

Helping the girl child

Saisuree Chutikul

PROBLEMS FOR GIRL children are today better known than a decade ago. Solutions can, however, be elusive and steps must be taken to bring positive change. Why should we be so concerned?

First, there is the issue of discrimination. Gender discrimination is manifested in many ways, such as conferring more affection on a son or, in extreme cases, abandonment, and female infanticide. As girls grow up, many of them will be subjected to early marriages leading to early pregnancies. This has negative effects on their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, as well as on the well-being of their infants.

Second, there are problems related to health and education. Studies have shown that in some countries girls' mortality rates are higher; food allocation for girls is less than boys; girls are breast-fed less frequently; and more boys receive vaccinations. As for education, even where primary schooling has full coverage, girls usually do not have equal opportunity to attend secondary or tertiary levels.

Third, there are also problems related to working and employment. Generally girls enter the work force at a younger age than boys, and with fewer opportunities.

Fourth, there are issues of vulnerability to sexual abuse, prostitution and HIV/AIDS. Girls are at risk of being prostituted, trafficked and abused. Girls are biologically and psychosocially more vulnerable to HIV infection. The number of children who have been orphaned by AIDS is also on the increase, with orphan girls frequently looking after their siblings.

Finally, girls are also particularly at risk from violence. Violence against girl children includes extreme neglect, corporal punishment, maltreatment, beating, battering, molestation, incest, rape, and other forms of physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Consequences range from suffering physical pain, to having psychosocial problems, to trauma. Some may have difficult interpersonal relationships based on feelings of mistrust, being unloved, and a lack of self-esteem.

To address these problems urgent action is needed, including:

1. Girl child policies. Although governments may adopt policies to promote the well-being of the family, children, and women, few develop comprehensive policy initiatives for the girl child.
2. Gender- and age-disaggregated data and information in surveys, and research and development of indicators. This will help our knowledge and assist in planning, programming, monitoring and evaluation.

3. Focusing on attitudinal change as well as changes in values and behavior towards girl children. The basic causes of gender discrimination must be tackled, both *de jure* and *de facto*, as well as the processes of socialization and cultural learning.
4. Specific advocacy programs are needed. This includes awareness raising campaigns, programs that stress education and health, and pressure on governments to address trafficking, abuse and violence.
5. Empowering the girl child and increasing her active participation. Capacity building and empowering girl children can be done through training, offering basic services, special programs on self-protection and self-discovery, leadership training and opportunities to actively participate in activities and decision-making processes.
6. Incorporating girl children into comprehensive child protection policies and programs. This can be done at the national and local levels as well as at organizational and institutional levels.
7. Involving more actors and networking. This includes parents, teachers, religious leaders, community leaders and organizations. government agencies, NGOs, the private sector, professional organizations, academics, planners, and international communities and organizations. Multi-disciplinary approaches, collaboration, coordination and sustainable networking are important to make the whole effort 'work'.
8. Using child rights and women's rights as a foundation. Child rights covers four general principles (in the Convention on the Rights of the Child): elimination of discrimination, development to full potential, the best interests of the child, and child participation. Women's rights include equality, development, and participation. These perspectives must be taken into consideration when dealing with girl children.
9. Involving boys and men to promote gender equality. Boys' and men's active participation are important so they will become more gender-sensitive. Such behavioral change will help solve many problems that occur today.
10. Mobilization and sharing of resources for girl child programs. This includes financial, human and technical resources. Sharing innovative or diverse approaches can assist in better results.

Dr Saisuree Chutikul is a member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and a member of the Board of Directors of World Vision International.