

### **3 Gender and Human Rights in the Life Cycle**

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# Taking the Life-cycle Approach to the World of Work

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## Overview

Globalisation and recent demographic and labour market trends are having a different impact on girls and boys, women and men. Gender roles and relations are being affected as are the gender differences in the inter-generational transmission of both opportunities and disadvantages over the life cycle for decent work and livelihoods for women and men – including the feminisation of poverty and the vicious cycle of poverty from one generation to the next. The changes that are happening in the world today are having important impacts – all with gender implications – for:

- 1 Fertility decisions, including sex preference and the value attached to daughters and sons;
- 2 Educational opportunities and types of education and training for girls and boys;
- 3 The school-to-work transition and the opportunities and barriers to entry into the labour force for young women and men;
- 4 Employment in the formal or informal economy and the types of employment relationships;
- 5 The nature of working life and careers, including, importantly, how women and men balance paid work and care work;
- 6 The returns from work, the working poor and the poor who are excluded from work;
- 7 Age at marriage, marriage patterns and family formation;

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- 8 Family structures and dynamics, including intra-household decision-making and the economic and social roles of different family members;
- 9 Labour mobility – within and between countries;
- 10 Access to different forms of security and social protection;
- 11 Who is socially excluded and falls into poverty, whether the voices of the poor are heard or not heard and new forms of insecurities.

The processes of globalisation – including trade liberalisation, the trend towards a single borderless economy, the changing organisation of production and employment, developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the changing roles of the state, business sector and civil society – are benefiting some but disadvantaging others. Who is benefiting and in what context? Why and how are others being disadvantaged? How is discrimination against women throughout life, from birth to old age, contributing both to the feminisation of poverty and the perpetuation of poverty from one generation to the next? What are the cultural and socio-economic class variables?

Why are young girls often outshining boys at school yet still finding it harder to enter the labour market? Has there been a reversal of inter-generational care, and can older women who have already spent their lifetime looking after other people expect to be cared for in their twilight years? Is there a trend away from gender-based discrimination and disadvantage to age-based discrimination and disadvantage? Or is sexist *and* ageist discrimination in the world of work affecting people at younger ages, so that women over 35 years are finding it harder to get hired or rehired and to get out of poverty? How is discrimination and disadvantage by gender *and* age evolving over the life cycle of women and men, and what are the links with other forms of discrimination, such as class and race?

Parallel to the processes of globalisation, various demographic changes are taking place. Populations everywhere are ageing. The number of persons aged 60 years or older is currently estimated to be nearly 600 million and is projected to grow to almost 2 billion by the year 2050, at which time the population of older persons will be larger than the population

of children for the first time in human history. Of this two billion, a much higher proportion will be women. Today, the developed world is already experiencing gender differences in longevity, with women accounting for a higher proportion of the older and oldest old population. In the United States, for example, women now account for 56 per cent of the over-60 population. In Japan, over a quarter of the female population is already over 60. But the feminisation of later life is occurring at a much faster rate in the developing rather than developed regions, so that within the next 25 years, nearly three-quarters of the world's older women are expected to work and live in the developing world, particularly in the Asian region. Although, women outnumber men in old age around the world, they generally have lower pension and social security entitlements. As widows, heads of households or living in single-member households, older women are highly vulnerable without income support.

At the same time, HIV/AIDS is having a devastating effect on some populations, especially in Africa, cutting down those in the prime of their working lives and changing the inter-generational pattern of care. The implications are not just in terms of those who are infected with HIV/AIDS but also those – often the oldest and the youngest – who have to provide care for the infected and who are left without their breadwinners.

These demographic, economic and social changes in the global economy help to explain the importance of adopting a life-cycle perspective to the promotion of gender equality in decent work and poverty reduction.

## **International Perspectives**

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, the community of nations committed to “make a real and measurable difference to people’s lives in the new century” through a concerted and co-ordinated drive to achieve eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These are to: eradicate poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development. The MDGs provide a

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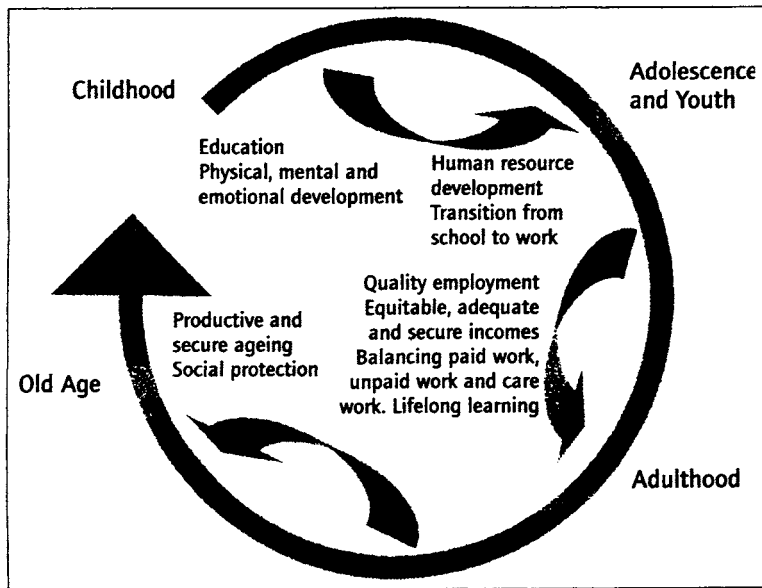
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context in which the life-cycle approach to the promotion of gender equality in decent work and poverty reduction is all the more significant and relevant.

