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Promotion and protection of the rights of children

The girl child

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to the request of the General Assembly in its resolution 64/145, contains a brief overview of international obligations and commitments with respect to the girl child stemming from human rights treaties and international conferences, as well as legal and policy development. It assesses the negative impact on the girl child caused by poverty and the global economic crisis; violence, abuse and exploitation; gender disparities in education; lack of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene; nutrition; HIV/AIDS; health; disabilities; humanitarian crises; and participation, and highlights action taken to address child and forced marriage.

* A/66/150.

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted in accordance with the request of the General Assembly in its resolution 64/145, entitled “The girl child”, that the Secretary-General submit a report to the Assembly at its sixty-sixth session on the implementation of the resolution, with a view to assessing its impact on the well-being of the girl child, with an emphasis on ending child and forced marriage. For the purpose of the preparation of the report, notes verbales requesting relevant information on the implementation of the resolution were sent to Member States¹ and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and letters were sent to key non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to promote the rights of girls.

2. The report follows up on the report submitted by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly at its sixty-fourth session (A/64/315), which included a focus on ending female genital mutilation. It provides an overview of: the existing legal and normative frameworks and international commitments with respect to the rights of the girl child (sect. II); the situation of the girl child in areas covered by resolution 64/145 (sect. III); and a detailed analysis of the practice of child and forced marriages (sect. IV). The report also highlights progress and achievements made to promote the rights of the girl child (sect. V) and recommendations for future action (sect. VI).

II. Legal and normative framework and global commitments

A. Human rights treaties and other international conventions

3. The fulfilment of the rights of girls is an obligation and a moral imperative which is reflected in international law. There is a comprehensive international legal framework establishing the obligations of States regarding the human rights of the girl child. In addition to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides a comprehensive set of rights to be enjoyed “without discrimination of any kind”, including discrimination on the grounds of sex, all fundamental human rights treaties include provisions confirming the principle of non-discrimination and equality between men and women, boys and girls. Of particular importance is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which, while focusing on women, has a direct bearing on the situation and well-being of the girl child. Furthermore, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force in May 2008, includes specific language with respect to children (article 7). In addition, according to article 6 of that Convention, “States Parties recognize that women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination, and in this regard shall take measures to ensure the full and equal enjoyment by them of all human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

4. In addition to the human rights treaties, legal obligations stem from legally binding labour law instruments, including the 1973 Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) and the 1999 Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) of the

¹ The following States submitted information which has informed the content of the report: Argentina, Belgium, Djibouti, El Salvador, Finland, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Malta, Namibia, Nicaragua, Oman, Peru, Qatar, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the United States of America.

International Labour Organization (ILO). This legal framework for the rights of children in general, and for the rights of girls in particular, is further strengthened by regional human rights instruments, including the 2005 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

5. Normative developments during the reporting period include the adoption by the Committee on the Rights of the Child of its general comment No. 13 (2011) on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, elaborating on article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The general comment analyses the gender dimensions of violence against children and recommends that: "States Parties should ensure that policies and measures take into account the different risks facing girls and boys in respect of various forms of violence in various settings". It further calls on States to address all forms of gender discrimination as part of a comprehensive violence-prevention strategy, including addressing gender stereotypes, power imbalances, inequalities and discrimination which support and perpetuate the use of violence and coercion in the home, in school and educational settings, in communities, in the workplace, in institutions and in society at large. "Men and boys", it asserts, "must be actively encouraged as strategic partners and allies, and, along with women and girls, must be provided with opportunities to increase their respect for one another and their understanding of how to stop gender discrimination and its violent manifestations" (CRC/C/GC/13, para. 72 (b)).

B. International conferences, intergovernmental bodies and related commitments

6. In addition to ratifying international legally binding instruments, Member States have also made far-reaching commitments to eliminate discrimination against the girl child in the context of world conferences and other international forums. The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, was the first such conference to include a specific segment on the girl child. The Beijing Platform of Action² included strategic objectives on issues ranging from the elimination of all forms of discrimination against the girl child and negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls to the promotion and protection of the rights of the girl child in the areas of education, health and nutrition, child labour, violence and participation in economic and political life.

7. In its resolution 64/145, the General Assembly reaffirmed other outcomes of major United Nations summits and conferences relevant to the girl child, including: the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century";³ the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development;⁴ the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development;⁵ and the declaration adopted by the Commission on the Status of

² *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chapter I, resolution I, annex II.

³ Resolution S-23/2, annex, and resolution S-23/3, annex.

⁴ *Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.95.XIII.18), chapter I, resolution I, annex.

⁵ *Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chapter I, resolution I, annex II.

