

Workshop Report: The Girl Child

Date: 19th October

Duration: 1h 30 mins

Facilitators: Sama Tanhai, Yasmin Wilkinson-Smith & Alina Young

Participants: Representatives from various organizations focused on child rights, mental health and gender equality, including:

The Guttmacher Institute, Regards De Femmes, Soroptimist International, Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse UK, University of Geneva, UNODC Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Section, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Zonta Club of Sion-Valais Switzerland

Introduction

The workshop addressed critical issues impacting the girl child, specifically in the areas of **mental health**, **child marriage**, and **child widows**. Discussions aimed to identify challenges, share solutions, and develop actionable recommendations for advocacy at local, national, and international levels.

1. Mental Health of Girls

Overview of Issues:

- **Social Media and Mental Health:** WHO reports show that adolescent girls in Europe and Central Asia experience worse mental health outcomes compared to boys, with 30% of teen girls in some countries reporting having seriously considered suicide in recent years. Social media exacerbates mental health challenges by reinforcing negative self-image and patriarchal pressures.
- **Impact of Societal Pressures:** Socio-economic conditions and social media compound to create higher rates of anxiety and depression in young women across the globe- social media isn't going anywhere, how do we address this?
- **Stigma and Access to Care:** Access to mental health care remains limited, particularly for girls in low-income or refugee communities, where there are long waiting lists and a lack of specialized services.

Recommendations:

- **Social Media Regulations:** Advocate for stricter social media regulations to reduce harmful content targeting young girls, with policies focused on minimizing exposure to extreme online misogyny, body shaming, and harmful gender stereotypes.
 - **Promote Male Engagement in Mental Health Education:** Educate boys and men on mental health management to foster healthier behaviors and reduce indirect negative impacts on girls. Programs should address the stigma men face in discussing mental health, as studies show increased rates of domestic violence correlate with male frustration and mental health challenges.
 - **Educational Guidelines on Social Media Use:** Develop and distribute age-specific guidelines on social media use, including screen time recommendations. Switzerland's guidelines, which suggest age-appropriate platforms and time limits, serve as a possible model.
 - **School-Based Mental Health Education:** Integrate mental health topics into school curricula from primary education onward. Mental health should be part of biology, personal development, and citizenship lessons to normalize mental health awareness.
 - **Establish Safe Spaces for Support:** Schools and community centers should create dedicated, stigma-free spaces for girls to discuss mental health openly, facilitated by trained counselors.
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2. Child Brides

Overview of Issues:

- **Prevalence and Consequences:** Approximately 12 million girls under 18 are married each year, and child marriage is linked to increased rates of school dropouts, exposure to domestic violence, early pregnancies, and limited career prospects. Child marriage also doubles the risk of maternal mortality and infant deaths.
- **Lack of Birth Registration:** Birth registration is essential for enforcing age-based laws but remains underutilized in many regions. Unregistered girls are often more vulnerable to child marriage due to a lack of official age records.
- **Economic Factors:** Poverty is one of the primary drivers of child marriage. Families facing financial hardship may view early marriage as a means to reduce their economic burden.

Recommendations:

- **Mandatory Birth Registration:** Ensure universal birth registration as a crucial first step in preventing child marriage. Authorities should provide mobile registration units in rural areas and conduct awareness campaigns to educate communities about the importance of birth registration.
- **Strengthening Legal Penalties:** Advocate for stronger penalties and consistent enforcement of anti-child marriage laws. In many countries, laws are poorly enforced, and the penalties for violators are minimal. Greater accountability and oversight can deter child marriage practices.

- **Economic Support Programs:** Implement financial assistance programs to support girls' education, reducing the economic incentives for families to marry off their daughters. Conditional cash transfers and scholarships could help more girls remain in school.
 - **Awareness and Education Campaigns:** Educate communities, particularly in rural areas, about the long-term benefits of delaying marriage for girls, including improved health, economic outcomes, and family stability.
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3. Child Widows (& GBV)

Overview of Issues:

- **Child Marriage as a Form of GBV:** Child marriage is widely recognized as a form of gender-based violence and exploitation. These young girls are at risk of physical and psychological abuse, forced pregnancies, and, in many cases, servitude.
- **Challenges Faced by Child Widows:** Child widows often face compounded human rights violations, including loss of inheritance rights, social isolation, poverty, and, in some cases, harmful traditional practices like widow inheritance.
- **Legal Gaps and Cultural Practices:** In many regions, existing laws on child marriage and GBV are not enforced, and cultural practices such as widow inheritance place young girls at further risk of exploitation.

Recommendations:

- **Recognize Child Marriage as a Form of Abuse:** Advocate for international recognition of child marriage as a form of exploitation and GBV. By reframing it as abuse, governments and communities may take stronger actions to eradicate the practice.
 - **Refer to Child Marriage as 'Child Rape':** Language around marriage can suggest a mutuality between those getting married and the term 'Child Rape' was called for multiple time to emphasise the severe sexual exploitation that results from Child Marriage.
 - **Comprehensive Support for Child Widows:** Develop targeted support services for child widows, addressing their unique needs for legal assistance, financial support, and mental health care. Partnerships with local NGOs and international organizations can extend support to marginalized regions.
 - **Strengthen Legislation on Harmful Traditional Practices:** Push for enforcement of laws against practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and widow inheritance that disproportionately harm girls and young women. Educate communities on the health risks and legal implications of these practices.
 - **Integrate Consent and Boundary Education:** Integrate discussions on consent, personal boundaries, and healthy relationships into school curricula, targeting both boys and girls. Early education on these topics can help prevent GBV and foster respectful attitudes.
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4. Broader Advocacy Strategies

Overview of Issues:

- **Data Collection and Storytelling:** Reliable data on mental health, child marriage, and GBV among girls is essential for informed advocacy. Personal stories of affected individuals also play a significant role in humanizing the data and raising public awareness.
- **Engagement of Male Allies:** The group highlighted the importance of involving boys and men in discussions on gender equality and mental health. This inclusive approach could reduce GBV and support girls' well-being.

Recommendations:

- **Expand Data Collection on Vulnerable Populations:** Encourage systematic data collection on girls affected by mental health issues, child marriage, and widowhood. Quantitative and qualitative data, including personal stories, can strengthen advocacy efforts and influence policy.
- **Promote Storytelling as Advocacy:** Support storytelling initiatives that allow survivors and affected individuals to share their experiences. Personal narratives help bring attention to issues and create empathy, particularly when shared with policymakers, media, and the public.
- **Engage Male Allies in Gender Equality Initiatives:** Develop programs that actively involve men and boys in gender equality advocacy and mental health education. Addressing harmful gender stereotypes can prevent GBV and create a supportive environment for girls.
- **Increased Funding for Holistic Health Programs:** Advocate for comprehensive funding of mental health and social support services, recognizing that mental, emotional, and physical health are interconnected. By taking a holistic approach, advocacy efforts can better address the needs of the girl child.

Conclusion

The workshop concluded with a collective commitment to advancing these recommendations. Participants emphasized the necessity of a multi-faceted approach involving education, legal reform, economic support, and community engagement to address the unique challenges faced by girls globally.