

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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
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than 450 nongovernmental organizations in over 70 countries.  
- The U.N.’s International Day of the Girl Child. First observed in 2012, it was established with the help of Plan International.  
- Girl Summit, an international conference held in July 2014 in the United Kingdom that drew global attention to child marriage and female genital mutilation.

“It took a while to get everyone on the same page, but now people understand that girls are their own subset of the population with a specific opportunity for impact,” says Melissa Hillebrenner, director of Girl Up, an advocacy campaign that is part of the U.N. Foundation, an agency that supports the work of the United Nations.

However, less than 2 cents of every international development dollar are earmarked for girls, even though nations pay an economic price when girls leave school early, marry and give birth as adolescents.  
The Ethiopian economy, for example, loses $6.8 billion in earned income over the lifetimes of girls who do not complete high school.  
And if child marriage and early childbirth are delayed for 1 million girls, Bangladesh could potentially add $69 billion to the national income over the girls’ lifetimes.

Studies show that “an educated girl will reinvest 90 percent of her future income in her family, compared with 35 percent for a boy,” and every additional year of school for a mother lowers the likelihood of a baby’s death by 5 to 10 percent.  
And countries that made progress toward the Millennium Development Goals — U.N. targets set in 2000 that aimed to halve extreme poverty by 2015 — have discovered that when girls’ education improves, new mothers and children live longer, diseases decrease and youth job prospects improve.

As girls’ rights campaigns are gaining momentum, however, the rise of religious extremists who espouse regressive policies toward females threatens progress in some countries. The Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (also known as ISIS or ISIL) and Boko Haram in Nigeria have all targeted girls. ISIS and Boko Haram have kidnapped girls en masse and forced them into child marriages; ISIS has sold them into sexual slavery.

Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani school girl shot in the head at age 15 by a Taliban gunman for advocating education for girls, became an international symbol of the girls’ rights movement and brought global awareness to the hardships girls face in fighting for an education. Her 2012 shooting, which was condemned worldwide, sparked protests across Pakistan and galvanized more than 1 million Pakistanis to sign a petition that led to passage of the country’s first law guaranteeing free education for all children.  
In 2014 she became the youngest Nobel laureate in history when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with anti-child labor activist Kailash Satyarthi of India.

But girls’ rights issues, such as efforts to outlaw child marriage, remain controversial in Pakistan. In March 2014 Pakistan’s Council of Islamic Ideology, which advises the government on Islamic law, ruled that any child who had reached puberty should be allowed to marry, calling efforts to set a higher minimum marriage age “against the teachings of the [Koran].”  
The council’s rulings are nonbinding on the Pakistani government.

While tragic and triumphant stories about the plight of girls capture the public’s imagination, media buzz is not enough, said Judith Bruce, senior associate and policy analyst at the Population Council, a U.S.-based nonprofit that researches critical health and development issues, including the impact of empowering girls.

“This girl moment must be seized, lest the ‘talk’ outpace the ‘walk,’” she said. “The adolescent girls campaign — so successful as ‘branded communication’ — must be transformed into on-the-ground activity.”

As activists, educators and policy makers strive to improve the plight of girls, here are some of the issues being discussed:

Should education be compulsory for all girls?

In Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, girls were prohibited from getting an education. So Shabana Basij-Rasikh took great risks to get an education, disguising herself as a boy during her commute to a secret school for girls. She later received a U.S. State Department scholarship to attend high school in Wisconsin, and eventually graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont.

She returned to Afghanistan, where she co-founded in 2008 the nation’s first boarding school for girls, the School of Leadership, Afghanistan, or SOLA, which means “peace” in Pashtun.
“I have parents who are so committed to education,” said Basij-Rasikh. “What if I was born into that family whose daughter a couple of years younger than me is already married with a few kids?”

Since the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 ended Taliban control of the country, official restrictions on girls going to school have been lifted, and the female literacy rate has tripled. About 3.2 million Afghan girls are getting an education, according to UNICEF.

But that represents only about 13 percent of the nation's girls. Violence, tradition and poverty still bar Afghan girls from schooling. According to UNICEF, of the 4.2 million Afghan children not being educated today, 60 percent are girls. Most live in rural districts and areas still plagued by insurgent Taliban attacks.

In other developing countries, gender discrimination, poverty and geographic accessibility can determine whether girls go to school. In some parts of the world, poor families resist educating girls because it costs too much and is considered a poor investment. Others say because school schedules are inflexible, girls can’t help with childcare or household chores. Girls also may face obstacles particular to their gender. The lack of toilets for girls, especially when they start menstruating, can deter them from attending school.

Security is also a concern. Girls risk violence from teachers, students or others during their commute to school, especially in conflict areas. The Taliban attacked Malala, for instance, while she was on a school bus. In 2012, more than 3,600 attacks were recorded against educational institutions, teachers and students worldwide, including those who advocated for girls’ education. And in April 2014, nearly 300 girls were abducted from their boarding school in northeastern Nigeria by the radical Islamist group Boko Haram.

“Western education should end,” said Abubakar Shekau, leader of Boko Haram. “Girls, you should go and get married.” Although the fate of most of the girls is still unknown, many are thought to have been married off to Boko Haram fighters.

Advocates of girls’ education say countries with higher levels of female secondary-school enrollment have lower infant mortality and fertility rates, lower prevalence of HIV and AIDS and better child nutrition. And, experts say, education reduces domestic violence because it empowers girls and women to negotiate and defuse abusive relationships or leave.

Studies show that higher levels of schooling make girls less likely to marry early. In Mozambique, for instance, some 60 percent of uneducated girls marry by age 18, compared with 10 percent of those with secondary schooling and less than 1 percent of those with higher education.

“School attendance has the potential to provide girls with protection during a phase of life when temporary setbacks can have lifelong consequences,” a Population Council report said.

Education also can translate into higher income for girls: A single year of secondary education can mean up to 25 percent higher wages later in life. A girl's potential to contribute financially to her family also diminishes the risk of her being sold to traffickers or into bonded servitude. In turn, educated women are more likely to send their own daughters to school.

But others argue that if the quality of education is poor, educating girls may turn out to be a token gesture. Primary school completion does not necessarily result in literacy and numeracy. When African countries began moving toward universal primary education in the 1990s, “the quality of education dropped,” says Satvika Chalasani, a technical specialist with the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA), because schools were flooded with children. Since then, however, “the quality has been improving slowly but surely,” she says.
And even when girls and boys attain similar levels of education and perform equally well in school, many girls are less able to find worthwhile jobs after graduation. If there is no economic opportunity for them, it is easy for parents to see all those years of education did not pay off,” says Chalasani.

In many cultures, daughters customarily leave home when they marry and are expected to care for their elderly in-laws, rather than their aging parents. So poor parents may not see any point in educating a girl. “They might think, ‘She’s going to marry and leave my family. Why commit my small amount of money and energy to a daughter?’” says Lyric Thompson, senior policy manager at the International Center for Research on Women, a nonprofit based in Washington.