Women at its forty-ninth session,⁶ as well as the agreed conclusions adopted by the Commission at its fifty-first session, at which it considered as its priority theme “The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”.⁷

8. At its 16th session, the Human Rights Council considered the joint report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (A/HRC/16/56). The report focused on effective and child-sensitive counselling and complaint and reporting mechanisms to which children can safely report incidents of violence, including sexual violence and exploitation. The report noted that the non-governmental organization Child Helpline International, in its 2010 report on violence against children, had recorded more than 250,000 incidents of violence and abuse from the 62 help lines contributing to its survey. Most complaints concerned children between the ages of 10 and 15, in particular girls. Physical abuse and bullying were most frequently reported, followed by neglect, sexual abuse and emotional violence. The report also acknowledged that girls remain the main victims of sexual violence in armed conflict.

9. Following a panel discussion held at the same session of the Human Rights Council, on the protection and promotion of the rights of children living and/or working on the street, the Council, expressing deep concern about the situation of girls and boys working and/or living on the street worldwide and the negative impact this has on the full enjoyment of their rights and their development, strongly condemned violations of the rights of those children, including gender-based violence, and urged States to ensure a holistic rights-based and gender-responsive approach to address this phenomenon (see Human Rights Council resolution 16/12).

III. Discrimination and the situation of the girl child

A. Poverty and the impact of the global economic crisis

10. Globally, over 8 million children die before the age of 5, of whom over 5.7 million die before the age of 1.⁸ Poverty acutely affects the lives of children, threatening their survival and development, and their rights to health, adequate food and nutrition and education. It also has a negative impact on their rights to participation and to protection from violence, harm and exploitation. Moreover, girls not only suffer from the effects of poverty and disease, but also from other factors, including: social and cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality; discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity; and social, geographical and income inequities, which may compound the gender discrimination they face. They are therefore extremely vulnerable to further deprivation and marginalization.

11. The global economic crisis, which began in 2008, has exacerbated the impact of poverty on children, and the magnitude of the poverty that many of them face. During crises, age-specific and gender-based vulnerabilities are compounded: women and youth may be the first to lose their jobs or be underemployed; households may be forced to reduce spending, thus affecting the nutritional intake

⁶ E/2005/27 and Corr.1, chap. I.A.

⁷ E/2007/27, chap. I.A.

⁸ See www.childinfo.org/mortality.html.

of children; and children may have to drop out of school to help their families seek additional income.⁹ Recent estimates suggest that 30,000 to 50,000 more infant deaths, the majority of them girls, could have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa because of the crisis.¹⁰

12. Although the global economy is now showing signs of recovery, and global gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates have rebounded considerably since 2009, girls and women are still vulnerable to many of the lingering effects of the crisis. Recent surges in food prices may also negatively affect girls. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Food Price Index, which measures the international price of food for a common basket of food commodities, has surged in recent months, averaging 234 points in June 2011, just below record highs in February and 39 per cent higher than in June 2010.¹¹ Domestic food prices have also remained alarmingly high since the previous spike in food prices in 2008.¹² Recent estimates suggest that, because of the recent food price hikes, approximately 44 million people have been pushed into poverty.¹³

13. As Governments move to address mounting fiscal deficits, there is concern that spending in key areas that affect the well-being of girls could be cut. Furthermore, where contractions in public spending on health and education occur, the cost burden often shifts to households, in particular to women and girls. When household income falls, women often have no choice but to take on low-status and temporary jobs, in addition to their other responsibilities, and girls may face disparities in how food is distributed within the household.³

B. Violence, abuse and exploitation

14. For millions of girls and women worldwide, violence is a part of their daily lives, at home, at school, in care and justice institutions, at their workplace and in their community. This is the case in every country, both developed and developing.

15. Data suggest that 150 million girls under the age of 18 have experienced some form of sexual violence,¹⁴ and more than 70 million girls and women between the ages of 15 and 49 in 29 countries have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting.¹⁵ Evidence from many areas of sub-Saharan Africa shows that female circumcision can lead to severe and chronic disabling pelvic and urinary tract

⁹ Caroline Harper, Nicola Jones, Andy McKay and Jessica Espey, "Children in times of economic crisis: Past lessons, future policies", background note, Overseas Development Institute, March 2009.

¹⁰ See Jed Friedman and Norbert Schady, "How Many More Infants are Likely to Die in Africa as a Result of the Global Financial Crisis?", World Bank, 2009.

¹¹ FAO Food Price Index (www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/wfs-home/foodpricesindex/en/). (Report released 7 July 2011).