The Report of the Director-General to the International Labour Conference 91st Session clearly explains this:

Today's girl child is tomorrow's older woman worker, and it is her opportunities and experiences now that will shape her ability to obtain and maintain decent work throughout her adult life, and enjoy security and protection in her old age. If girls, compared to boys, face negative cultural attitudes and practices and discrimination from birth, they will grow up to be women with greater constraints and few choices and opportunities. In turn, they will be less able to influence positively the lives of their daughters and sons, so that poverty is likely to be passed on from one generation to the next. The links between a vicious cycle of poverty and gender discrimination against the girl child start at the earliest stages of life within families. Throughout life, from birth to old age, gender discrimination contributes both to the feminisation of poverty and to the perpetuation of poverty from one generation to the next. (ILO, 2003:26)

Equality between women and men and the elimination of discrimination is a fundamental right throughout all stages of life – from childhood to old age. This life-cycle approach to the promotion of gender equality is at the core of the International Labour Organization 'decent work' approach (see Figure 1). The concept of decent work is best expressed through the aspirations of individuals and families, through the eyes of people. It is about your job and future prospects; your working conditions; your ability to earn enough to feed, clothe and educate your children and give them a childhood rather than put them into labour. If you are a woman, it is about equality with men; about being able to compete on a level playing field; about receiving equal pay for work of equal value; about being able to balance your work life and family life; about having your care work and domestic chores acknowledged and valued; about having a say about whether your daughter has the same opportunities as your son; and about having a voice in your community. Decent work is at the heart of family life and society – work that offers possibilities for personal creativity, expression and fulfilment, and that provides a sense of self worth and secures human dignity.

**Figure 1: Decent Work in the Life Cycle**

## The Vulnerability of Children – Especially Girls

Every child should have the right to health, nutrition, literacy and education, and protection from exploitation and abuse as child labour. The estimate is that some 120 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 years are engaged in full-time work, and another 130 million work as a secondary activity. Of these 250 million child workers, about 110 million are girls. Girls are much more likely than boys to face negative cultural attitudes and practices, beginning within their own families; start working at an earlier age; be paid less for the same work; work longer hours; work in hidden and unregulated sectors where they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse; be excluded from education; or suffer the triple burden of housework, school work and economic work. Since the work that girls do is often 'invisible', they are especially vulnerable to the worst forms of child labour, including child prostitution, child slavery, sale and trafficking, debt bondage and serfdom.

Since the root causes of child labour are poverty and socio-cultural attitudes towards the value of sons and daughters, actions are needed to target parents. Between parents, there is substantial empirical evidence that mothers tend to have a greater influence than fathers on children's education, health

and welfare, and that women tend to use their income, however, meagre, for the benefit of the family more than men do. Programmes need to improve the quantity and quality of employment for women and at the same time ensure, for example through awareness-raising and training, that decent employment translates into empowerment and greater decision-making power for women within their families and communities and improved welfare for their families, especially their children.

Poverty leads many households in developing countries to survival strategies that can have the effect of accentuating gender inequalities. One survival strategy, for instance, is to withdraw children from school so that they can work and contribute to family income. While often born out of desperation, such a strategy can further discriminate against the girl child. Families are likely to take prevailing gender prejudices as given in their economic decisions and thus choose to invest their limited resources on, for example, boy's education and health since returns to girls' education in labour markets tend to be much less. Economic security is thus vital for families.

### **The Importance of Education and Training**

Where girls have improved access to education, their labour market opportunities have also improved. An important gain in recent years has been the narrowing of the gender gap in education. In higher education, women's enrolment now equals or surpasses that of men in many countries. Yet the school-to-work transition is still harder for young women than for young men. The pathways to decent work for young women tend to be very difficult to negotiate, with many obstacles, setbacks, exits and re-entries. Unfortunately, at the end of the process, many young women, particularly those in developing countries, still do not find decent work. They may already be married, already mothers or pregnant, and desperately looking for whatever work they can find so that they and their children can survive. The available data also indicate that there are many more young women than young men living with HIV/AIDS. And even those that are not thus affected still face stereotypical prejudices and discrimination in trying to enter the labour market.

From a life-cycle perspective, education is a first step to decent work. Employment opportunities are a next step. Unfortunately, however, employment opportunities tend to be limited, especially for those 15 to 24 years of age. Worldwide, some 60 million young people are looking for work but cannot find any. Unemployment rates for youth are more than twice the corresponding rates for the economically active adult population in all regions of the world, and young women have much greater difficulty than young men in entering the labour market and retaining their jobs in periods of economic downturn, especially in Latin America, the Caribbean and South Asia.

