

United Nations
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
in collaboration with UNICEF
Expert Group Meeting
Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence
against the girl child
UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre
Florence, Italy, 25-28 September 2006

***Girl child empowerment:
A challenge for all***

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

In the next lines I propose to integrate the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights with the ordinary life of girls and adolescents. I will put forward good practices and make proposals to move forward on empowering and offsetting the discrimination that girls are suffering daily in Latin America.

Myths and fears always appear when we talk about sexuality. This is increased when we think of sexuality and childhood. However, sexuality is part of our lives since our birth and to grow up healthy, scientific information about our body is needed. For a very long time the movement for rights related to sexuality and reproduction was dissociated from the movements promoting children rights. It is necessary to rebuild this bridge and to think of actions tending to the achievement of girl child rights, including her sexual rights. This is the most assertive path for the real empowerment of girls and women. If we can't decide what happen in our bodies, neither we will decide other issues which concern our citizenship like vote, community involvement, etc.

Who are the girl children?

In order to design any policy, the first step is to clarify our framework. I propose to define girl children as a socially constructed category around female persons between 0 and 18 years.

Childhood is built on the cross road with other identities we have as individuals. Ethnicity, class, nationality, family environment, sexual orientation, occupation, and other features, such as if they live in a violent environment, if they are deprived of freedom, if they are disabled persons, if they are from western or eastern hemisphere; these are identities whose interconnection will place these girls in a situation with more or less access to their human rights. Hence, public policy should take these differences into consideration since these policies will affect unequally girls who are in different situations.

Despite all these differences, in common all girls have to be under an adult's supervision. For this reason our analysis should be thought of from the intergenerational perspective.

Furthermore, it is necessary to think of girls as the subjects of rights and not only as an object of protection. They could be in vulnerable situations but the approach must be necessarily be made from that of respect for a human being and not from the victim perspective.

Unequal and diverse Latin America

In Latin America and the Caribbean 197 million children live¹, more than half of them under the poverty line. They are children of the nineties, which is like saying, children of the opening up, of free trade and of market deregulation. They are the children of wealth concentration and flexible working relationships; nowadays some of them ask for coins in the great cities, work in the countryside, some of them study, play and some others queue up at the free dining rooms. Moreover, in the most unequal region of the planet, poverty has the face of a girl child.

Nowadays, governments considered to be progressive are gaining ground in the continent, but we still not seeing specific policies for girl children. Besides that, national and international networks of traffickers are taking advantage of the search for

¹ The State of the World's Children 2005

opportunities by poor women or women in armed conflicts, for trafficked women either for sexual exploitation or the slave labour force; this is a highly profitable hidden economy². In this context, what are the roads to empower girls? How do we diminish the vulnerable situation they are facing?

School: empowerment key?

School access has been one of the standards of child policies. However, in Uruguay where there is universal access to school, the challenge is different. The quality of the education and avoiding dropouts are two important strands we can not miss in all the countries. In order to give quality education it is necessary to have resources and we need to take responsibility of that. In relation to dropouts, especially high school, we must debate the reasons that lead to taking this decision and what alternatives the society is offering to girls and boys who are not in the formal educational system. Teenage pregnancy seems to be one of the most relevant factors for school dropout; however few efforts are being made to help these girls to integrate their identities as mothers and students. Often changes in the educational system take their time, in that sense besides the access to formal education, we must find other ways to empower girls.

Girl children in action

We must recognise that girls participate in diverse aspects either in school or outside it. Participation is a process and at the same time an end which brings empowerment as a positive consequence. We have to recognize different ways of children participation, like arts, class representative, songs lyrics and graffiti. Promoting girls participation in collective activities must be one of our objectives. The challenge of the adult world consists of decoding demands expressed in different languages by children and translating them into public policies destined to satisfy those demands. It involves accepting adult limitations to really understanding the world and to assume the necessity to integrate those who are directly implicated, children in this particular case. At the same time, we should appeal as a society for a change in policies where the state is made more accountable to society to all the groups, including girls and boys.

In relation to this point, I want to mention two good practices which have improved at all levels girls access to the exercise of their rights. The first example refers to the creation of a radio program which used to promote girls and teenagers participation in Uruguay. The second example refers to a regional network in which I participate since I was an adolescent.

In 2003, one year after the Special Session on Children, the Uruguayan adolescent participants of the event wondered about which was the best way, according to the resources we had, to feedback to other youngsters what happened in New York. The Organization of American States's Inter-American Child Institute showed its trust in children and gave us a space to do a program in a very popular broadcasting station to express ourselves and promote other girls, boys and teenagers participation from different zones of the country. That was an experience which lasted almost a year, where four teenagers, two girls and two boys, produced, conducted and edited a weekly

² Alma Espino and Norma Sanchos in "Beijing +10 We want all the Plataform" (2006)

radio program called “Pinto Radio: Hacete oír”. Over the two-hour program, phone lines and e-mail were open to receive comments, opinions and teenagers criticisms. In each programme we approached a specific subject, drugs, participation, discrimination, education. We listened to the opinions of the audience and we invited adolescents to the studio. I think the programme’s success was that it was done by adolescents for adolescents. This generated empathy and a horizontal communication between the audience and us, whose outcome was high audience participation on the air and in some cases in the studio. One day we asked the audience what were their fields of participation? A girl called to tell us that her only space of participation where she really felt comfortable and where she was learning was that radio show. Regrettably, the radio programme ended when there were no resources left. However, in the past years many adolescents have stepped forward and have their own radio programmes on community radio stations, not at national level but at least in their neighbourhoods. They play music, discuss different subjects and are a reference point in their community.