¹² Isabel Ortiz, Jingqing Chai and Matthew Cummins, "Escalating food prices: The threat to poor households and policies to safeguard a recovery for all", Social and Economic Policy Working Paper, UNICEF, 2011.

¹³ Food Price Watch (http://www.worldbank.org/foodcrisis/food_price_watch_report_feb2011.html), World Bank.

¹⁴ See Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, *World Report on Violence against Children*, United Nations, 2006 (<http://www.violencestudy.org>).

¹⁵ See *The State of the World's Children 2011, Adolescence — An Age of Opportunity*, UNICEF (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.11.XX.1).

problems and mobility impairment and can place girls at increased risk for a number of infectious diseases, including HIV.¹⁶ However, data in this field is limited, and violence against girls and women is under-recognized and underreported or unrecorded because of stigma, fear, social tolerance and the often illegal and covert nature of such activities.

16. Girls often carry the triple burden of housework, schoolwork and work outside the home, paid or unpaid. Such burdens, in particular hours spent on unrecognized work within the household, significantly reduce their school achievement and completion rates and increase the likelihood that they, and their children, will continue the cycle of child labour.¹⁷

C. Gender disparities in education

17. Increased enrolments in the last decade have ensured that the gender gap in the out-of-school population at the primary education level has narrowed: girls of primary school age who are out of school decreased from 57 per cent in 1998 to 53 per cent in 2008. However, nearly 36 million at the primary level and over 39 million girls at the lower secondary level remain out of school. Progress has been uneven and aggregate figures often mask large variations among countries and regions. The number of out-of-school girls is much larger in South and West Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁸

18. Along with gender, factors such as poverty, ethnicity and household location also increase the likelihood of a child being out of school. In developing regions overall, girls in the poorest 20 per cent of households are 3.5 times more likely to be out of school than girls in the richest households and four times more likely to be out of school than boys from the richest households.¹⁹

D. Lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities

19. Girls, more often than boys, bear the responsibility of collecting water. Data from 45 developing countries indicate that girls under 15 years of age are twice as likely to bear this responsibility as boys in the same age group. The ratio increases as girls move into womanhood, with women being responsible for collecting water in almost two thirds of households. In some cases, girls have to walk great distances to collect water, increasing their workload and affecting their health and their ability to spend time on their education. In addition, collection and exposure to unsafe water can take a physical toll.²⁰

20. In addition, girls, particularly adolescent girls, may be at risk of sexual harassment or rape at wells or other water points as well as in school toilets,

¹⁶ Nora Groce, "Girls and women with disability: A global overview", *One in Ten*, vol. 17 (1997).

¹⁷ See *Joining forces against child labour: Inter-agency report for The Hague Global Child Labour Conference of 2010*, ILO and Understanding Children's Work, May 2010.

¹⁸ See *Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2011: The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education*, UNESCO, 2011.

¹⁹ See *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010*, United Nations, 2010. Figures are based on household survey data from 42 countries.

²⁰ See *Progress on Sanitation and Drinking-Water (2010 update)*, WHO and UNICEF, 2010.

especially those that are located outside the protective environment of the school. In humanitarian crises, problems facing girls in terms of access to water, sanitation and hygienic practices are even more acute.

E. Inadequate nutrition services and prevalence of anaemia

21. There are negligible gender disparities at the global level in nutrition outcome indicators relating to girls and boys under 5 years of age. In general, however, the inadequacy of nutrition services (in terms of the coverage of nutrition programmes and quality/availability of food and supplies) has a disproportionately negative impact on women and girls. This is because of the higher nutritional needs of women and adolescent girls, the cultural barriers that prevent them from travelling far distances to reach services and lack of time owing to their workload. In addition, studies and analyses have found a significant association between low maternal literacy and poor nutritional status of young children.²¹

22. It is notable that anaemia (two thirds of the cases of anaemia are due to iron deficiency), which is highly prevalent among adolescent girls and women in developing countries, increases the risk of maternal death. The high rates of anaemia among girls and women are related to the loss of iron they experience, especially during adolescence, owing to menstruation and pregnancy.

F. HIV and AIDS: the disproportionately high risk

23. Young women and adolescent girls continue to face a disproportionately high risk of infection due to biological vulnerability, social inequality and exclusion. Nearly 78 per cent of all young people living with HIV in the 15- to 24-year-old age group are from sub-Saharan Africa; most of them are female and are not aware of their HIV status. Over 60 per cent of all adolescents living with HIV in the 10- to 19-year-old age group are girls.²²

24. Globally (excluding China), 11 per cent of adolescent girls have had sex before age 15, and adolescent girls under age 20 account for about 15 million births every year.²³ Early experiences with sex and drugs are key factors associated with the risk to adolescent girls for contracting HIV. These behaviours reflect problems in the environment of adolescent girls and are the result of multiple failures in protection and care, possibly associated with violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.