Access to education and training is fundamental for enabling young women to compete on the basis of objective criteria for recruitment and promotion. But, increasingly, it is the type, rather than the level, of education and training that is critical. Young women are still not going into some fields of study traditionally dominated by men. Gender-based stereotypes survive and role models that could lead young women to challenging, better-paid careers are still scarce. Importantly, girls are much less likely than boys to enrol in mathematics and computer science courses. It is true that more and more women are having access to the new ICTs that are dramatically changing the world, but the next essential challenge is for women to enter these new and powerful media as producers. If women do not participate in designing the content and modes of use of ICTs, they will be doubly excluded.

## **Women and Work**

More and more women are spending their child-bearing and child-rearing years in paid employment. The increasing participation of women in paid work has been driving employment trends, and the gaps between male and female labour force participation rates have been shrinking. For example between 1980 and 1996, the annual growth rate of the labour force was over 4 per cent for females and 1.2 per cent for males in Latin America, and 2.2 per cent and 1.8 per cent respectively in Asia. While women have become more economically active, the male labour force participation rate has been declining in

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most regions, albeit slowly; an important reason is a tendency toward earlier retirement. In the developed countries, East and South-East Asia, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa women now account for close to half the labour force.

Growing numbers of girls and women with ever-higher educational qualifications have been breaching glass walls and ceilings. The share of women in administration and middle management has increased. More women are also creating their own enterprises. In the United States, the number of firms created and managed by women has grown twice as fast as those set up and managed by men. In Japan, the percentage of women entrepreneurs increased from 2.4 per cent in 1980 to 5.2 per cent in 1995. In several Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises have been growing at a faster rate than the economy as a whole and have been an important source of employment generation, innovation and economic development.

But there is still a long way to go to achieving gender equality in decent work. With 54 per cent of working age women in the labour force as compared to over 80 per cent of men, the world is still not making the most of its female talents and potentials. Gender remains a ubiquitous source of labour market inequalities and inadequately utilised human resources. More jobs for women have not necessarily meant better jobs. Worldwide, women hold only 1 per cent of chief executive positions. The majority experience the effects of the so-called 'sticky floor' – on the bottom rungs of the occupational hierarchy.

Quantitative increases in employment have not been matched by qualitative improvements in working conditions and social protection. After all this time, about half of the world's labour remains in sex-stereotyped occupations, with women dominating in clerical and secretarial jobs and low-end service occupations that tend to be outside the scope of labour legislation and social protection. In occupations where many women but few men work, pay levels remain low. With so many women concentrated in low-paying jobs, it is no surprise that despite the increasing adoption of equal pay legislation, a large gap persists between male and female earnings. Although real manufacturing wages have been rising faster for women

than for men in recent years, women continue to earn 20–30 per cent less than men.

Women's working lives are greatly determined by the presence of children in the family. In order to achieve equality of treatment, measures must be taken to ensure that women's specific role in reproduction has no adverse effect on their employment. These measures include: health care for pregnant women and mothers; cash benefits and maternity leave; arrangements to better reconcile family and occupational responsibilities, and give fathers the opportunity to play a recognised role in raising children; and other types of collective responsibility such as family allowances, taxation arrangements and childcare systems.

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## **Balancing Paid and Unpaid Work – for Women and Men**

Women now constitute almost half the global labour force and account for the tremendous rise in dual-income families and single parent households. But societal perceptions of work and family have not changed; the division of labour is still based on the 'man breadwinner, woman homemaker and caregiver' idea. Some facts are illustrative:

- 1 Women work more hours than men, more than half their working time being spent on unpaid work. Because women continue to have primary responsibility for housework, childcare and unpaid work in general, women's increase in paid employment has in many instances simply meant that women work extra long hours. In Bangladesh, for instance, women working in the formal sector devote another 31 hours per week to unpaid work, as compared to only 14 hours by men.
- 2 Small children greatly increase women's unpaid work, not men's. Part-time work can offer women an effective way to divide their time between paid work and looking after young children and other dependents. There has been a substantial increase in part-time employment over the past two decades, with women accounting for up to 80 per cent of all part-timers. In the United Kingdom, for instance, over 40

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per cent of all women workers are part-time, as compared to only 8 per cent of men workers. However, the problem is that part-timers earn lower hourly wages than full timers, lose out even more on benefits than on hourly pay and have little prospects for career advancement, training or skills enhancement.

- 3 The available evidence shows that where women lack quality childcare, they take their young children to work with them and often expose them to the hazards of their work place; and also that child victims of various forms of violence tend to have both parents working away from home.
- 4 The pressures are especially great for a sandwich generation of women who are marrying later and having children later – because they have been investing in their own human resource development – but then end up struggling to juggle career advancement, care of young children and care of elderly parents, all within the same time span of their lives.