The second good experience I want to share happened on a couple of levels, one is regional and the other local. When I was 16, I joined REDLAC, Latin-American and Caribbean Youth Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights. REDLAC is structured by young persons, from 15 different countries of Latin America. We work at local and regional level promoting sexual and reproductive rights. We are the only network of young persons in the region which works specifically these items from a youth, feminist and plural perspective. Furthermore the diversity of the region in terms of customs, behaviour, traditions and languages is another feature which allows each organization to have a different approach to the framework of sexual and reproductive rights. For example, in Uruguay with DESYR we created a strategy of advocacy with feminists, workers unions, afro-religions and other groups to support a law about reproductive health which includes sexual education and the legalization of abortion. While in Nicaragua, the strategy is to use the media by producing a soap opera and a radio programme with adolescents, about sexual and reproductive rights and AIDS. Another example could be Brazil where young persons of GTPOS held workshops with other young persons about sexual orientations and sexual transmission of diseases.

Anyway, the cause is what brings us together either to share experiences or participate in UN conferences to monitor our governments and ensure they carry out in our countries the commitments they agreed to at the international level. In this sense, in REDLAC we try to be an horizontal organization, which promotes different types of leadership especially in adolescents. We recognized there are different generations among youth. It is relevant that the older generations don’t reproduce the scorn and discrimination they receive from adults, on younger generations. It is also fundamental transfer knowledge and experiences between generations, not with a paternalistic sense but with the intention of making the lessons learned useful for the present and future. In that way we try to rotate responsibilities and decide by consensus, however we have to recognize that on some occasions it is difficult to be democratic and at the same time effective. Regarding the communication, one negative aspect is that the feedback is not received as quickly as we want because access to the Internet is not equally developed in the different regions and organizations. Among the lessons learned are the creation of a training manual for children and young women which is a crossroad of perspectives about age, gender and human rights, and it also includes the CEDAW. This manual is available for every organization and is used in workshops with different young people and child groups.

On the international level we have participated in the Special Session on Children, Beijing + 5, Beijing +10, Cairo +10 and conferences related to the Millennium Development Goals. This kind of participation has allowed us to empower a lot of girls who return to their countries as points of reference of these items and have the ability to promote movements at the local level. As we said, each organization uses different strategies. In DESYR we like to be able to lobby our governors in seminars and conferences but also we promote impact activities to prevent these subjects from being only treated by a select group of people. We have done workshops in schools and high schools as peer educators and also urban interventions. From voluntarism, peer education is a very good initiative to mobilize and get closer to girls and teenagers. In several of our workshops participants have come to relate to us that they encouraged themselves to ask us and confess experiences they would not tell their doctors, gynaecologists or sexologists. Generational codes are really important to communicate with girl children, either to own the information or to report to us cases of violence or abuse they suffered or are suffering. In relation to the mass activities, we believe they are also very important and few years ago, with the support of Montevideo council we held a "Safe Pleasure Initiative". We gave away condom carrying cases which we call "condoneras." Each condonera contains one condom, information about HIV/AIDS, and a list of places where you can get condoms for free.

The condoneras are printed with one of two slogans: "I carry a condom," or "safe pleasure." They can be worn on your belt, on your keychain, or on your bag, where everyone can see them. Besides encouraging safe sex, carrying these condoneras gives adolescents and young people the opportunity to make a political statement. Whether you are a man or a woman, carrying these condoneras says, "I have a right to pleasure, as well as a responsibility to take care of my partner and myself." We gave away six hundred of these condoneras in Montevideo on December tenth, the International Day for Human Rights. Day and night we travelled around the city to places where young people congregate—bars, clubs, cafes—performing a street theatre piece starring an egg, a sperm, and a condom. As we travelled around the city, more and more young people joined in the performance. And at the end of the night, we had given away all the condoneras.

Challenges for those who take decisions

I think eradication of any form of girl child discrimination is a subject which concerns the whole society. The proper perspective about girl's rights has to penetrate all areas of society and for that matter we have to build alliances with key sectors. In this sense I will introduce some proposals and recommendations to certain actors I consider relevant. Among them there are UN, the nation's governors, civil society, the media, universities and the educational system.