25. Social and income inequality and inadequate knowledge about sexuality and HIV underlie other behaviours that exacerbate the risk for HIV infection, including sex with multiple partners and age-disparate relationships. Young women and adolescent girls are often compelled to be in relationships with older partners as a survival strategy for money, food, protection or other social or material gain. Their

²¹ See Jane E. Miller and Yana V. Rodgers, "Mother's Education and Children's Nutritional Status: New Evidence from Cambodia", *Asian Development Review*, vol. 26, No. 1 (2009).

²² See *Opportunity in Crisis: Preventing HIV from early adolescence to young adulthood*, UNICEF, June 2011 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.11.XX.5).

²³ James E. Rosen, "Position paper on mainstreaming adolescent pregnancy in efforts to make pregnancy safer", WHO, 2010 (WHO/MPS/10.03).

risk of infection is heightened by laws, policies and practices that restrict the access of adolescent girls to condoms, HIV testing and accurate, comprehensive sex education. Intimate partner violence, which often occurs with the knowledge of families and communities, also limits the ability of young women and girls to make effective choices for the prevention of HIV and further adds to the risk of contracting the virus.

G. Adolescent health

26. While under-five mortality tends to be higher for boys than for girls because girls have certain biological and genetic advantages, gender inequality results in girls having to confront greater health risks in adolescence.²⁴ Early pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death worldwide for adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19. At this stage of their lives, girls tend to be at greater risk than boys of negative health outcomes, including depression, and these risks are often magnified by gender-based discrimination and abuse. Girls are particularly prone to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, and this vulnerability derives in part from profound anxieties over body image, fuelled by cultural and media stereotypes of feminine beauty.¹⁵

H. Disabilities: stigma and marginalization

27. Girls with disabilities not only face the same social stigma and marginalization that boys with disabilities encounter, they face additional discrimination because of their sex. In addition to suffering from marginalization within the family, the community, at school and in wider social circles, which may lead to poor health and education outcomes, girls with disabilities are often at greater risk of violence, injury, abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment and exploitation.²⁵ Furthermore, girls with disabilities may be subjected to forced sterilization or abortion.²⁶

I. Humanitarian crises

28. During humanitarian crises, including armed conflict and natural disasters, girls are exposed to a dramatic increase in rights violations as a result of the greater instability and insecurity that ensue, including the related breakdown of formal and informal protection mechanisms. The consequences of humanitarian crises are highly gendered and may be shaped by pre-existing gender inequalities that can exacerbate negative impact for girls. In emergencies, girls, in particular adolescent girls, are vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation at the hands of fighting forces, community members, humanitarian workers and uniformed personnel. In the context of armed conflict, girls may be abducted or recruited into armed forces or groups. Reports of girls engaging in transactional sex for aid or selling sex to meet their own needs or those of their families are frequent. Such activity increases their

²⁴ See *Progress for Children: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals with Equity* (No. 9), UNICEF, 2010.

²⁵ See resolution 61/106.

²⁶ E/CN.4/Sub.2/1991/31, para. 34 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.92.XIV.4).

vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse, HIV/sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Girl survivors of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence suffer mental health and psychosocial problems, severe social stigmatization and exclusion.

29. Crisis-affected girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in school or to have access to early education; they also have limited access to sexual and reproductive health services. In cultures where boys are more valued than girls, boys may be given priority by families and community members in distribution of aid. Increased poverty resulting from crisis may also drive parents to push their daughters into child marriage (as a coping mechanism) in some cases. Girls who, along with women, traditionally take on the majority of household chores, often shoulder an increased workload during crises to support their families in the face of diminished social services. This adds to their daily burden, leaving less time for school and other activities.

J. Lack of participation opportunities

30. The fulfilment of article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that “States Parties shall assume to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters” affecting him or her, poses profound challenges for Governments in most regions of the world. Traditionally, children have not been deemed to have the experience, knowledge or understanding necessary to be directly involved in contributing to major decisions affecting their lives. Social and cultural patterns of conduct within the family typically present further barriers to the ability of girls and women to claim their rights. Increasingly, youth service programmes are creating spaces for the participation of young people. However, the proportion of girls, in particular those who are out of school and disadvantaged, in typical peer clubs and youth programmes is often very low. Many communities also lack strong female leaders to serve as role models and opportunities for girls and women to establish networks and realize their right to participation.

