



**WORLD VISION UK**

## **Putting Girls at the Centre**

March 2015

Members of an adolescent girls group in India, started by World Vision. ©2014 World Vision/ Annila Harris

### **The girls in ‘violence against women and girls’**

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) crosses culture, economic status and ethnicity. It occurs in every part of the world and happens in developed and developing countries, stable and fragile contexts, during war and in peacetime. Violence against women is one of the areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action, in which the particular vulnerability of girls is recognised.

Violence against girls can take many forms, including female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), early marriage, sexual violence, family violence and recruitment as child soldiers. UNICEF estimates that an adolescent girl dies every 10 minutes as a direct result of violence.<sup>1</sup> Many more experience violence on a daily basis, with devastating and long-lasting impacts—often lasting well into adulthood.

Violence against girls and women has its roots in gender inequality and discrimination - and negative norms or practices that result from these. Girls have distinct vulnerabilities and needs. Given the opportunity and support, they are also influential advocates for gender equality. Making their perspectives and needs central to all efforts to tackle gender-based violence and promote gender equality can have a powerful effect not only on girls and women, but on wider society too.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund, *A Statistical Snapshot of Violence against Adolescent Girls*, UNICEF, New York, 2014

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**EVERY CHILD FREE FROM FEAR**

## What makes girls so vulnerable?

All members of society can be victims of violence. However girls, due to their age and sex have an added risk of harmful traditional practices and other forms of gender-based violence that predominantly occur in childhood, including early marriage and FGM/C. Through their everyday activities, girls are also vulnerable to violence. For example it's estimated that every year 60,000 girls are sexually assaulted on their way to, or at school<sup>2</sup>, which girls themselves say often prevents them from going to school. They are also vulnerable in different ways to the violence faced by women, including sexual and family violence.

World Vision has found that during conflict or humanitarian emergencies, girls may be forced into marriage as a coping mechanism for desperate families, to alleviate the economic insecurity they face or with the view to protect them from the risk of sexual violence.

***“I spend my days sleeping or dwelling on our worries. Marrying Sheereen would be our survival.”***

***Syrian refugee Amira, who feared having to arrange a marriage for her 12-year-old daughter in order to provide for her four other children.***

In emergencies, many children are separated from their parents – leaving girls particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Girls living in conflict zones may also be at risk of abduction and forced recruitment into armed groups. These girls face the double risk and added stigma by being fighters and, all too often, victims of sexual violence.

## Putting girls at the centre

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women enshrine the right for girls and women to participate in decisions that affect their lives and to participate as valued members of society. Moreover, girls' voices are essential to fully understanding the risks of violence they face and how it can best be addressed. They in turn can become strong advocates, both to help others who have been impacted by violence and to change social norms. Ultimately, girls who are empowered become women who lead change.

***“The biggest issue where violence against girls is concerned is girls keep those problems a secret. They don't consider them big.” 15 year old girl, Bosnia***

Therefore, efforts should be made to engage girls in tackling the wider problem of gender inequality and in development initiatives from the beginning. Both the Beijing Declaration in 1995 and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security call for steps to be taken to enable the increased representation of women in peace and political processes. Challenging gender norms and empowering girls from a young age to realise and act upon their rights can install the building blocks to achieving the objectives set out in these frameworks.

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<sup>2</sup> EQUATE Project, Management Systems International (MSI). *Are schools safe havens for children? Examining school-related gender-based violence.* USAID, October 2008.

## Tackling violence and gender inequality

World Vision, believing that prevention of violence is as important as appropriate response, adopts a comprehensive approach to engage all members of society: girls, boys, women and men, to address the root causes of gender-based violence. We also recognise that violence against girls and women often increases in times of humanitarian emergencies and conflict and take several measures to protect girls, and to support the recovery of those affected. World Vision works to:

- **Strengthen the protective nature of the environment around children and within children themselves**, including laws and policies, services and protection mechanisms, the circle of care around children and children's own resilience.
- **Challenge social norms and harmful practices**, working with faith leaders and communities to acknowledge and act upon gender injustices and negative practices. We engage men and boys as allies and advocates to make sure they recognise and act upon their obligation to prevent and end violence against girls and women.
- **Empower girls and boys through Children's and Youth Clubs**, which provide training for children on their rights, how to better protect themselves, challenge existing gender imbalances and actively engage with the wider community.
- **Protect girls in emergencies**, creating *Child Friendly Spaces* where girls and boys are protected from the risk of violence, have space to play and continue with their education. We also work within IDP and refugee camps to promote gender equality and reduce the occurrence of violence.
- **Meet the needs of girls impacted by violence**, providing medical, legal and psychological support as well as life skills, vocational training and other support for girls affected by violence, including for example former girl soldiers, who often come back from conflict zones with their own children and want to return to school.

*"I am always afraid since I was raped. Every time I hear a loud noise, like a plate dropping, it grabs my heart. I am always afraid."* Laini, 14 years old, from Democratic Republic of Congo



Ruth is a youth member of a World Vision Child Protection Committee, who works within her local community to educate families on the dangers of child marriage, and intervenes in marriages that are due to take place. Uganda  
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## Looking to the future: ensuring girls are at the centre

This year presents several opportunities to ensure the needs and voices of girls are at the centre of key development agendas going forward, for example, in the review and assessment of international frameworks, including:

- **UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security**  
Empowerment and participation of girls should be integral to the women, peace and security agenda. The review should address the continuum of participation from childhood to adulthood, developing the building blocks of women's participation in girlhood. It should also explore how girls can actively contribute to both peace and political processes.
- **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**  
Whilst the importance of upholding girls' rights is reflected within the Platform for Action, there are still many challenges that prevent girls from exercising them in everyday life. As we review progress made over the past 20 years we should also look to break down barriers to girls' active participation in key initiatives towards women's and girls' rights.
- **The Sustainable Development Goals**  
Addressing deep-rooted gender injustices and practices must be a key priority for the post-2015 agenda. Activities that engage both girls and boys as part of those efforts should be built into the new framework, cementing the position of girls at the centre of development agendas for the next 15 years.
- **World Humanitarian Summit in 2016**  
The recognition that girls are particularly vulnerable to violence during emergencies should be reflected in the new agenda for humanitarian action.

## About World Vision

World Vision is the world's largest international children's charity, working to bring real hope to millions of children in the world's hardest places. Our local staff work in thousands of communities across the world to free children from fear. They live and work alongside them, their families and communities to help change the world they live in for good.

Our worldwide presence means we're quick to respond to emergencies like conflict and natural disasters. We also use our influence and global reach to ensure that children are represented at every level of decision-making.

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