United Nations: From paper to practice

Regarding United Nations reform, it is necessary to establish its identity again as an organisation which defends all human rights of everyone. Governments must be held more accountable when they do not fulfil agreements. Besides that, it is urgent to reinforce institutionally women's rights and other subjects in the UN agenda. Lastly, we

need to transform the UN into a coherent and integrated organization with a strong political proposal for the human rights framework..

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Fourth World Conference on Women, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) gave an international juridical framework of reference to the fight for the individual's human rights.

Regrettably, in Latin America, structural conditions (external debt, negative effects of structural adjustment policies) added to the lack of political will, have limited their implementation. At the same time, conservatism has caused conference reviews to focus more on what has already been agreed to rather than moving forward on commitments already made by States

I believe we cannot delay the national and local implementation of the nineties agenda, especially that of CEDAW, the Beijing Platform For Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Plan of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. Without any doubt the implementation of these agendas are fundamental pillars to eradicate poverty, gender inequality and to decrease the rate of child and maternal mortality, in one phrase: the achievement of MDG's.

The United Nations should reorient its policies and its resources to the local level, especially to follow up on the implementation of local agreements, train state personnel about agreements and how to develop effective policies and reinforce local civil society for lobbying.

Governments: do your homework

Governments must know the international instruments to be able to transform them into laws, programs and concrete services. It is necessary to have allied persons in different state institutions to achieve the crosscutting of the gender and rights perspective in every policy. The creation of specific organizations for girls' and womens' improvement has been of great help to place the subject in public policies. However, these organizations have a low place on the state pyramid, which is translated into few resources to carry out some actions. At the same time, these mechanisms are seen like the only ones responsible for implementing policies from this perspective and it relieves other state areas of their responsibilities to carry out specific policies for girls. The main objective must be the crosscutting of this perspective in every ministry. The outcomes will be sensitive concrete policies for structural inequalities and of course with the intention to transform it. This involves training judges, senators, policemen, government services staff. In relation to health system, the existence of specific health services for girls and women is really urgent. Girl children have the right to have responsible medical attention without parental help. They have to have friendly sexual and reproductive services to be listened to and informed of every option so they can decide, gradually in accordance with their age, about their own lives³.

³ Inspired on Chapter 7 of ICPD PoA

International and local civil society organization: push on top, push on bottom

In the nineties international conferences boosted the creation of national spaces for dialogue with the persons who participated on the international conferences. This allowed to have some influence on the government's agenda and a process which helped make many women's organizations more professional. However, the big challenge is to integrate more persons. For that matter it is necessary to change some methods of participation of many NGO's. If they really consider girl's and women's participation important, better feedback and a respectful intergenerational dialogue are necessary.

Besides that, as we have seen it is fundamental for civil society to participate in international conferences. However, there is still a gap in the process of reporting back to the population the outcomes and experiences in the international conferences. At the same time, it is necessary to promote adolescents and girls networks like REDLAC in different regions. Lastly, civil society should continue fighting for spaces of dialogue with the government. To have access to government's accountings is a right at all levels. It would be interesting on the government side to have a mechanism to listen to the proposals and needs of girls and also communicate what they have done to eradicate structural discrimination.

The media: a task to be done

The media is constantly having a bigger role in our societies, setting our senses and also setting imitable icons. There is a need for the state to regulate the contents which are broadcast by the media, especially on TV. There is an abundance of sexist advertisements on TV and there are no clear mechanisms to censor them. When I mention sexism, I affirm that they produce stereotyped images either of women or men. On many occasions they prefer not to show men in alternative roles, like being responsible for taking care of their children or showing affection to their children or friends, since it is viewed as a weakness. Governments should go further on this subject, as well as demand a minimum of time for news about good practices of girls or about positive news related to children and teenagers. At the same time, community radio stations and spaces for youth participation should be supplied to accomplish fair diffusion.

Universities: building knowledges

Universities have a fundamental role in two areas. In the first place, universities must educate all their students and teachers, beyond careers, about human rights, gender and diversity. Different reports like "The State of the World's Children" must be available for all the educational centres as reference material. Future lawyers, judges, professors have to know and work respecting this perspective. In the second place, quantitative and qualitative studies about the girl child situation in different social

contexts must be encouraged. The relationship between poverty, infancy and growth and development models must be also studied.

Educational system: how to make changes faster

For the above mentioned reasons, I visualize different challenges for the Educational System. Firstly, train and make teachers and work staff aware about structural discriminations and some practices that girls are suffering in schools. Secondly, go deeper in the elaboration of non-sexist curricula⁴ and focus on human rights and diversity. Thirdly, we need the inclusion of scientific sex education from the early years. Education in arts, music, expression and recreation is also important. Fourthly, schools should be integrated on its context, and have a close relationship with the existing services (polyclinics, club, etc). Fifthly, I maintain that children have a central part in the whole educational process. I refer for instance to consultation with the children about study plans, I mean the necessity of mechanisms where children can evaluate their teachers and can also interrogate them.

In conclusion, I think it is time to move from paper to practice. For that, we only need three things: allies, resources and political will.

⁴ Inspired on article 4.19 of ICPD PoA