

THE GIRL CHILD

The Big Picture

In Canada

- Gender socialization shapes and limits the lives of girls, especially their education and career choices.
- Adolescent girls are vulnerable to stereotypical gender images that idealize being underweight, smoking and being submissive to men. They also face the risk of gender-based violence.
- The majority of girls in Canada believe in gender equality but they continue to be affected by systemic inequalities prevalent in society. Most girls don't recognize either the potential barriers they face, or the new opportunities that are available to them compared to other generations.

Around the World

- Progress has been made in improving the health, nutrition and education of children around the world. However, girls continue to be disadvantaged compared to boys and the specific needs and interests of girls are often not addressed in the development and implementation of policies and programs. Adolescent girls are particularly at risk and have specific needs in terms of their sexual and reproductive health and the development and implementation of their life skills and self-esteem.
- Since 1995, there has been a great deal of attention given to the issues of child labour and the commercial sexual exploitation of children including the First World Congress Against Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm in 1996 and the adoption of the *ILO Convention for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour* in 1999.
- Increasing attention has been given to the situation of girls in a number of international fora such as at the

World Summit for Children in 1990, through the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), International Conference on Population and Development (1994), and their subsequent reviews, as well as at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) where the girl child was identified as a critical area of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action.

- In developing countries, discrimination against girls results in higher mortality rates, malnutrition, unequal access to education, and a greater work burden of unpaid domestic chores and paid child labour.
- In addition to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has nearly achieved universal ratification, individual countries have passed legislation that protects the rights of girls, including laws on female genital mutilation (FGM), access to education and health, protection from sexual abuse and exploitation, and child labour.

Facts and Figures

In Canada

- A 1997 report by the Canadian Institute of Child Health entitled "The Canadian Girl-Child: Determinants of the Health and Well-being of Girls and Young Women" has stressed that "gender identity determines how boys and girls experience their environment and the life paths they choose".
- Girls and young women are making headway in the education system, with young women now more likely to have a university degree than young men. While women make up the majority in most fields of study, almost 7 out of 10 are in education (69%) and health-related programs (68%). In contrast, women account for only 29% of students in mathematics and 22% of those in engineering and applied sciences.



- Statistics show that over 80% of girls diet before age 18, with an alarming 40% of 9-year-old girls reporting dieting. (February 2000)
- In 1996-97, the rate of smoking among young women aged 12-14 years (10%) and 15-17 years (29%) was substantially higher than among young men the same age (6% and 22% respectively).
- In 1998, over half of female victims of sexual offences were less than 18 years of age; 32% were aged 12-17 and 21% were under age 12.
- As a follow-up initiative to the *1996 World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*, Canada initiated the development of *Stolen Innocence*, a national education campaign against the commercial sexual exploitation of children.
- Canada is also working with Save the Children Canada on an initiative called *Out of the Shadows and into the Light* to address the commercial sexual exploitation of girls and boys by increasing public awareness of the realities of the problems facing these young people, by assisting them in leaving the sex trade and by deterring other youth from entering the sex trade.

Around the World

- The International Labour Organization estimates that worldwide at least 250 million children under age 14 work part- or full-time; girls tend to concentrate in domestic service and are often victims of abuse and exploitation.
- Girl refugees are vulnerable to gender-based violence and gender-based discrimination in areas such as food distribution and access to health care services and education.
- Younger mothers aged 15-19 give birth to more than 16 million babies each year; pregnancy complications are the major cause of death in 15-19 year-olds worldwide, and maternal mortality rates for girls aged 10-14 is five times higher than that of 20-24 year-olds; nearly one quarter of the 585,000 women who die each year of causes related to childbirth are teenagers.
- The Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) and the Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) are programs that help some of the most vulnerable children overcome difficulties that limit their opportunities in life. CAPC funds community coalitions to establish and deliver services that address the developmental need of children aged 0 to 6 years. CPNP is a comprehensive program designed to provide food supplementation, nutrient counselling, support, and referral to pregnant women who are most likely to have unhealthy babies. AHS is an early intervention program, designed in consultation with local Aboriginal groups, that involves parental and the Aboriginal community in the design and implementation of preschool projects promoting Aboriginal culture, language, education, health, nutrition, parental involvement and social support.
- Government programs such as the Youth Employment Strategy and Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy help youth get the work experience, knowledge and skills they need to prepare for and work in the labour market. Projects directed at young women support training and work experience in science and technology trades, entrepreneurial training and start-up internships and skill development for youth-at-risk and teen parents.