IV. Ending child and forced marriages

31. Marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 is recognized in international legal instruments to be a violation of the child’s human rights.²⁷ Even if the child consents to it, child marriage is an outcome of prevailing social norms whereby children are expected to marry as children. It can therefore be considered forced marriage. In some cases, child marriage is referred to as early marriage; however, this terminology is equivocal because it is relative in nature. For example, it could also apply to the promotion of marriage at an earlier age in countries where the average age of marriage is over 30 years.

²⁷ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, article 16, para. 2; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, general recommendation No. 21 (1994), Equality in marriage and family relations; Convention on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 4 (2003), Adolescent health and development in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

32. Child marriage is the result of the interplay of economic and social forces, forces which are particularly strong with respect to the marriage of girls. The cost of marriage for families tends to be lower if the children are younger, both because they leave the care of their parents and because younger girls tend to require a lower dowry. These social forces are manifested by the social approval that families enjoy if they are seen to uphold tradition, safeguard the chastity of their girls, protect the honour of the family and minimize the risk of girls bearing children out of wedlock. Failure to abide by social norms is met with social disapproval, which may even entail violence against the girl or members of the family.

33. A review conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2010 using data from the latest demographic and health surveys and multiple indicator cluster surveys shows that about a third of women in the developing world who are currently 20 to 24 years old were married before the age of 18. It also indicates that, overall, the prevalence of child marriage has been decreasing, albeit slowly. While 48 per cent of women in the developing countries between 45 and 49 years of age were married before reaching 18 years of age, the proportion drops to 35 per cent for women between the ages of 20 and 24.^{24,28}

34. Data also indicate significant inequities. Child marriage is strongly associated with girls who have received little formal education. Decreases in the practice have occurred almost exclusively among households in the highest income quintile, while prevalence among the households in the lowest income quintile has remained almost unchanged. Data substantiate the perception that child marriage is motivated in part by economic factors and although it is necessary to address those factors, such actions alone will not be sufficient to bring about an end to the practice.

35. In communities where the practice is prevalent, marrying a girl as a child is part of a cluster of gender norms and attitudes that reflect the low value accorded to the human rights of girls. These norms include: early and continuous childbearing, with negative consequences on the health of both the mother and her children; dowry or bride price whereby girls are considered an economic asset; giving preference to the education of boys over that of girls; having girls eat after the men and boys in the household, with potential negative effects on the overall health and nutritional status of girls; and the general expectation that girls should be subservient to men, which infringes on their right to participation.

36. Where child marriage is prevalent, adolescent girls become brides, get pregnant and have children before they are physically, emotionally and socially ready to be mothers. Approximately 15 million adolescent girls, the majority of whom are married, give birth each year.²³ Most of them lack awareness of their rights and of health-care services, including reproductive health. As a result, they face significant risks during pregnancy, including obstetric fistula and death. Girls between 10 and 14 years of age are five times more likely than women aged 20 to 24 to die in pregnancy and childbirth.²⁹ Because they start childbearing early, adolescent girls are likely to have more children and at shorter intervals, putting them at higher risk of maternal death and disability. As a result, their life options are also constrained by reduced opportunities to complete their education, gain comprehensive health knowledge, participate in the community or develop

²⁸ Figures are for paragraph 33 and the following paragraphs.

²⁹ See "Giving Girls Today and Tomorrow: Breaking the Cycle of Adolescent Pregnancy", United Nations Population Fund, 2007 (see <http://www.unfpa.org>).

employable skills. Child marriage also exposes young married girls to greater risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infections, as they lack the power to refuse unwanted and unprotected sexual intercourse with older husbands. There are also negative consequences for the next generation: stillbirths and death are 50 per cent more likely for babies born to mothers younger than 20 years than among babies born to mothers of between 20 to 29 years of age.³⁰

37. Progress towards the goal of ending child marriage is of crucial importance for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It will also contribute to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and will respond to the recommendations of the 2006 report of the Secretary-General on violence against children.¹⁴

38. Country experience shows that ending child marriage requires an approach that includes Government commitment through the enactment of appropriate legislation as well as support to communities to enable them to find better alternatives. While necessary, in contexts where social support for child marriage is high, legislation that bans the practice is very difficult to enforce. Nonetheless, legal measures and communications strategies can be used to diminish support for the practice and, as social acceptance begins to wane, to provide legitimacy and support to those who are moving to end the practice.

39. Several countries are enacting legislation setting the minimum age of marriage at 18, in accordance with general comment No. 4 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, while others are increasing the minimum age of marriage to 18 and eliminating differences in the legal age between boys and girls. In 2009, Eritrea revised its Civil and Penal Code to increase the minimum age of marriage to 18 for both boys and girls, ensure that marriage is consensual and equal and limit bride price and dowry. In Malawi, the law is being redrafted to increase the legal age of marriage from 16 years of age. In other countries, including Mali and Yemen, the issue is a topic of debate, with proposals for setting or increasing the legal age of marriage under discussion.