Education experts at the center say there is no quick fix to educating girls. Solutions include a wide range of initiatives, they say, including convincing parents and community leaders about the benefits of educating girls, providing scholarships for girls, having more female mentors and teachers, equipping schools with sex-segregated toilets and providing a safe environment for students.

### Should the legal age of marriage be 18 worldwide?

In Tanzania, where 40 percent of girls marry before age 18, Anita’s father forced her to marry at 16. “My father said he did not have money to support my schooling,” she said. “I then discovered that he had already received 20 cows as dowry for me.”

Although 158 countries have established 18 as the minimum legal age for girls to marry without parental consent, child marriage persists. In 146 countries, including developed ones, girls younger than 18 can marry with the consent of parents or other authorities. But in developed nations, early marriages typically are not forced, and legal systems protect children from forced marriage.

In developing countries, on the other hand, laws against child marriage often go unenforced. One-third of girls in the developing world are married before age 18; one in nine is married before age 15. Bangladesh and several countries in West and Central Africa have the world’s highest child marriage rates. (See map, p. 340.)

Most girls’ advocates recommend a legal minimum marriage age of 18. “Age 18 gives an objective standard to safeguard against children marrying too early,” says Helena Minchew, a program associate at the International Women’s Health Coalition, a nonprofit based in New York.

In countries where birth control is unavailable or not widely accepted, early marriage leads to adolescent pregnancy, which increases the risk of childbirth complications, other health risks and even death. Mothers under 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. Child marriage also deprives girls of access to education, diminishes future job prospects and earning potential and makes them more vulnerable to violence than their peers who marry later, according to the International Center for Research on Women.

“Child marriage hinders our efforts to end gender inequality, poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS, maternal and new-born deaths,” said Sarah Kamdoum, president of the center.

However, supporters of early marriage argue that communities, especially religious groups, should be able to hew to their culture and practice their traditions. Child marriage is banned in most Muslim countries, but scholars have varying interpretations of Islamic law, or Sharia, so practices differ according to a country’s — or a region’s — history and culture. For instance, in some predominantly Muslim regions ruled by Sharia, such as Northern Nigeria and the Southern Philippines, girls can marry once they reach puberty.

“There’s nothing in the Koran that says there are specific ages at which a marriage is permissible at puberty,” says Stephen Suleyman Schwartz, executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism in Washington, which promotes moderate Islam in America. “The [justifications] seem to all come from the Hadith,” referring to the Islamic document Muslims believe represents what the Prophet Muhammad said in his lifetime. “And all of the Hadith is subject to argument and debate.”

Followers of Islam’s ultra-conservative Salafi branch justify child marriage on the basis of the Hadith, which states that the prophet consummated marriage to his third wife after her first menses, at age 9. When Egyptians were drafting a new constitution in 2012, Salafis, who represent a minority of the country’s Muslims, tried to get the marriage age lowered, setting off a heated national debate. “We fought for years to raise the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18, and now the Islamists want to lower it,” women’s rights activist Azza Kamel said at the time. “There are Salafis arguing it should be as low as 9.”

In Malawi, recent debate among traditional leaders over child marriage took a different turn: Some opposed setting 18 as the legal age of marriage — because they thought it should be higher. “As chiefs we are advocating for 21 years,” said Chowe, who goes by one name. “The girl child would have grown well and . . . she should have finished her form 4 [secondary education].”

In some countries, early marriage is how poor families survive. Poverty pushes some families to marry off their young daughters in exchange for a dowry or to have one less mouth to feed. Poverty and early marriage go hand in hand: Niger ranks last out of 187 countries on the U.N. human development index and has the world’s highest child marriage rate: three out of four girls marry before their 18th birthday. “Many families have no choice,” said Amina, a mother in Niger. “When a wealthy Nigerian comes offering millions [in local currency as a bride price],
Drought in West Africa has increased the incidence of child marriage in Niger. “Families are using child marriage . . . as a survival strategy to the food insecurity,” said Djanabou Mahonde, UNICEF’s chief child protection officer in Niger.

In remote areas, there may be few options for adolescent girls beyond marriage. Schools may be nonexistent or of poor quality, and job opportunities rare. Early marriage may also be seen as a way to protect girls from rape, unwed pregnancy and other dangers, such as trafficking. In Niger, a deep-rooted fear exists of unmarried teenaged girls becoming pregnant. As one mother put it: “They can easily become delinquents.”

Often, “parents don’t think of themselves as criminals,” says Thompson, of the International Center for Research on Women. “Sometimes they send their daughter into marriage to protect her from violence.”

Should governments impose tougher punishments for gender violence?

In India, the fatal gang rape of a female student on a bus in New Delhi in December 2012 sparked widespread outrage. The next year, the kidnapping and rape of a 5-year-old girl, also in New Delhi, led to a national debate over whether the death penalty should be applied.

In fact, much of the public’s hostility in the 2013 case was directed at police, who allegedly refused to file a report when the child’s parents complained she was missing and offered them 2,000 rupees (about $37) not to contact the media.

Indian women and girls often complain that police don’t take sexual violence seriously, pressing them to drop cases or humiliating them. A 2012 assessment of India’s domestic violence law found that despite increased training, police continue to discourage victims from filing reports. Without police enforcement and a functional judicial system, laws can be “meaningless,” says the U.N. Population Fund’s Chalasani.

Many countries have passed laws specifically focused on preventing violence against women and girls. Guatemala, which has one of the world’s highest rates of female homicide, in 2008 made the murder of any female punishable by 25 to 50 years in prison. And more than two-thirds of the world’s countries have laws against domestic violence — up nearly 50 percent since 2006.

Even if enforcement is lax, having laws on the books against domestic violence results in lower rates of intimate partner abuse, and fewer people find such violence acceptable, according to U.N. Women, a United Nations agency focused on gender equality.

“In 2005, when Cambodia passed an anti-domestic violence law, 64 percent of survey respondents knew a husband who physically abused his wife,” according to Plan International.

“Four years later the percentage had dropped to 53 percent.”

Laws “provide the protective framework for girls that do seek justice,” says Chalasani. “Girls need to be able

They will let them marry, even if they are young,” she said.

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In India, the fatal gang rape of a female student on a bus in New Delhi in December 2012 sparked widespread outrage and massive, sometimes-violent protests across the country. Four men, including the bus driver, were sentenced to death in the rape and murder of the victim, who suffered massive internal injuries from repeated penetration with an iron bar. Prosecutors sought the death penalty due to the extreme brutality of the attack.

In response to the public fury over the case, the Indian government in 2013 increased prison terms for rape and broadened the definition of sexual harassment.

That same year, the brutal kidnapping and rape of a 5-year-old girl, also in New Delhi, led to a national debate over whether the death penalty should be applied in cases involving rapes of children. Tougher laws won’t succeed unless “a sense of accountability is instilled amongst law enforcement personnel,” said Kavita Krishnan, secretary of the All India Progressive Women’s Association, a communist women’s rights organization. “The law is no magic wand. . . . The police [do] not take violence against women . . . seriously.”