Towards Equality

In Canada

- Through income support programs, the federal government has taken measures to support early child development to enhance opportunities and improve the well-being of children. A key component of the National Children's Agenda is the National Child Benefit that aims to prevent and reduce the depth of child poverty. The federal contribution is an increase in the Canada Child Tax Benefit for low-income families, that allows provinces and territories to re-invest savings due to the federal increase in programs and services that benefit low-income families with children.
- The Centres of Excellence for Women's Health, funded by the Government of Canada, have a number of initiatives addressing the health of adolescent girls including the benefit of recreation, eating disorders and the media, and access to sexual health services.
- The Government of Canada has provided support to a range of NGOs to undertake initiatives related to the girl-child in area such as non-traditional science and

technology occupations, sexual exploitation, violence prevention, empowerment and self-advocacy, and communication through the Internet.

- Canada also amended the *Criminal Code* to make it an offence to communicate for the purposes of obtaining a child prostitute, allowing police decoys to be used in laying charges. Bill C-51 received Royal Assent in March 11, 1999.

Around the World

- Canada is a strong supporter of children and children's rights. For example, Canada played a leading role in the negotiations leading up to the adoption of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1989 and co-chaired the first World Summit for Children in 1990, which recognized the urgent situation with respect to the girl child.
- The issue of war-affected children is a key priority within Canada's human security agenda. Canada recognizes that girls experience conflict differently than boys and strives to ensure these differences are integrated into international discussions. For example, at the Conference on War Affected Children in West Africa, co-hosted by the governments of Ghana and Canada in April 2000, governments recognized the need to ensure overall protection of girls; to ensure that military training incorporates gender-sensitivity; and the need to structure social service infrastructures to care for the specific needs of girl soldiers and war-affected girls.
- The need to pay special attention to the experiences and needs of girl children and adolescents affected by war will be a key priority for Canada at the International Conference on War-Affected Children which Canada will host in Winnipeg, Manitoba from September 13-17, 2000.
- Canada played an active role in the development and conclusion of the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2000. The main objective of the Optional Protocol is to raise the minimum age for conscription and for participation in hostilities to 18. The Preamble of the Optional Protocol recognizes the special needs of children who are particularly vulnerable to recruitment or use in hostilities due to their sex.
- In February 1997, Canada ratified the *Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption* which will assist in preventing the abduction, sale or trafficking of children. In addition, Canada was instrumental in the development of the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2000. The main objective of the Optional Protocol is to clearly define what constitutes sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and to ensure protection of child victims. The Preamble of the Optional Protocol explicitly recognizes that girl children are disproportionately represented among the sexually exploited.
- The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) supports a range of programs addressing particular challenges faced by girls, including:
 - a drop-in centre for girls in Bolivia; awareness programs on the commercial sex trade for girls and their families in northern Thailand; and a conference on sexual exploitation that brought together former child sex workers and youth-serving organizations and experts across the Americas;
 - special programs for child workers in countries from India to Nicaragua and a variety of programs for girls in education, skills training and self-esteem support help to reduce girls' vulnerability and dependence;
 - a project in Kenya providing an alternative to FGM which involves the education of girls in their future roles as adults and a community ceremony of music and theatre to mark their passage to adulthood; and
 - HIV-AIDS education and awareness programs in Sub-Saharan Africa to help girls protect themselves, and in several areas of Uganda and Kenya where new HIV-AIDS infections have decreased. Young women who act as peer educators implement many of these programs.