40. Ending child marriage requires support for community discussions to collectively explore alternatives to the practice.³¹ Such discussions need to be respectful of the desire of families to uphold tradition while simultaneously exposing the harm associated with the practice and reinforcing human rights principles. Information can be provided through credible sources, including medical personnel and religious leaders, and a greater voice can be given to girls themselves ensuring consistency of message throughout the community. The strong engagement of men and boys is also needed. Such awareness-raising actions have been reported from countries in various regions.

41. Comprehensive policies and programmes on child marriage address the needs of adolescents who are already married while supporting actions to end the practice. They provide viable alternatives and institutional support, especially expanded educational opportunities for girls, including for those who are already married or

³⁰ See Miriam Temin and Ruth Levine, *Start with a Girl: A New Agenda for Global Health*, Center for Global Development, 2009.

³¹ See "Child Protection Meta-Evaluation", final report, UNICEF, 15 May 2008 (see <http://www.unicef.org>).

pregnant. Countries are increasing physical access to education by establishing safe residential facilities, increasing financial incentives to families, promoting the empowerment of girls, improving educational quality and ensuring safe and hygienic conditions in schools. In some countries, such as Djibouti, legal measures have been taken to make school attendance mandatory up to 16 years of age.

42. Despite its widespread practice, child marriage has historically received limited attention, although there are increased efforts among a range of partners, notably non-governmental organizations, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF. The latter two entities have stepped up their advocacy and programme support to countries, including through the United Nations Inter-agency Task Force on Adolescent Girls. In addition, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Rights of the Child are in the process of drafting a joint general comment/recommendation on harmful practices, which will update the guidance provided to States parties on child marriage. Development cooperation agencies such as USAID are also increasing attention to the issue of ending child and forced marriage.

43. Experience in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Ethiopia, India, Niger, Senegal, Somalia and Sweden indicates that combining legal measures with support to communities, providing viable alternatives and enabling them to discuss and reach the explicit, collective decision to end child marriage yields positive results. In addition, there have been many encouraging outcomes from the efforts of national and local civil society organizations. Other countries have also made progress on some of the elements needed to end child marriage. For example, Belgium, Nicaragua and Slovakia report strengthening the legislative framework banning child marriage. In other countries, however, ending child marriage is given a low priority despite the fact that the practice infringes on the rights of a high proportion of adolescent girls and a proportion, albeit smaller, of adolescent boys.

44. If current trends continue, as many as 100 million girls could be married during the next decade.³² However, with the available knowledge and experience and increased action by States in enhanced partnerships with civil society, the majority of girls and boys could delay marriage and realize much more of their potential, to the benefit of the entire community.

V. Progress and achievements

45. Progress has been made in a number of areas with respect to the promotion of the rights of girls and the implementation of General Assembly resolution 64/145. Some key achievements are highlighted below.

A. Strengthened legislation and commitment

46. National legislation addressing violence against women and girls is being systematically improved across the world. Numerous States have adopted laws and policies, including specific action plans and strategies, to address the multiple forms

³² Fact Sheet, United Nations Inter-agency Task Force on Adolescent Girls, 3 March 2009.

of violence against girls, including human trafficking, sexual violence and exploitation, female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage. In addition, the institutional response to violence and exploitation has been strengthened in some countries through intersectoral coordination and capacity-building in the social welfare, justice, education and health sectors.

47. Owing in part to the global campaign, launched in May 2010, for the universal ratification of the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and on the involvement of children in armed conflict, approximately 75 per cent of all Member States have now ratified both Optional Protocols and are working to implement their provisions. A number of countries have already passed some form of legislation to stop child pornography.

48. The Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers, adopted by ILO in June 2011, establishes a set of international standards aimed at improving the working conditions of tens of millions of domestic workers worldwide, including children, of whom 90 per cent are estimated to be girls.¹⁵

49. The international response to protecting girls affected by conflict has been strengthened by the adoption of Security Council resolution 1882 (2009) on children and armed conflict, which expands the monitoring and reporting mechanism to include sexual violence in armed conflict, resolution 1888 (2009) and resolution 1960 (2010) on prevention and protection from conflict-related sexual violence, which establish strengthened mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account, and resolution 1889 (2009) on women and peace and security, which calls for a set of global indicators to better monitor the inclusion of girls and women in peacebuilding, to meet their security needs and to provide basic services.