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Laws “provide the protective framework for girls that do seek justice,” says Chalasani. “Girls need to be able
to seek protection.” But, laws cannot change deep-rooted social norms, such as the belief that violence is a normal part of marriage. Even when adequate laws exist, “when something is widespread and socially accepted, it’s not viewed as a crime,” she says.

For instance, some religious conservatives oppose strengthening laws against gender violence. During the 2012 debate over Egypt’s new constitution, a Salafist cleric complained that if proposed laws protecting women from violence passed, husbands could be prosecuted for beating their child brides or forcing them to have sex. “If you have intercourse with your wife against her will, she will be able to file a complaint against you,” warned Sheikh Mohamed Saad El-Azhary. “That’s where things are headed.”

A 2009 survey in India found that 50 percent of magistrates being trained on the Domestic Violence Act believed that to have “a successful marriage, sometimes a man needs to discipline his wife,” and “too much fuss is made about domestic violence.”

And advocates say tougher laws cannot easily undo deeply held misogynistic attitudes common among a certain segment of Indian society. Such attitudes were dramatically revealed in the new documentary, “India’s Daughter,” about the 2012 gang rape on the New Delhi bus. Many Indians were shocked by unrepentant remarks made by one of the convicted rapists, the bus driver, in a death row interview in the film.

The rapists “had a right to teach them a lesson,” bus driver Mukesh Singh said, referring to the fact that the victim and her male companion had gone out together at night. Although many Indian girls go out at night unmolested, one said, referring to the fact that the victim of the rapists’ lawyers, A. P. Singh, said: “They’d have dropped her off after ‘doing her,’ and only hit the boy,” he said. Applying the death penalty in rape cases, he contended, “will make things even more dangerous for girls” because rapists will not leave the girl alive, “like we did.” Perpetrators of sexual violence often escape punishment, in part because many victims do not report the crime, and conviction rates for reported rapes are low — in both developed and developing countries.

Notably, despite common perceptions about the high prevalence of sexual violence in India, more rape cases were reported in the United States, which has stronger laws and enforcement efforts. In 2011, 83,425 rapes were reported in the United States, out of a population of more than 300 million. The same year, 24,206 rapes were reported in India, with a population of more than 1.2 billion. “Even if sexual assault in India is dramatically underreported . . . the statistical difference is still striking,” wrote Sally Koh in MORE magazine.

Education about laws banning violence against girls is important, says Ruchira Tabassum Naved, a gender and reproductive health specialist at icddr,b (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research), a Bangladeshi public health institution. Although Bangladesh passed a domestic violence bill in 2010 and has many laws against gender violence, “people rarely know about laws,” she says. “Even the lawyers did not know much about the laws.” Local initiatives must be established aimed at changing behavior and making girls aware of their rights, she says. “If you don’t do prevention work, response doesn’t help much.”

India lacks modern medical evidence-gathering protocols for treating sexual violence victims, according to research by the Center for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes, a nonprofit in Mumbai. “Nothing beyond the medical aspects of the problem gets recorded, much to the disadvantage of the patients in case legal proceedings are initiated,” a center report noted. “Most health professionals do not even recognise this as part of their professional duty.”

Stella Mukasa, director of the gender, violence and rights portfolio at the International Center for Research on Women, says, “Legislation and policies have to go hand-in-hand with on-the-ground programs. You have to engage communities for real change.”
BACKGROUND

Early History

Some early societies honored women and believed they were solely responsible for reproduction — which led to the worship of female goddesses. In a few female-centric cultures, women inherited property, made household or family decisions and sometimes even ruled tribes or nations.

But in patriarchal societies women typically experienced prejudice and discrimination. For instance, from 1500 B.C. to 800 B.C., women in what is now India enjoyed equal status with men and were heads of their households. Then when the Moguls of Persia and Central Asia took over the region, women faced new restrictions, and their social status declined. By 600 B.C. they had become subservient to men, were largely confined to their homes and could marry only if their families paid large dowries.

In ancient Greece, women were treated as children and denied basic rights. They could not leave their houses unchaperoned, were prohibited from obtaining an education and could not own land.

With little economic opportunity for them as adults, girls had few options except marriage and childbirth, so many societies showed a strong preference for sons. Once married, girls typically would leave their parents' homes to care for their husbands' households and parents, whereas boys upon adulthood could earn money and establish independence. Because girls were seen as a financial burden, their families often had to pay large dowries to grooms' families upon marriage, potentially driving girls' families into ruinous debt.

Social mores that viewed girls' virginity as a symbol of family honor also have led to repression, violence and misogyny. In ancient Greece, a father could sell his unmarried daughter into slavery if she lost her virginity. If a girl was raped, she became an outcast.

Such factors contributed to the devaluation of girls' lives, sometimes leading to the murder of newborn girls. In male-dominated ancient Persia, poor families sometimes buried infant girls alive immediately after birth. In ancient Greece and Rome, infants who were disabled or of the “wrong” sex sometimes were abandoned after birth.

In China, female infanticide occurred as early as the sixth century B.C.

However, the practice has not died out. The gender imbalance in China today, where the preference for sons over daughters remains deeply ingrained, is as high as 130 boys per 100 girls in some provinces. The availability of inexpensive sonograms for determining an unborn child's gender contributes to the practice of aborting female fetuses both in China and India. The gender imbalance in China also has been exacerbated by the government's longstanding policy, partially lifted recently, of allowing parents to have only one child.

But India's gender imbalance has been creeping upwards recently, indicating that the ancient preferences for boys may be starting to wane. India's gender ratio increased from 934 females per 1,000 males in 2001 to 940 females per 1,000 males in the 2011 census.

Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a practice in which a girl's genitals are removed — either in whole or in part depending on local custom — for nonmedical reasons. Today, more than 125 million girls and women in 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East have undergone the practice.

Genital mutilation is typically carried out sometime between infancy and age 15 in a practice designed to signal a girl's marriageability. However, the procedure has no health benefits, according to the World Health Organization. It is generally done without anesthetic and can cause severe bleeding and problems urinating and menstruating. Later, cysts, infections and infertility can develop, as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn deaths. Women and girls may also suffer psychological trauma.

Four types of FGM are performed: clitoridectomy (partial or total removal of the clitoris); excision (partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia); infibulation (narrowing of the vaginal opening through stitching); or other procedures such as pricking, piercing or cauterizing the genital area. Infibulation is the most extreme form of FGM.

Societies continue to practice FGM, primarily as a cultural and social convention. Some experts say the procedure prevents girls from enjoying sex, thus discouraging them from ruining their family's honor by having intercourse before marriage. In such societies a girl who has not undergone FGM is considered unclean and unmarriageable and is treated as an outcast.

Although FGM is practiced in many Muslim communities, the procedure predates Islam and was used in Eastern and Western societies by Christian, Islamic, atheistic and other groups. Practitioners often believe it is rooted in religion, but neither the Koran nor the Bible mentions it. The Prophet Muhammad opposed it.