For most, if not all, of our history, there has been a care deficit – mainly a deficit in the care provided to women who spend most of their time caring for other people but have little time to care for themselves. Nowadays, men and children are also beginning to experience a care deficit, as more and more women enter the labour force and the pressures of the double burden of paid and unpaid work become too much for women and men do not take on more of it. What we need is not only a better balance between paid and unpaid work for women but also a change in attitudes and responsibilities on the part of men. Until and unless men assume their fair share of family responsibilities, the social order will not change.

## **Gender Concerns around Ageing**

Over their life course, women are likely than men to move in and out of the labour force several times as they seek to combine work and family responsibilities. There is thus a need for lifelong learning and continuous training to enhance employability and flexibility for women at different stages of family formation and care. Lifelong learning and continuous training are also particularly important for women because ageist and

sexist discrimination in the world of work appears to be occurring at earlier and earlier chronological ages. In a growing number of countries, women over 35 years of age are finding it increasingly difficult to get jobs or to be rehired.

Ageing raises important gender concerns. As noted earlier, nearly everywhere women live longer than men. At 60 years and above, there are 99 males to every 100 females. At the age of 80 and over, there are just 69 males to every 100 females. So the ageing world is also a female world. Older women account for the majority of single person households. Older women are often living alone, neither cared for nor able to productively contribute their knowledge and experience to society. Particularly in developing countries, where public assistance is meagre, women are even more likely to end up in poverty in their old age. Growing numbers of today's older women are left unsupported by formal social protection. In addition, public expenditures on social security and health care have been cut, often based on the mistaken belief that families and communities will take care of their aged. The sad fact is that there has been a reversal of inter-generational care. Older women who have already spent their lifetime looking after other people increasingly cannot expect to be cared for in their twilight years. In many least developed countries, the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has left older women with responsibility for caring for their infected children and, later on, their children's children. Thus, AIDS now provides a further distortion of gender inequalities both at the beginning and end of a woman's life cycle.

The progressive ageing of the populations compels us to rethink the conventional concept of a simple three-stage life cycle of education, employment and retirement. As the vitality of our societies increasingly depends on active participation by older people, we must foster economic and social conditions that allow people of all ages to remain fully integrated into society, to enjoy freedom in deciding how to relate and contribute to society and to find fulfilment in doing so. The central challenge is to promote a culture that values the experience and knowledge that come with age. A wider basket of policy tools, strongly oriented to ease and support participation in economic and social life by older workers, is needed.

Discrimination against older women workers needs to be

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addressed at all stages of the employment process, including recruitment, selection, training, promotion, redundancy and termination. This may involve reviewing recruitment and training policies and procedures (e.g. banning job advertisements that not only specify sex but also age and physical characteristics), redesigning jobs (e.g. by providing seating and better lighting) and analysing social security and pension arrangements from the perspective of the older woman worker.

## **Conclusion**

The life-cycle approach focuses not just on the individual but on the family. No matter the culture or country it is family goals that determine life and work strategies; the family that assigns economic and social roles for girls and boys, women and men; the family that ultimately decides on issues such as education, consumption, gender and employment. There needs also to be recognition of the fact that, unlike the standard pattern of the 20th century, more and more women (and men) will be having flexible working lives, moving in and out of the labour force at various times of their lives and changing work status more often. Thus, their need for lifelong learning and social protection to deal with such changes is greater than ever.

In summary, the message of the life-cycle approach is that we can achieve what people are asking for in their daily lives – work, security and human dignity – only if there is equality of opportunity and treatment for women and men from childhood to old age; if discrimination encountered at one stage of life is not perpetuated at later stages or gains made at one stage are not lost as one ages; and if there is better harmonisation of work and family responsibilities for men and especially women.

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# Older People

*Fiona Clark*

Each and every one of us, young and old, has a role to play in promoting solidarity between generations, in combating discrimination against older people, and in building a future of security, opportunity and dignity for people of all ages.

UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan,  
*Foreword to the Political Declaration and Madrid  
International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002*

## Introduction

The issue of gender and human rights has to be understood in the context of the multiple and complex factors that intersect gender roles and identities and the ability of citizens to claim their rights. One of these factors is age and these issues must therefore necessarily be approached from the basic understanding that:

- 1 Discrimination is experienced by virtue of people's age, and this is especially the case for older women and men.
- 2 Age cross-cuts other forms of discrimination and disadvantage throughout the life cycle, to fundamentally determine people's health and well-being throughout life and into old age.

A life-cycle approach is based on the recognition that people are faced with different opportunities and obstacles throughout their lives that determine their development, well-being and status. In order to ensure that progress and gains made in one stage of life are not negated by adverse experiences and discrimination based on age in a later stage, people need support in the transitions from one stage of life to another. Similarly, one cannot understand or address issues of older people without knowing the trajectory of their lives and the opportunities and constraints they faced to place them in their current situations.

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## **Age-based Discrimination**

A life-cycle approach to gender and human rights must take account of existing, if unacknowledged, age-based discrimination and the violation of the rights of older persons of both genders that this entails. Advancing age is connected to social exclusion and social distancing from policy processes. In poor communities poverty only serves to exacerbate this exclusion. Stripping older people of assets is common, as is rationing of services and support to old people when resources are scarce. This is the case in developed as much as in developing countries. Poor health and dependence on family for material well-being and physical security in old age enhance the potential for discrimination, where older people may be dependent on the very people who are discriminating against them.