B. Joint initiatives

50. with the support of UNFPA and UNICEF, 15 African countries have adopted a common approach to ending harmful practices. The approach includes the promotion of laws and community programmes, large-scale community discussion sessions based on human rights principles and community and district-wide public declarations for the abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting.

51. Many Governments are also carrying out multisectoral initiatives to provide support to girls and women and to address violence against girls in the home, schools, communities and the workplace. Within the context of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, which entered into force on 1 July 2010, countries are combining systemic interventions with awareness-raising and direct support to girls and women experiencing violence, including establishing child help lines and making information on preventive and protective measures available to communities.

52. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, launched in 2000 at the World Education Forum, continues to play a significant role in keeping the spotlight on the education of the girl child. The initiative brings together diverse stakeholders, Governments, civil society organizations, bilateral aid agencies, the private sector and the United Nations system, to work to ensure the right to free and compulsory

education and gender equality. The partnership is currently operational in 47 countries in Africa and Asia.

53. The United Nations Inter-agency Task Force on Adolescent Girls, co-chaired by UNFPA and UNICEF, and including ILO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN-Women and the World Health Organization (WHO), provides a platform for collective action for the most marginalized adolescent girls. Work is under way with Governments and their partners to develop comprehensive programmes in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Malawi, Liberia, the United Republic of Tanzania and other countries.

54. The humanitarian community has increasingly invested in ensuring that inter-agency coordination mechanisms respond to the distinct needs of girls, as well as boys, women and men. In 2010, new inter-agency tools and guidelines were developed to help humanitarian actors better respond to the distinct needs and rights of girls affected by crisis situations. They include: the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies “Pocket Guide to Gender” (2010), which provides concrete examples of how to promote girls’ education in emergency situations; the “Handbook for Coordinating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings” (2010), which provides guidance on leadership roles, key responsibilities and specific actions to be taken; and the *Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health Toolkit for Humanitarian Settings* (2010), which addresses the special needs of adolescents in humanitarian crises, with special attention to the particular vulnerabilities of girls and those most marginalized, such as indigenous groups, migrants and persons with disabilities.

C. Improved access to, and quality of, education

55. Since the launch of the “Education for All” initiative in 1990, a number of interventions across developing countries have successfully accelerated school enrolment and school completion rates for girls. For example, the elimination of user fees and the provision of stipends and cash transfers to girls has led to greater demand for education, inter alia, in Bangladesh, El Salvador, Mexico and Kenya. In Namibia, efforts have focused on addressing cultural and social norms that impede girls’ education through the adoption of a policy allowing teenage mothers to return to school after they have their babies. In addition, the Government has launched a national “zero-tolerance” campaign for gender-based violence and efforts have been made to build the capacity of administrators across all sectors to handle cases of gender-based violence, as well as that of media professionals reporting on the issue.

56. Several Member States and United Nations organizations, including UNICEF, FAO, UNESCO and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), are supporting girls’ transition to secondary education and advocating for vocational education training opportunities for adolescent girls, based on their specific needs and contexts. The World Food Programme (WFP) has been providing take-home rations as an incentive to enrol and keep girls in school. In addition to improved access, efforts are also being made to improve girls’ experience of schooling and the quality of education they receive by ensuring that schools are child-friendly and gender-responsive and that they promote human rights education.

57. Countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua are integrating human rights and life skills education, including reproductive health issues, into school curricula in order to equip adolescent girls with appropriate knowledge. In Madagascar, the United Nations Democracy Fund supports organizations such as the scouts and youth environmental clubs to promote an appreciation among children and youth of gender equality and human rights. In Ghana, UNICEF supports a children's radio broadcasting network known as "Curious Minds" to serve as a knowledge platform for the exchange of ideas and dissemination of laws affecting children in general. Such networks have served as useful channels for publicizing information on girls' education, protection from traditional practices and teenage pregnancy.

58. Additional measures have been taken to recruit qualified female teachers and build the capacity of teachers and educational administrators to address gender issues. In Malta and Sweden, for example, policymakers, teachers and students are sensitized to the need for greater gender equality in career choices, with a focus on increased participation of girls in mathematics and science.

D. Improved health services

59. Health services for girls have been strengthened in many parts of the world. For example, in Djibouti, confidential family planning services are provided and women and girls are at the centre of the national strategic plan on HIV/AIDS for 2008-2012. In Bangladesh, the use of the integrated management of childhood illness and the training of community health workers have helped reduce gender disparities in immunization coverage. UNRWA health programmes provide paediatric preventive and curative services for Palestinian refugees, including through schools, while raising awareness on ending child marriage and the prevention of gender-based violence.