Today some religious leaders promote FGM, some consider it irrelevant to religion and others want to end it. FGM isn't “a religious requirement” but is a culturally based custom, says Grace Uwizeye, FGM program officer for the Nairobi, Kenya, office of Equality Now, a women's rights advocacy group in New York. “FGM is part of daily life.”

The practice is internationally recognized as a human rights violation and is seen as a violation of children's rights, since it is nearly always carried out on
1920s-1980s
International agreements and laws begin to recognize the rights of children and women.

1920
Nineteenth Amendment ratified, giving American women the right to vote.

1924
League of Nations adopts Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the first international recognition that children have rights.

1946
United Nations convenes first Commission on the Status of Women, the main intergovernmental body dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

1961
India bans dowries — payments of money or property from a bride’s family to the groom and his family — but the custom persists.

1979
U.N. adopts Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, called the “international bill of rights” for women. Ratified by 188 nations, it sets up an agenda to end discrimination against women; it does not specify girls, though the term “women” broadly includes them.

1985
Britain bans female genital mutilation (FGM).

1989
U.N. adopts Convention on the Rights of the Child, the first legally binding treaty on children’s rights. It recognizes that children are more than just “passive objects of care and charity” and are entitled to a distinct set of rights. Since then, more than 190 countries have signed it, not including South Sudan and the United States.

1990s
Global leaders give more attention and resources to the rights of women and girls.

1993
World Conference on Human Rights expands the international human rights agenda to include gender-based violence.

1994
Population Council researcher John Bongaarts publishes groundbreaking report in Science magazine on the implications of investing in adolescent girls. International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, says fulfilling the rights of women and girls is central to development.

1995
Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing establishes comprehensive commitments to women’s and girls’ rights.

1996
United States makes FGM a felony, punishable by five years in prison.

1998

2000s
Governments and organizations make firmer commitments to uplifting girls.

2000
U.N. establishes Millennium Development Goals to reduce extreme poverty. The goals include targets for reducing maternal mortality, promoting gender equity and achieving universal primary education.

2003
Britain closes loopholes that allowed guardians to take girls abroad to undergo FGM.

2008
U.N. Population Fund and UNICEF begin the largest global program to end FGM.

2012
Taliban gunman shoots Malala Yousafzai, a 15-year-old Pakistani education advocate, on her way to school. First U.N. International Day of the Girl Child is observed. Fatal gang rape of 23-year-old student in New Delhi triggers unprecedented protests across the country. The government subsequently increases prison terms for rape and broadens the scope of what sexual harassment against women and girls entails.

2014
Malala shares Nobel Peace Prize with Kailash Satyarthi, founder of an anti-child labor organization.

2015
Ethiopian Activist Fights Genital Cutting

While in graduate school in the United States, Bogaleth Gebre of southern Ethiopia learned from reading about female genital mutilation (FGM) that the process is needless. She herself had been cut in 1967 at age 12.1

Like other girls in her village, Gebre had undergone the rite of passage known locally as “cutting off the dirt.”2 She nearly bled to death and took two months to recover. Years later, her older sister died while trying to give birth to twins due to complications from her childhood FGM, Gebre said.3

More than 125 million girls and women worldwide have undergone genital mutilation, which usually involves the removal of parts of the female genitalia — often without anesthesia and in unsanitary conditions using razor blades. “Cutting” is most common in Africa but is occurring increasingly in immigrant communities in the developed world.4

The practice, which varies from country to country, is based on cultural rather than religious traditions. It is believed to minimize sexual desire in girls and thus make it easier to protect their virginity and family honor. Narrowing the vaginal opening, one form of FGM, is thought to discourage “illicit” sexual intercourse and to deter premarital sex.5 The practice is also associated with cultural ideals of femininity and modesty, which include the idea that girls are “clean” after the procedure.

After learning more about FGM, “I was outraged and angry and cried endlessly,” Gebre recalled. She decided to return to Kembatta/Tembaro Zone, her home region in Ethiopia, to try to eradicate the practice.6

With another sister, Fikrte, Gebre in 1997 founded Kembatti Mentti Gezzima-Tope (KMG), which translates as “women of Kemba pooling their efforts to work together.”

Since then KMG has managed to dramatically reduce the centuries-old practice in Kembatta/Tembaro Zone, an area with about 680,000 people. According to a UNICEF study, by 2008 FGM had been nearly abandoned in the region, and only 3 percent of the population still supported cutting — down from 97 percent in 1999.7

It was a remarkable feat for KMG and Gebre, who as a girl was expected to do chores and marry in her teens. Her family thought her lack of education, along with FGM, would improve her marriage prospects. “Women were typically valued little more than the cows they milked,” said Gebre.8

But Gebre took a different path. “In defiance of my father, I snuck off to classes at a nearby Protestant Christian school and learned to read and write,” she recalled. “In time, I won a scholarship to the only girls’ boarding school in Addis Ababa,” Ethiopia’s capital.9 Later, she won scholarships to study in Israel and the United States, where she earned a doctorate in epidemiology at UCLA.10

At first, KMG addressed the day-to-day needs of women in small group sessions. “When I first started talking to villagers about HIV/AIDS, women’s rights and human rights, these were abstract concepts,” Gebre said. They were more concerned about immediate needs, such as fixing a broken bridge.11

KMG trained young men and women to hold community workshops on AIDS. Then the U.N. Development Program suggested starting “community conversations,” based on the traditional African practice of “palaver,” in which village elders gather to discuss a problem until they reach consensus.12 KMG trained hundreds of facilitators to conduct similar conversations. The sessions eventually reached 85 percent of the Kembata Tembaro population.

The international community has only recently recognized that children have rights and deserve legal protection. As industrialization proceeded in the United States in the 1800s, children worked in mines, glass factories, textile mills, farms and other workplaces. Factory owners preferred to hire children because they were more manageable and cheaper to employ than adults.13

The Declaration of Geneva, drafted in 1924 by the founder of Save the Children, the nonprofit children’s advocacy group, was the first international document to establish the concept of children’s rights. It was adopted by the League of Nations, the forerunner to the United Nations.14 In 1959, the U.N. approved the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. However, neither document was legally binding.

In 1989 the U.N. adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a binding treaty stating that children are entitled to a distinct set of rights.15 Since then it has become the most widely and rapidly adopted treaty of all time: More than 190 member states have ratified it. The United States has not ratified the document due to opponents’ fears the treaty will undermine parental rights.

In 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, recognized for the first time that promoting women’s and girls’ rights was important to economic development. Since then, many international conferences and policymakers have called these rights an important part of the global agenda.16
The U.N.’s Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, was the largest U.N. conference ever organized, with more than 189 governments and 17,000 participants attending.  It brought unprecedented attention to issues affecting women and girls, and the “Beijing Declaration” adopted at the conference outlined 12 critical areas negatively affecting females, including poverty, inequality in education, inadequate health care and violence.

