



Women and Poverty

Women compared to men have a higher incidence of poverty.

Women's poverty is more severe than men's.

Over time, the incidence of poverty among women is increasing compared to men.

(Cagatay 1998)

Gender based roles vary between and within countries and cultures, and change over time. Social, cultural, religious, economic, political and legal factors all add to the complex web which reinforces differences between males and females.

Since the 1945 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights there has been an increased commitment to promoting equality between males and females. There has also been an increasing awareness of the role females play in sustaining the changes made in development.

Many improvements have been made to the quality of life of girls and women. Generally, however, on all indicators of development – education, health, political involvement and employment – girls and women are still far from equal with men.

Education

My mother did not get the chance to go to school when she was a girl. But I am lucky to be a student and I have been learning a lot of things. We know that education is a key to national development and since we have the chance to go to school there is a need for us to learn hard in order to develop our country.

-Wareketu, Ghana (Rose 2001, p 69).

In many countries, the role of girls is to assist with household chores, while boys need to earn an income and care for aged parents. The cost of schooling or the loss of income in educating girls is often considered too high a price.



Photo: Jon Warren

Often girls' parents have survived without schooling and see investing in a daughter's education as just assisting her future husband's family. Some parents fear that education will ruin a daughter's prospects for a good marriage because it might make her too opinionated and less willing to stay at home caring for children. Parents also fear for the safety of their daughters where there is some distance to travel and where there are only male teachers.



Photo: World Vision Honduras

Two thirds of the world's 176 million illiterate people are women.
(UN Stats, 2000)



Photo: Jon Warren

Each One, Teach One

In Barapula, New Dehli, many more girls are being educated through World Vision's application of the innovative "Each One Teach One" programme than would normally have the opportunity. This programme teaches students to share what they learn in school with at least one friend in their community, passing on literacy and other skills they have gained. Some talented and motivated children take the initiative to teach more than one friend, starting up informal classes of their own. In this way, more children have access to education. (Rose 2001)

Health

Many families struggle to provide adequate diet and preventative health care for their children. Poverty, distance and lack of knowledge contribute to these difficulties. Malnutrition reduces the body's resistance to disease and affects growth and the ability to learn. If girls are fed less than their brothers, they are more likely to miss school due to illness and more likely to produce underweight babies. If families are poor, parents are less likely to seek help when children are sick, and are more reluctant to do so for daughters.

HIV/AIDS

Women are biologically more at risk of HIV infection than men. They also carry the biggest burden of caring for the sick and dying. For women lower income, status, education levels and more limited legal rights mean reduced access to resources including social and health services. Social traditions and economic factors limit women's ability to express their wishes regarding choice of sexual partners and 'safe-sex' practices. (UNGASS 2001)



Photo: Simon Peter Esaku

Harmful Traditional Practices

"Harmful traditional practices are institutionalised practices that cause physical harm, with multiple psychological and sociological impacts. Examples are female genital mutilation, early marriage, son preference, female infanticide, early pregnancy, dowry or bride price, and nutritional taboos and traditional birth practices that discriminate against girls." (Rose 2001, p 10)

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM is one of the worst violations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is often justified because it is considered a traditional rite of passage that is an important part of a girl's development into womanhood.

Mali Stop FGM Project

The New Zealand government has funded a World Vision project in Mali to help stop FGM. It is estimated that 95 per cent of girls in Mali undergo FGM. World Vision held an education and awareness campaign in the Bla district to teach about the harmful effects of FGM. World Vision also helped practitioners of FGM to find alternative sources of income. As a result, one former practitioner became an advocate against the practice.

Labour

Poverty means that girls in many countries are expected to work from a young age and support their families, particularly through household labour and childcare. Heavy domestic workloads affect girls' development by inhibiting access to education and impacting upon their health.

Domestic labour which girls do for other families in exchange for food and shelter is one of the most dangerous forms of child labour. Girls often work

long hours and are vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse.

Bamako, Mali

World Vision New Zealand has helped fund a project for young women in Mali who had left rural communities to earn money as domestic workers in the city. The project provided literacy classes, health services and human rights awareness education. The young women were helped to lodge formal complaints if they were maltreated.

Because the young women became better skilled and were placed by an agency, employers changed their attitudes and were more respectful towards them. (Rose 2001)



Photo: Nigel Marsh

Disability

Poor nutrition, dangerous living and working conditions, limited access to vaccination programmes, health and maternity care; bad sanitation, inadequate information about the causes of impairments, war and conflict, and natural disasters all cause disability. Many of these causes are preventable. (Culhane, Culhane and Morrissey 2002).

Women are at greater risk of becoming disabled than men.

Women with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be victims of physical and sexual abuse than women with no disabilities.

Girls with disabilities attend school less frequently than boys with disabilities.

(Culhane, Culhane and Morrissey 2002)



Photo: Sanjay Sojwal

Abuse and Violence

Violence against girls and women crosses cultural, social, religious and regional boundaries. It takes many forms: rape in war, abduction for early marriage, forced prostitution, soldier's brides as well as a range of domestic assaults. Male teachers, police officers, and elders often exploit their positions of trust.

Girls on Violence

Domestic violence and violence outside of the home mean there is no safety for girls at school or in the community

-girls in Nichyajeewa, India

Fetching water and going to and from school is not safe.

-girls in Vijayawada, India

Girls experience pressure for sex from teachers and boys.

-girls in Ghana

Rape is getting somewhat better, but female genital mutilation is getting worse.

-girls in Tanzania

Domestic violence is common.

-girls in Romania

(Rose 2001, p 19)

Economic Development

There are a lot of problems because women don't have enough money, no land, little development and so forth. We need programmes that help us to become more

positive and develop ourselves.
- Kendy, Guatemala (Rose 2001, p 78)

Worldwide, women held only 14 per cent of seats in parliaments in 2001, a slight increase from a decade earlier. (Saas & Ashford 2002)

Women make up 8 per cent of the Board of Directors of the World Bank and are not represented on the Board of Directors of the International Monetary Fund. (WEDO) 2002

Only 1 per cent of top executives in the biggest transnational corporations are women. (WEDO 2002)

Women are participating in the labour force in greater numbers, but they typically receive lower pay, even when they work in the same sector. (Saas & Ashford 2002)



Photo: Jon Warren

Action you can take

Interview your parents and/or grandparents to understand how the role of women and girls has changed in their lifetimes.

Analyse how males and females are represented in the media. Do they present a broad range of images? How might these representations influence the way males and females see themselves and each other?

Track the way the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is implemented in a particular country.

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Other World Vision resources on related issues include:

Topic sheets

Trash or Treasure? the way the world treats its children.
Child Trafficking.

Videos

From the Ground Up. (15 mins, 1992)

Shows the lives of four women in India and Bangladesh – Nabu, Sharda, Kesari and Nasimha, and how they are working for change.

Evening the Odds (30 mins, 1996)

Examines some issues which prevent girls around the world from experiencing good health and equal opportunities: early marriage, child prostitution and female genital mutilation. Looks at the value placed on girls in parts of Asia, Africa and Canada. (World Vision Canada).

We the Women (14 mins, 1993)

This video explores how tradition, culture and economics work against women from the cradle to the grave. The powerful poetry of Grace Nichols, "I must construct myself a dream..." points to the hope that exists in all women. (World Vision Australia).

Contact

Information Centre
World Vision New Zealand
Private Bag 92078
Auckland.
Ph 0800 800 776

infocentre@worldvision.org.nz

Topic sheet by World Vision Australia. Adapted for World Vision New Zealand by Barbara Ruck, February 2005. infocentre@worldvision.org.nz
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