'Being old' is not an identity people are too keen to promote, and yet age is a defining feature in our identity, our access to resources and claiming our rights, and can cross-cut gender, ethnicity, religion, and geography to increase disadvantage and discrimination. A gender analysis therefore necessarily has to acknowledge that older women, for example, experience high levels of disadvantage by virtue of their age and cumulative gender disadvantage over the life course. Poor access to education, the labour market, economic assets and health services over their lives leave women doubly or triply disadvantaged in old age. Illiteracy, economic insecurity, discriminatory laws and practices mean that older women suffer from violence (including gender-based violence such as rape), property grabbing and disinheritance, denial of access to justice and participation in decision-making.

However, it is important to realise that gender and age also intersect with negative consequences for older men. Very often the reduced capacity of older men to make economic or other contributions to the households and family leave them isolated as their role is perceived to lessen and their burden seen to increase. Therefore human rights approaches to gender equality from a life-cycle perspective need to consider and put in place actions in favour of older men too, who are discriminated against socially and in the household (Beales, 2000; Clark and Laurie, 2000).

Public policy options to counter discrimination need to

begin by recognising that there is age discrimination, and take affirmative action in all fields to ensure that older people's rights are upheld and that older people's perspectives are included in national and international plans for poverty reduction, gender equality, tackling the HIV pandemic, as well as dealing with emergency and conflict situations.

Secondly, efforts must be made to measure the impact of policies and programmes on people of all ages. There is a need for concerted efforts to collect and disaggregate data by age and undertake age disaggregated research and policy work.

### **The MIPAA**

There is now an opportunity for affirmative action on ageing with the agreement in 2002 on the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). The plan commits UN Member States, including Commonwealth countries, to the inclusion of older people in poverty and human rights agendas, and to tackle negative attitudes to older people to ensure an enabling environment for a society of all ages.

Principles underpinning the MIPAA include:

- 1 The full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all older persons;
- 2 The achievement of secure ageing, which involves reaffirming the goal of eradicating poverty in old age and building on the United Nations Principles for older persons;
- 3 Ensuring the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, and civil and political rights of persons and the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against older persons; and
- 4 Commitment to gender equality among older persons through, *inter alia*, elimination of gender-based discrimination.

The problem remains that the UN principles for older persons and the MIPAA are not well known. They still need to find their way into the body of legislation at national and international level and be connected with existing poverty reduction and human rights instruments, including gender-related instruments such as CEDAW.

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## **Best Practices: HelpAge International**

HelpAge International (HAI) is a global network of not-for-profit organisations with a mission “to work with and for disadvantaged older people worldwide to achieve a lasting improvement in the quality of their lives”. Its core aim is to integrate an understanding of a life-cycle approach and the needs and rights of older women and men into policy at local, national, regional and international levels, via the perspective of older people.

### **Including the voices of older people**

HAI brings the voices of older people into development and decision-making processes that affect their lives, through their own participation, through its publications and through its policy and advocacy work. For example, in 2001 HAI and its partner organisations undertook a large number of consultations with older people around the world in preparation for the 2nd World Assembly on Ageing in 2002. HAI informed older people and their groups about the existence of the plan, asked them to put forward their views and demands as to what should be in the plan, and helped them to attend the Assembly and engage with their own national government delegations who would be representing them. The outcomes of these consultations are presented in the report *State of the World's Older People 2002* (HelpAge International, 2002), launched in Madrid at the time of the Assembly.

### **Direct practical work with older people**

On a practical level, HAI supports older people and their groups to get involved in processes working for poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals at a national level. In Tanzania, HAI is now actively involved in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Review. It is undertaking programmes to support older people who are caring for people living with AIDS and orphaned grandchildren. However, it is also stressing the risk of older people becoming infected with the virus. International statistics on prevalence rates refer to those between the ages of 15 and 49, making

those above this age totally invisible. Yet, recent data from Uganda show that of those over 50 who presented at Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centres, 20 per cent were HIV positive. Older people are sexually active and are at risk of HIV infection through their own sexual behaviour, as well as from contaminated blood transfusions.

HAI's Regional Rights Programme in Africa works to raise awareness about the rights of older people, and supports older people and their organisations in launching legal challenges in the courts. In Mozambique and Tanzania, HAI has been undertaking work on civic education with older people at community level. A widowhood and inheritance project coordinated by HAI-Tanzania trains older women as paralegal advisers to act as resource persons for local community members, to understand the statutory and customary laws and the implications they have for widows and inheritance issues, and to refer people to the local justice system as and when required (HAI, 2003).