Then-first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton famously declared at the conference that “human rights are women's rights. . . . And women's rights are human rights.”

Furthermore, she added, “It is a violation of human rights when babies are denied food, or drowned, or suffocated, or their spines broken, simply because they are born girls. It is a violation of human rights when women and girls are sold into the slavery of prostitution. It is a violation of human rights when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death because their marriage dowries are deemed too small. . . . It is a violation of human rights when a leading cause of death worldwide among women ages 14 to 44 is the violence they are subjected to in their own homes.”

The fact that Gebre was not an outsider and had undergone FGM herself gave her credibility. The practice “doesn’t stop when [the elders] superficially raise their hands, or when religious leaders say ‘we declare it will stop,'” she said. “It has to come from inside the community.”

Gebre estimated that the campaign has spared hundreds of thousands of girls from FGM in southern Ethiopia, and KMG has won several international awards for its work on FGM.

In 2013 KMG reached 6 million people in southern Ethiopia and now addresses broader health issues and gender violence. “Women are assuming roles their mothers and grandmothers could never have imagined for themselves, and they are transforming Africa,” Gebre said.

Although FGM remains widespread in Ethiopia, Gebre said she hopes to end the practice in 10 to 15 years. She has gained important allies, including the U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development, which in 2012 introduced a strategy to prevent gender-based violence globally. FGM has been illegal in the United States since 1995.

“But change takes commitment,” Gebre said. “It doesn’t happen by miracle.”

— Amy Yee

3 “Interview with Dr. Bogaletch Gebre,” op. cit.
6 “Interview with Dr. Bogaletch Gebre,” op. cit.
8 “Interview with Dr. Bogaletch Gebre,” op. cit.
12 Rosenberg, op. cit.
13 Ibid.
16 Batha, op. cit.

Maasai women discuss female genital mutilation (FGM) on June 12, 2014, in Enkorika, a village outside Nairobi.

The Maasai have supported FGM in the face of widespread criticism by Kenyan society and the international community.

Maasai women discuss female genital mutilation (FGM) on June 12, 2014, in Enkorika, a village outside Nairobi.

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Bangladeshi Females Fight Gender Violence

“Before, they didn’t think they could do anything.”

Najma was just 13, a serious student living in the Bangladeshi slums of Dhaka, the capital, when her father married her off to a man of 24.

“Why would a girl need to be educated?” she recalled her father asking. Her father worried about Najma’s prospects for marriage and the family’s ability to provide a dowry — money or other gifts typically given to a bridegroom and his family. Najma (a pseudonym) resisted the marriage, but to no avail.

“My family is poor and they could not keep me in the family anymore,” she said. 1

Najma said her husband beat her and forced her to have sex, leaving her depressed and frequently sick. “I was too young to understand what was going on,” she said. “I was being tormented, physically. . . . I cried, thinking, ‘I was a good student. I had a dream for a bright future.’ ”

Najma, now 23 with two children ages 10 and 2, began attending information sessions that were part of the “Growing Up Healthy and Safe” (SAFE) project in the Dhaka slums to reduce violence against girls and women. The project, which ran from March 2012 to October 2013, helped women and girls become more aware of such issues as sexual and reproductive health, marriage-related rights and ways to fight gender violence.

In Dhaka, SAFE interactive sessions allowed women and girls to think through issues, and it lessened feelings of isolation.

“They think they could do anything. They thought that it was normal because [violence] is so ingrained in our society,” says Ruchira Tabassum Naved, senior scientist with the icddr,b (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research in Bangladesh), a project collaborator, and a principal investigator for a report on SAFE released in December.

Now, SAFE is serving as a model for a new project, funded by the Embassy of the Netherlands, which aims to reach about 500,000 people in the Dhaka slums by 2018. “SAFE identified what works to make life safer for adolescents and young women living in urban slums,” says Mushfiqua Satiar, adviser on gender and sexual and reproductive health at the embassy.

Through SAFE’s awareness-building sessions and group discussions with other girls and women in the slum, Najma said she was taught how to better communicate her views and defuse violence.

“Now I can share my views about women’s rights and violence against women with my family members and others,” she said.

The interactive group sessions were just one part of SAFE, a collaboration between icddr,b, the Population Council (a U.S. research institute), the reproductive health nonprofit Marie Stopes Bangladesh and We Can, a Bangladeshi anti-domestic violence nonprofit. The Dutch embassy in Dhaka provided funding, with additional support from the MacArthur Foundation and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA).

Worldwide, violence against women and girls has no simple fix. Domestic violence by a husband or male partner, among the most common forms of gender violence, is “frequently invisible since it happens behind closed doors” and is often at the Population Council, published a groundbreaking article in Science magazine about the macroeconomic implications of investing in girls. He recommended actions aimed at increasing the age at which young women have their first child, particularly by investing in education for adolescent girls.

In 1998 the council published “The Uncharted Passage: Girls’ Adolescence in the Developing World,” which sparked momentum for improving the lives of teenage girls. Another significant Population Council report published in 2005, “Growing Up Global,” made clear that “adolescence is a time of widening opportunities for boys, but constricting opportunities for girls. Girls’ school enrollment lagged behind boys; and girls spent far more time than boys on domestic chores, such as cleaning and fetching water and fuel.”

This seminal research on girls’ needs in developing countries began to guide policy and programs. The Population Council helped shape the approach of several key girls’ rights campaigns, nongovernmental organizations and coalitions — including The Girl Effect and the Coalition for Adolescent Girls. The U.N. Population Fund made reducing early marriage a priority, and in 2012 pledged $20 million to work with the most vulnerable girls at risk of early marriage. Growing Up Global set the stage for the World Bank’s adolescent Girls’ Initiative, which helps adolescent girls transition from school to employment.

Girls’ advocates soon realized that simply teaching girls about reproductive health wasn’t enough. “It’s much more than access to contraception,” says Sajeda Amin, a senior associate at the Population Council. “It’s the ability to negotiate and assert one’s rights. Girls have a specific set of needs.”

Advocates also increasingly recognized that the school and work lives of boys and girls diverge in adolescence. “The second decade of life is such a vulnerable decade,” Amin says. “What you experience then can really determine your trajectory for the rest of your life.”