### **Changed policy environment for older people**

HAI is also campaigning for improved social protection measures as a right for older people and as a means of cushioning the most vulnerable against the shocks and obstacles they encounter over the life course, and especially nearer the end of it. It is working to promote the feasibility of a basic universal income transfer to be integrated into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and national development plans. Few countries in the world have adequate social security for their older citizens. One country that does is South Africa and HAI research there shows that the state pension, although small, provides an important part of household economy and survival. Older women, especially, spend their pensions largely on school fees and uniforms for their grandchildren, on health care, rent and other vital elements of family livelihood strategies.

Recently, HAI has been working at EU level with members of the gender movement, the disability movement and Minority Rights Group to promote what has been termed an "inclusive approach to development". This is a reaction to the widely held cynicism about the failure of mainstreaming

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efforts, especially gender mainstreaming, and the need for development policy to be inclusive of all those who are poor and marginalised. It is hoped that these efforts will help HAI to push for EU development co-operation to be focused on reaching the very poorest and those off the margins of mainstream development, including older people.

In the UK, HAI is involved with the 'Grow-up free from poverty' coalition for international action against child poverty. HAI has been successful in integrating an inter-generational, cross-sectoral and inclusive approach into the work and advocacy of this coalition, which is concerned with child poverty within the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Similarly, HAI is involved in the UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development, and has worked hard with others to ensure that the Consortium's focus is not only on access to treatment and ARV therapy for those infected with the virus, but also support for those affected as carers, family members and breadwinners for households affected by AIDS. HAI is making some headway ensuring that the impact of AIDS on older people is recognised within the Consortium, its membership and its work.

Finally, HAI is also involved in the UK Gender and Development Network. Interestingly, the current debates about 'diversity', and especially EU legislation on diversity, have led to the women's movement feeling that gender is under threat of being diluted. These defensive (if justified) reactions of the gender movement have hampered attempts to broaden debates within the movement about the heterogeneity of women and men and to see diversity as an opportunity to strengthen discussions around discrimination and difference.

HAI seeks to embrace diversity and to promote an inclusive approach to development based on the fundamental freedoms and rights of all people and a focus in development co-operation on the poorest and most disadvantaged.

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# The Life Cycle: Adolescent Girls<sup>1</sup>

*From the Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Adolescent Girls and Their Rights*

*The international community has acknowledged that the equal rights of girls and the equal participation of women in the social, cultural, economic and political life of societies is a prerequisite for successful and sustainable development.*

The issue of the girl child was firmly placed on the international agenda by the 1990 Declaration of the World Summit for Children, which accorded priority attention to the girl child for survival, development and protection.

The Programme of Action adopted by the international community at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 highlighted the need to improve the situation of the girl child, to eliminate all forms of discrimination against her and to increase public awareness of her value. The Regional Conference on Women, held in Dakar in November 1994 in preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, adopted the African Platform for Action, which clearly identified the crucial link between the well-being of today's girls and the status of tomorrow's women. Consequently, the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference of Women, included the girl child in its 12 critical areas of concern.

The international community has acknowledged that the equal rights of girls and the equal participation of women in the social, cultural, economic and political life of societies is a prerequisite for successful and sustainable development. For those countries which have ratified CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the achievement of equality between girls and boys and the elimination of discrimination against girls are legal obligations.

The Beijing Platform for Action seeks to promote and protect the full realisation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women throughout their life cycle. The Platform identifies 12 critical areas of concern in which major actions are designed to overcome the existing obstacles and to advance the status of women. The chapter on the girl child, one of the

critical areas of concern, recognises that in many countries the girl child faces discrimination in all stages of life, from birth, through childhood and into adulthood, despite the progress in advancing the status of women worldwide. The Platform argues that due to this discriminatory environment, girls often receive limited opportunities for education and consequently lack knowledge and the skills needed to advance their status in society. The Platform underscores the responsibility of governments to protect and promote the rights of girls and recommends eliminating all barriers in order to enable girls to develop their full potential and skills through equal access to education and training, nutrition, physical and mental health care and related information. The Platform also notes that girls are encouraged less than boys to participate in and learn about the social, economic and political functioning of society, and urges governments to take action to provide access for girls to training and information to enable them to articulate their views, and to promote the equality and participation of girls in society.

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women, greater attention has been paid at all levels by governments, the United Nations system and other international institutions and NGOs to the needs of girl children. However, not enough action has been taken to redress the discrimination and difficulties they face, in particular during adolescence. Adolescents are caught between childhood and adulthood in terms of their social status and physical development. Adolescent girls have needs that differ significantly from those of boys because of their expected biological and social roles, and are often discriminated against on the accounts of both their age and their sex.

The Expert Group Meeting identified the following predisposing and determining factors that contribute to the vulnerable situation of adolescent girls:

- 1 The slow pace of dissemination and implementation of the CRC and CEDAW;
- 2 The low and unequal status accorded to girls and women from birth resulting in low self-esteem among girls;
- 3 Poverty in the high proportion of female-headed households and poor access to basic services;

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- 4 Lack of social policies that recognise the situation of adolescent girls and the girl child in general;
- 5 Urbanisation, the social impact of globalisation and structural adjustment policies.