Because of this pioneering research, says Amin, in the last 15 to 20 years, “we’ve gone from saying ‘girls are also important’ to ‘girlhood is when [development is] most important.’ ”
treated “as a ‘private’ family matter, or a normal part of life,” said the World Health Organization. 5

In Bangladesh, a South Asian country with more than 150 million people, women and girls in urban slums experience particularly high rates of gender and domestic violence and poor sexual and reproductive health. Across Bangladesh, 55 percent of girls marry before 16. 6 The country has the world’s fourth-highest rate of child marriage, with 65 percent of girls married before 18. 7

Besides the community information sessions, SAFE sought to tackle gender violence and improve female health by offering legal advice, reproductive health services and access to contraceptives. It set up one-stop health and legal services centers, as well as telephone hotlines. Sessions on gender violence and reproductive health reached 17,000 people, including men and boys, who were essential to reducing domestic violence. 8

“It’s not just telling them that you have a right not to be beaten, but where to go if this happens, what you can do, who will help you, and having committed and competent people on hand to provide that help,” said Sara Hossain, honorary executive director of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, which also participated in SAFE. 9

Based on a study of more than 12,000 participants, icddr,b’s report concluded that SAFE reduced spousal violence against women and girls, particularly adolescent girls, by a margin ranging from 9 percent to 20 percent across various sample groups. In one group, the prevalence of sexual and physical violence was as high as 70 percent before SAFE, and dropped to 50 percent after the program was introduced. Contraceptive use increased as much as 10.5 percent, and more survivors of violence sought help from informal sources of support. 10

The Dutch embassy was pleased with the results. Because SAFE used randomized controlled trials, the changes among participants was “confidently attributed” to the program, says the Dutch embassy’s Satiar. The results were “significant and remarkable,” he adds.

— Amy Yee

1 Najma’s story is from “SAFE Case Studies” (unpublished), provided by the We Can Alliance 2014, compiled in 2014.
2 Ibid.
5 “SAFE Case Studies,” op. cit.
7 “SAfE: Promoting rights and reducing violence against women and girls in urban slums,” op. cit.
8 Naved and Amin, op. cit., p. 1.

CURRENT SITUATION

Tackling Girls’ Issues

Girls’ and women’s rights campaigns are gaining traction on a broad front as advocates push for gender equality and better education for girls. Yet, the movement also has experienced setbacks in recent years because of terrorist attacks on girls and new laws in some countries legalizing child labor and early marriage.

“No Ceilings,” a global report by the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation released in March, captured the complexity of girls’ rights in 2015. 91 “There has never been a better time to be born female,” said the report, based on data spanning more than 20 years from over 190 countries. 92

It cited new laws protecting women and increases in the number of girls going to primary school and mothers getting access to health services. But the report added that “despite this progress, significant gaps remain around the world, including in the United States. . . . When it comes to gender equality, we’re just not there yet.”

The report said “the global under-5 mortality rate for girls has fallen by half from 1990 to 2013, and the rate of adolescent births has fallen by almost a third since 1995.” Yet, an estimated 1.4 million girls are never born every year, mostly in China and India, where parents who prefer male children often have abortions if a sonogram shows the fetus to be female.

On the education front, the gap in the number of boys and girls completing primary schools globally has nearly closed; more girls are attending secondary school, and the gender gap has narrowed from 92 girls per 100 boys enrolled in 1998 to 96 girls today. However, the report said, “Despite a narrowing of the gender gap in secondary education, many girls remain out of school.” Finally, the prevalence of child marriage is declining, but the practice remains embedded and endemic. 93

With plenty of work left to be done, campaigns for global and local girls’ rights remain numerous and active. In
March, 8,600 representatives from more than 1,100 nongovernmental organizations registered to attend the two-week-long 59th session in New York City of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the main U.N. body for promoting gender equality and empowerment of women. 94

“This timing is opportune. As a watershed year with the millennium Development Goals expiring and the new 2016 Sustainable Development Goals being drafted, the [conference] is key to amplifying and codifying the rights of girls and women,” says Harper of Let Girls Lead.

At the conference, delegates discussed the broad challenges to gender equality and reviewed progress since the Beijing Declaration adopted in 1995 at the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women. Girl-centric sessions discussed early marriage, cyber-abuse, protecting women and girls in humanitarian emergencies such as war and natural disaster and other far-ranging topics.

On International Women’s Day on March 8, U.N. Women, an organization that promotes gender equality, began a campaign called “Step It Up for Gender Equality,” which asks governments to address challenges that are “holding women and girls back from reaching their full potential.” 95

“Step It Up” commitments include an anti-femicide law in Brazil, signed by President Dilma Rousseff on March 9, which “imposes harsher penalties for those who harm or kill women or girls on account of their gender.” 96 The law includes longer prison terms for crimes committed against girls under 14 and women and girls with disabilities. 97

During the March meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, several groups launched a program focusing on educating adolescent girls and young women. The joint program of the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA), U.N. Women, the World Bank and UNESCO will be rolled out in 20 countries that show large gaps in girls’ education, including Mali, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, South Sudan and Tanzania. 98

“We know increasing the education of adolescent girls and young women carries impact across generations,” said Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO. The program will concentrate on improving the quality and relevance of education; strengthening links between health and education; improving collection of data on gender and education and raising awareness about the importance of gender equality in education. 99

In the United States, President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama introduced “Let Girls Learn” in early March, aimed at eliminating barriers preventing more than 62 million girls across the globe from going to school. The $250 million initiative is a collaboration among the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Department of State, the White House and the Peace Corps. 100 The Peace Corps will focus on 11 countries: Albania, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Georgia, Ghana, Moldova, Mongolia, Mozambique, Togo and Uganda.

To promote Let Girls Learn, the first lady in March traveled to Cambodia and Japan, which has pledged $340 million for girls’ education efforts. 101 “It’s about whether fathers — and mothers — think their daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons,” Obama said while in Japan. “It’s about whether communities value girls simply for their bodies, for their household labor, their reproductive capacities, or whether they value girls for their minds as well. And if we’re being honest with ourselves, we have to admit that these kinds of challenges aren’t just limited to the developing world.” 102

Recent months have seen significant legal milestones on other fronts. In Malawi, parliamentarian Jessie Kabwila praised her country’s February move to raise the legal age of marriage from 15 to 18. “The country will for the first time clearly articulate that we are saying ‘no’ to child marriage,” she said. 103

Continued on p. 354
Research from around the world shows that good quality sex education — particularly that integrates gender and human rights — can lead to fewer sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies. Sex education does this by changing behaviors, including delaying the start of sexual activity, decreasing the number of partners and increasing contraceptive and condom use. Research also shows that sex education does not lead to an increase in sexual activity among young people.

There are more than 1 billion 10- to 19-year-olds. They are growing up in circumstances quite different from those of their parents. The environment in which they are making decisions related to sexual and reproductive health is rapidly evolving.

For sex education to be effective, it must reach young people before they become sexually active and be provided incrementally, over time. It also needs to be age-appropriate and delivered in a participatory and engaging way, based on science and facts. It should cover issues such as relationships, puberty, reproduction, sexually transmitted infections, sexual diversity, stigma and discrimination. It should include opportunities for young people to explore their attitudes and values and to practice key skills, such as negotiation and decision-making.

Adolescent girls are at a disadvantage compared to boys when it comes to issues like negotiating safer sex, using contraceptives, preventing unplanned pregnancies and accessing reproductive health services. They are also at greater risk of sexual abuse, early marriage, discrimination and stigma and health risks following unplanned pregnancies.

Given the many benefits of sex education, it is important that it be included in the formal school curriculum and that teachers be trained to deliver this information. Schools offer the best way to efficiently reach large audiences of young people for two-way communication. Complementary activities also should be provided to reach young people who are not in school — often the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Reaching large numbers of adolescents is much harder when they are at home with their families or during their free time. With increasing school enrollment and retention rates, education settings offer the best opportunity to make a large-scale impact on these issues.

Today’s adolescents will determine the future social fabric, economic productivity and reproductive health and well-being of nations. It is our responsibility to ensure they receive the essential knowledge and skills to become responsible adults and — when ready — parents.

There is little debate that adolescents should learn about sex. But questions of where, how and by whom they should be educated remain hotly debated.

Surveys show parents are generally supportive of sex education in schools, particularly when it comes to biology and statistics, like the fact that abstinence and fidelity are associated with the best physical, psychological and socio-economic outcomes. But when schools promote the moral equivalence of any kind of sexual activity, controversies arise.

Comprehensive sexuality education, promoted by Planned Parenthood, employs a harm-reduction approach that stresses increased access to contraception — and abortion when it fails — on the premise that abstinence and fidelity are impractical. But harm-reduction programs have a major flaw.

Contraceptives are worse at preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than pregnancies. While teen pregnancy rates in the United States are decreasing, the infection rate among adolescents is increasing. This is compounded by the harm-reduction approach.

Studies suggest that the perception that contraception makes sex safer leads to increased sexual risk-taking behavior. That in turn erodes any gains from harm-reduction approaches. This cannot be solved by more promotion of condom use. The majority of U.S. high school students are not sexually active. Of the 34 percent who are, only 13.7 percent say they did not use some form of contraception the last time they had sex.

Adolescents must be empowered to avoid risks altogether, not just reduce the harms associated with early sexual behavior. A risk-avoidance approach to sex education emphasizes abstinence and fidelity to one partner.

Comparisons of the effectiveness of different approaches are misleading. Advocates of “comprehensive sexuality education” promote specific curricula with extremely controversial elements. Yet when assessing outcomes, they broadly define their approach as any curriculum with a harm-reduction component, thereby claiming for themselves the success of abstinence-based programs already proven effective. Then they disparage similar programs by disingenuously combining them with “abstinence only” curricula and deem them ineffective.

Girls and boys should learn the truth about love and responsibility and how harmful early sexual activity and promiscuity are. Sex education should not be misleading.
“Malawi’s vote in favor of girls’ rights comes at a time when momentum is growing towards legal equality for women and girls in many countries across the African continent,” said Faiza Jama Mohamed, Nairobi office director of the advocacy group Equality Now. In addition, Tunisia in late January signed the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa, an agreement that strengthens the rights of women and girls.

Also in January, Egypt saw its first conviction for FGM, eight years after the practice was banned. Dr. Raslan Fadl was convicted of manslaughter in the death of Soheir al-Batea, 13, who died from an allergic reaction to penicillin after Fadl performed genital mutilation on her. Fadl is serving two years in prison.

It is “the first time that this law has ever been implemented,” said Suad Abu-Dayyeh, a consultant for Equality Now, which helped bring the case against Fadl. “That’s why we’re very much pleased and happy.” But she said it was a tragedy that “this girl had to die for the law to be implemented.”

Setbacks

However, there also have been setbacks to girls’ rights. Last July, Bolivia became the first nation to legalize child labor from age 10. The legislation permits 10-year-olds to work if they are under parental supervision and go to school.

In Iraq in 2014, the Cabinet approved the Ja’afari personal status law, which says girls reach puberty at age 9 and thus are ready for marriage. In response, women in Iraq declared International Women’s Day in March 2014 to be a day of mourning.

Meanwhile, extremist terrorist groups continue to target girls. In Iraq and Syria, Islamic State militants have captured hundreds of women and children and sold them as sex slaves, forced them into marriage or imprisoned them. Women and girls from Iraq’s Yezidi religious minority have been tortured and raped by the group.

“Hundreds of Yezidi women and girls have had their lives shattered by the horrors of sexual violence and sexual slavery in [Islamic State] captivity,” said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s senior crisis response adviser. “Many of those held as sexual slaves are children — girls aged 14, 15 or even younger. [Islamic State] fighters are using rape as a weapon in attacks amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

In northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram terrorist group reportedly has abducted about 500 women and girls since 2009 in addition to destroying villages and conducting suicide bombing attacks in crowded marketplaces. Soldiers from neighboring countries have helped the Nigerians push back against the group, which wants to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria.

The group’s 2014 kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls has been condemned internationally and sparked a viral social media campaign on Twitter, at #bringbackourgirls. But, except for a few dozen who escaped, the girls are still held by Boko Haram or have been reportedly sold as brides to Islamist fighters for 2,000 naira (about $11.25) each. Social media campaigns may “make lots of noise, but no one has brought the girls back yet,” says Goulds of Plan International.

OUTLOOK

Life and Death

Although girls’ rights have gained prominence, advocates for girls say governments, aid agencies, donors and other organizations have much more to do to improve girls’ lives. This year offers a chance to make further gains. Policymakers at the United Nations are drafting the Sustainable Development Goals, new goals for the next 15 years, as the 2015 deadline for the current Millennium Development Goals approaches.

The post-2015 goals will offer a “once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the lives of adolescent girls,” said a joint statement on girls’ rights signed by nearly 20 nongovernmental organizations and agencies. The statement called for the new goals to ensure universal reproductive health rights for girls and all adolescents; freedom from harmful practices, including early marriage and FGM; safety from violence and discrimination and access to justice; free and equitable secondary education; and youth-friendly and gender-sensitive programs that include adolescent girls.

“The issues highlighted here can be the difference between life and death for an adolescent girl, and can have significant impact on the development of their communities and societies,” the statement said.

Current drafts of post-2015 development goals propose 17 goals and 159 targets. Ending child marriage and FGM and other harmful traditional practices likely will be addressed in the new guidelines, says Thompson of the International Center for Research on Women. Because the specific needs of girls were largely unaddressed in the original Millennium Development Goals, advocates want child marriage rates included as an indicator of the welfare of girls.

“There are few clearer indicators of how adolescent girls are faring in a country than its rate of child marriage,” said Lakshmi Sundaram, global coordinator of Girls Not Brides. “By ensuring that ending child marriage is included in the new development goals, we can keep track of how well we are all doing in ensuring that adolescent girls can thrive.”

And while big gains have been made in primary and secondary school enrollment, future targets will focus more on girls completing primary school — not just enrolling — and moving on to
secondary school. In low- and middle-income countries, as many as 200 million young people (58 percent of them girls) have not completed primary education and cannot acquire skills to get decent jobs. 114

Improving education quality — in a safe environment — is also a priority, says Minchew, at the International Women’s Health Coalition. "Is the education of good quality? Are girls staying in school?" she asks, adding, "If we have empowered girls who walk into disempowered [unsafe] environments, are we really changing anything?"

She also cautions against policymakers looking for simple “one-off solutions” rather than holistic approaches. "There is no one thing to solve these problems," Minchew says. "You have to put time and resources behind whole-of-government approaches."