The Expert Group Meeting noted that the rights of adolescent girls should be seen as an integral part of human rights and that girls should be enabled to develop fully and contribute to all spheres of life. They need to be given the skills and knowledge that contribute to their self-esteem in order to become more self-reliant and be active participants in society. The Meeting focused on the following critical aspects relevant to improving the situation of adolescent girls:

- 1 Adolescent girls in need of special protection;
- 2 Health, including reproductive and sexual health and nutrition;
- 3 Creating an enabling environment for the empowerment of adolescent girls.

## **1 Adolescent Girls in Need of Special Protection**

CEDAW and the CRC contain mutually reinforcing principles that, if fully implemented, would ensure the protection and fulfilment of the rights of girls and put an end to gender-based discrimination. Although adolescent girls have special needs, and face many especially difficult circumstances on the way to womanhood, their specific situation and needs remain largely ignored and neglected.

While some 191 countries have ratified the CRC and some 166 countries have ratified CEDAW, there remains a large gap between the State obligations resulting from those Conventions and their reflection in national legislation and effective implementation. The increasingly important role of NGOs in supporting implementation of these instruments has been noted.

Globalisation, poverty and erosion of values and family and community ties make adolescent girls increasingly exposed to the sex industry, child pornography and trafficking in women and children. These phenomena are neither confronted with

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adequate legal and political measures at national and international levels, nor sufficiently addressed by civil society.

Although the situation varies greatly from region to region and even within countries, a common thread seems to be the lower value ascribed to girls in relation to boys in virtually all countries. In addition, rapid urbanisation, growing economic disparities between rich and poor, and especially between the resources women and men control, gender-based violence and armed conflict exacerbate the already distressing situation of adolescent girls.

For many girls, discrimination often starts within their families and extends to affect their educational opportunities and all other spheres of their lives. Their powerlessness to protect themselves from sexual assault, early child-bearing, exploitation and abuse, and the effects of war and armed conflict rob them of the chance to enjoy their childhood and develop their full potential. The extent of their individual suffering is often hidden by the overwhelming numbers of those affected.

The rapid transmission of HIV/AIDS is a new threat to millions of adolescent girls around the world, especially those who are exploited in the sex industry. An even greater number of girls are losing their parents and primary care givers to HIV/AIDS and also find themselves forced to assume responsibility for younger siblings.

Attention was given to adolescent girls who worked at home and were often exploited and deprived of their rights, benefits and opportunities which other adolescent girls enjoyed such as access to education, training and social interaction. There are many groups of adolescent girls in need of special protection. They include:

- 1 Girls with disabilities, further exacerbated as they become adolescent and often neglected in favour of younger siblings;
- 2 Girls in armed conflict, including combatants and refugees;
- 3 Orphaned girls through AIDS, maternal mortality or conflict and who lack any care giver;
- 4 Girls subject to sexual abuse whose mothers are abroad as migrant workers;
- 5 Girls in conflict with the law;

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- 6 Sexually abused girls including victims of incest, rape, forced prostitution and sexual harassment;
- 7 Girls subjected to female genital mutilation or suffering from fistula, often subsequently ostracised, and devalued if they are not able to be wives or mothers;
- 8 Girls obliged to marry too early and consequently bear children at a young age who are more likely to suffer from maternal morbidity or mortality as well as a curtailment of other opportunities;
- 9 Girls affected by the dowry or 'bride price' systems;
- 10 Girls abducted by men, including soldiers, for marriage or sexual exploitation;
- 11 Girls used as subjects of child pornography, which may cause them lasting damage;
- 12 Girls working under hazardous and exploitative conditions;
- 13 Migrant girls who cross international borders.

Violence against adolescent girls is often hidden. Yet there is evidence to indicate that it is widespread, and some young people even assume it to be the norm. The need for proper legislation, awareness-raising and education on the rights of girls and young women is not sufficiently recognised by planners and policy-makers.

## **2 Health of Adolescent Girls Including Reproductive and Sexual Health and Nutrition**

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity. The health of adolescents is intimately linked to their development. Changing global conditions are placing greater strains on young people and modifying their behaviours and relationships, which are increasingly exacerbating some health problems. These health problems often fall on the young girls who are disadvantaged due to their age, gender and low economic status.

Adolescent girls who are no longer children, but not yet women, are denied rights and protections available to adult

women. Because of their gender, they often suffer culture-bound violations and are exploited, abused and denied opportunities more available to adolescent boys. When they live in impoverished settings, they lack access to health services, education and gainful employment, all issues that have an impact on their health and well-being.

Building on the international standards set by the CRC and CEDAW, and the consensus reached in the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action, which have recognised the rights of adolescent girls to reproductive and sexual health, including information, counselling and services, attention was drawn to the responsibilities of parents, communities, governments and international organisations in this regard. The importance of the active involvement of men and boys in this process was emphasised.