Leslee Udwin, the British documentarian who made "India’s Daughter," believes the toughest problem will be changing age-old societal attitudes about girls. "Gender-inequality is the primary tumour, and rape, trafficking, child marriage, female [infanticide], honor killings and so on, are the metastases," she wrote. "Until and unless the mindset changes, the cancer will thrive and continue to spread." 115

But Mukasa, at the International Center for Research on Women, is optimistic. "I like the momentum I see globally," she says. "Beyond child marriage, I see further investment in empowerment of girls and definitely an increase in investment in education. That gives me hope."

Likewise, Emily Teitsworth, director of programs at Let Girls Lead, the U.S. advocacy group, recalls proudly watching 15-year-old Emelin Cabrera speak on a panel at the Commission on the Status of Women meeting in March alongside U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and philanthropist Melinda Gates. 116 Cabrera is part of a Let Girls Lead girls’ empowerment group in Guatemala.

"I was struck by how far we’ve come in our efforts to put girls at the center of global development," says Teitsworth. "In the post-2015 global development process, it’s essential that we sustain that forward momentum; there is much work left to be done."

Notes

13 See The Girl Effect website at http://tinyurl.com/5v5t52s.
16 See Nicole Foundation website at http://tinyurl.com/mkh5fod.
17 "Why Girls?" op. cit.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
31 "Boko Haram's Abubakar Shekau: 'I ab-
36 Ibid., p. 9.
37 “Education for girls is crucial to end child marriage but must be part of a broader effort, urge NGOs,” press release, International Center for Research on Women, April 17, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/krdsv46c.
43 Ibid.
44 “Education for girls is crucial to end child marriage but must be part of a broader effort, urge NGOs,” op. cit.
50 Keane, op. cit.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p. 148.
58 Ibid.
59 McGrath, op. cit.
60 “Because I Am a Girl,” op. cit., p. 51.
62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Foerstal, op. cit.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
75 “Female Genital Mutilation Fact Sheet,” op. cit.
77 Ibid.
79 Ibid.

About the Author
For More Information

Coalition for Adolescent Girls, coalitiionforadolescentgirls.org. A global coalition of more than 40 organizations, supported by the Nike Foundation and the United Nations Foundation, dedicated to supporting, investing in and improving the lives of adolescent girls in the developing world.

Equality Now, P.O. Box 20646, Columbus Circle Station, New York, NY 10023; www.equalitynow.org. An international nonprofit working to protect women and girls against violence and to promote human rights.

The Girl Effect, www.girleffect.org. Campaign begun by the U.N. Foundation, the NoVo Foundation and Nike Foundation that focuses on preventing child marriage, teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS; also seeks to break the cycle of poverty.

Girls Not Brides, 50 Brook Green, London W6 7BJ, UK; www.girlsnobrides.org. A global umbrella group of 400 organizations working to end child marriage.


International Women's Health Coalition, 333 Seventh Ave., 6th Floor, New York, NY 10001; iwhc.org. Policy and advocacy group that promotes women's and girls' health and other issues.

Let Girls Lead, Oakland, CA; www.letgirlsead.org. Advocacy group that aims to empower girls to attend school, stay healthy, escape poverty and overcome violence.

Plan International, Dukes Court, Block A, Duke St., Woking, Surrey, GU21 5BH, UK; plan-international.org. Nonprofit focused on poverty reduction that is pushing a girls’ rights campaign.


ENDNOTES

89 “Charting a Positive Future For Girls in Developing Countries,” op. cit.
90 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 “Education for girls is crucial to end child marriage but must be part of a broader effort, urge NGOs,” op. cit.
114 Ibid., p. 2.
115 Udwin, op. cit.
Books


This collection of articles by academics, health and legal experts and others focuses on the evolution of women’s rights and human rights.


Two *New York Times* journalists tell of the hardships that women and girls around the world face, including poverty and sex trafficking.


The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize writes about life under the Taliban in Pakistan and her fight for girls’ education around the world.

Articles


Families in Niger are driven further into desperation by drought in the Sahel region.


A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist provides a detailed analysis of the method used by KMG, a nongovernmental organization, to nearly eradicate female genital mutilation in one area of Ethiopia.


A lack of medical protocols in India for victims of domestic and gender violence contributes to weak legal justice.

Reports and Studies


The report presents a comprehensive examination of female genital mutilation around the world.


The U.N. Children’s Fund says that “for every 100 boys enrolled in primary school in West and Central Africa, only 90 girls are admitted” and that the problem “is worse in secondary school.”


The nonprofit asks what will shift the inequity in power experienced by girls around the world.


The groundbreaking paper was the first to urge delaying early marriage and educating girls as a way to further economic development.


This study examines the methods and results of KMG, an Ethiopian group that has nearly eliminated female genital mutilation in a part of southern Ethiopia.


The report explores how international economic development programs can focus on girls’ needs.


Researchers from the Population Council and other institutions focus on the lives of adolescents and their longer-term impact on developing countries.


Educating girls during adolescence can be transformative, say the authors, who identify a broad array of promising educational approaches.


The authors summarize research on girls’ education in the developing world; the impact of educating girls on families, economies and nations; and the most promising approaches to increasing girls’ enrollment and enhancing educational quality.
Birth Control


A Guatemalan teenager spoke to international leaders at the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women about her experiences working with leaders in her rural town to confront teen pregnancy and childbirth, sexual assault and poor education.


Members of Iran’s parliament have proposed legislation blocking women’s access to birth control and discouraging law enforcement from intervening in family disputes.

Child Marriage


Approximately 16 percent of girls aged 15 to 19 living in poor countries were married in 2014, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international economic organization based in Paris.


Child marriage undermines health, education and economic empowerment for girls, especially in the developing world, according to a recent report by the Clinton Foundation.


An international law expert says cultural and legislative practices in sub-Saharan Africa make it difficult for the United Nations to abolish laws permitting child marriages or enforce restrictions in that region.

Girls’ Education


Globally, girls are more likely than boys to do their homework and view school positively, but they often lack self-confidence in math and science, according to an OECD study.


First lady Michelle Obama will collaborate with Akie Abe, wife of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, on an international education initiative called “Let Girls Learn,” which encourages girls to commit to their education.


A Pakistani activist urges the United Nations to prioritize secondary education for girls in developing nations as they develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals to replace the expiring Millennium Development Goals.

Violence


UNICEF reported that 10 percent of girls in 40 low-to-middle-income countries reported having experienced acts of sexual violence against them in the previous year.


More than 20 percent of American teenage girls report having been physically or sexually abused by a dating partner, according to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Taub, Amanda, “‘She should just be silent’: the real roots of India’s rape culture,” Vox, March 17, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/qe366pu.

One of the six rapists convicted in a high-profile 2012 gang rape case in Delhi said in an upcoming documentary that female rape victims should be held responsible if they do not follow traditional Indian behavior standards.

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