In the light of systematic discrimination against girls in many societies, as well as the conditions that force girls into early marriage and child-bearing, emphasis was placed on the critical need for self-reliance and empowerment of adolescent girls. It is also necessary that girls are helped to resist pressure to provide sexual favours in exchange for material goods, and to challenge the attitudes to adolescent girls as 'sex objects'. The need for relevant in- and out-of-school programmes and open, informed discussion of adolescent girls' reproductive and sexual health was recognised as an important way to reduce their problems with peers, parents and medical personnel. Programmes are needed to raise their self-esteem, develop support networks and re-examine the roles and impacts of existing institutions and country-based organisations.

Particular concerns expressed with regard to some health problems that particularly affect adolescent girls include:

- 1 Malnutrition and anaemia;
- 2 Sexual and reproductive health, including FGM, too early and unwanted pregnancy, adolescent maternal morbidity and mortality, unsafe abortion, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS;
- 3 Violence, including sexual abuse and incest;
- 4 Mental health;

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5 Substance abuse including the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.

While some progress has been made in putting the needs of adolescent girls on the agenda of governments, international organisations and NGOs, much more needs to be done. Many programmes have been effective while others have failed, but even the successful ones tend to be small scale. The need for new, effective means to address those issues was stressed.

The Meeting identified critical obstacles to adolescent girls' health, including nutrition and reproductive and sexual health:

- 1 The reluctance of society at large to address adolescent girls' reproductive and sexual health;
- 2 The lack of knowledge, information and skills among young people;
- 3 The lack of health provisions, including counselling services in all sectors designed for adolescents;
- 4 The lack of training for service providers and educators who interact with young people, especially in sensitive areas such as sexuality, which require skills in confidential counselling;
- 5 National policies, laws and practices that can be restrictive and/or inconsistent, or those of which the general public is not aware, or those that are inefficiently implemented and/or those that often limit the access of young people to services and information, for example by requiring the consent of another party;
- 6 Absence of national strategies for the health of young people, which could provide a framework for health care;
- 7 Inadequate support from the donor community.

It was recognised that interventions are needed in five major areas to improve the situation, as indicated in the WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF document, *Action for Adolescent Health: Towards a Common Agenda*, drawn from the Study Group on Programming for Adolescent Health. These are:

- 1 The provision of information;
- 2 Strengthening skills;

- 3 Access to quality health services;
- 4 Provision of counselling;
- 5 A safe and supportive environment.

### **3 Creating an Enabling Environment for the Realisation of Human Rights and Empowerment of Adolescent Girls**

Despite the critical importance of the adolescent period in a woman's life, until recently little effort has been made to accurately address and analyse the specific situation and needs of adolescent girls with an aim to realise their rights. Following the United Nations Decade for Women, 1976–1985, when data on women began to be increasingly collected and disaggregated by sex, children continued to be profiled as a collective entity, with the exception of data on schooling. Lack of sex- and age-disaggregated data on adolescent girls was a limitation to analysis, making it difficult to accurately define and assess their status. Later developments in regard to realising the human rights of women and children have not sufficiently helped to give priority to issues concerning adolescent girls. It was noted that very few States parties reporting on the CRC or CEDAW analyse or discuss adolescent girls. There is an urgent need for research in this area and the compilation of sex- and age-disaggregated data will help to deepen the understanding among the international community of the situation of adolescent girls, their status and the achievement of gender equality.

Accurate information is particularly important when analysing the enabling environment for the empowerment of adolescent girls to exercise their rights, as it encompasses a wide range of aspects, including education, socialisation, mass media, human rights and preparation for participation in social and political life as full citizens.

Girls continue to be under-valued both by society and by themselves and suffer from low self-esteem which prevents them from realising their full potential. This could lead to the detriment, not only of themselves, but of society as a whole.

There are many contributing factors to these problems, including poverty, social policies that are inadequate for

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addressing the development of adolescent girls, stereotyping of adolescent girls in negative images in the mass media that tend to portray girls as passive, as victims or as sex objects. Teachers, textbooks and educational materials often perpetuate these same stereotypes of girls as passive and destined to serve others. Girls are not given sufficient opportunity for full education and training to equip them for a wide variety of potential roles in life. They are not provided with opportunities for non-traditional jobs and are not prepared for responsible decision-making and participation in matters that affect their lives or the community.

Girls are often forced to drop out of school because of pregnancy or violence or for economic reasons. These problems sometimes lead parents to stop them continuing in school or to disrupt their education.

Laws are often contradictory and derived from different sources in society. Commonly the law that is least favourable to the girl is applied. Even in countries with legal systems that provide for *de jure* equality, *de facto* discrimination of adolescent girls prevails.

The family, including male family members, has a crucial role to play. Gender roles are predisposed from birth and perpetuated in the family. The male-female relationships in the family need to be changed to serve as role models for girls and boys. However, one of the difficulties that needs to be overcome is reaching families to help them appreciate the value to them and to society of investing in the complete education and training of girls as well as boys.

## Note

- 1 Extracted from the *Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Adolescent Girls and Their Rights*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 13–17 October 1997. This meeting was held by the UN Division for the Advancement of Women in preparation for the 42nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The full report is available online at: [www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/cn6/1998/gchild/egmagr1997-rep1.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/cn6/1998/gchild/egmagr1997-rep1.htm)