E. Girls' participation

60. Initiatives have been undertaken to promote the empowerment of girls by creating opportunities for their participation, developing their leadership skills, informing them about their rights and helping them build the skills to exercise those rights. In Jamaica, a child symposium and gender training workshops, the latter organized by the Bureau of Women's Affairs, were held to inform girls and boys about their rights and raise awareness of gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health. In Chile, UN-Women supported a study, developed by 40 young women, on violence against young women in marriage and other relationships. The results of the study will be used for advocacy with Parliamentarians.

61. In Cameroon, an initiative was set up, with UNICEF support, to develop young people's leadership skills by creating youth municipal councils. The initiative has resulted in the establishment of 21 such councils, of which 17 are headed by adolescent girls. Girls make up half the membership of the councils, compared to only 6 per cent of national councils being led by female mayors. The youth mayors and their councillors advocate youth participation in decision-making within their communities. UNFPA is working to empower young girls in Guatemala, Malawi and Ethiopia by promoting safe spaces, building leadership skills and supporting life

skills education activities with a focus on sexual and reproductive health. These programmes are also being managed by youth leaders.

F. Mitigation of the impact of the global economic crisis

62. Special measures have been taken to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis on girls and women. Successful examples include maintaining necessary social sector expenditures and implementing social protection policies to help ensure their rights to health care, education and maternal health services. A recent study found that in 35 countries an estimated 25 per cent of stimulus spending, amounting to \$653 billion, went to social protection measures.³³ It is important to ensure that these measures are not cut back as part of austerity programmes to curb public-sector spending. Moreover, transformative social protection measures, including anti-discrimination policies and legislation reform, have the potential to address social vulnerabilities, ensuring equitable access to services by girls and boys.

VI. Recommendations

63. While progress has been made, as the above examples demonstrate, such efforts must be built upon and expanded. This requires decisive action by Governments, supported by development agencies, non-governmental organizations and civil society, with the active engagement of girls and boys, men and women.

A. Empower girls

64. Girls' participation and empowerment should be further promoted as called for by the Commission on the Status of Women, the Committee on the Rights of the Child and other bodies.³⁴ It is important to recognize girls as key actors in achieving both gender equality and their own empowerment. Programmes to develop their leadership skills should be supported as part of school curricula, or through other means, such as girls-only clubs or as part of broader skills training programmes. The involvement of girls in the design and delivery of development programmes intended to reach them should also be promoted. Efforts must also ensure that the perspectives of girls, including adolescent girls, are included in discussions about humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery, institutionalizing opportunities for them to speak about their distinct concerns and formulating recommendations on how to address them.

65. Girls cannot exercise their rights unless they have access to information in a form that they can use and understand. Social networks and safe spaces for girls can facilitate their access to essential information and health and protective services. Comprehensive, age-appropriate sex education and knowledge of their HIV status enhance their ability to protect themselves and take charge of their health and well-being.

³³ Yanchun Zhang, Nina Thelen and Aparna Rao, "Social Protection in Fiscal Stimulus Packages: Some Evidence", working paper, UNDP/Office of Development Studies, 2010.

³⁴ See E/2005/27 and Corr.1; Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 12 (2009), on the right of the child to be heard.

B. Support social change and transform power relations

66. Where inequalities and discrimination against girls are entrenched, social change and transformation of power relations are essential to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women. A better understanding of the role of social norms and the ways they affect the decision-making processes of individuals, families and communities to inform policies and strategies and to scale up interventions is a vital complement to higher-level initiatives such as legislative reform. Without addressing the root causes of gender inequality and the exclusion of girls, it is not possible to meet collective obligations to protect and fulfil the rights of girls. Governments, communities and households are accountable for shaping positive environments that do not tolerate discrimination or violence against girls.

C. Keep girls in school

67. Investing in the education of girls empowers them and helps accelerate the fight against poverty, inequity and gender discrimination. Special efforts are needed to identify and reach out to girls who are the hardest to reach and most excluded, including girls from: the poorest households; rural, slum and remote areas; socially excluded groups, including children with disabilities; and indigenous and disadvantaged minority populations.

68. Gains made in primary education during the last decades must be consolidated, while accelerating progress by expanding pre-primary education programmes, to ensure that girls start and stay in primary school, and through targeted interventions aimed at getting out-of-school children, the majority of whom are girls, back in school. Since gender disparities are the greatest at the secondary education level, the transition of girls from primary to secondary education should be facilitated and increased and access to secondary education expanded, with particular attention to reducing dropout rates among girls. Multiple pathways of education, both formal and informal, should be promoted to ensure that girls successfully complete their basic education and make the school-to-work transition. Furthermore, multisectoral strategies covering education as well as health and nutrition, social protection, infrastructure and the labour market should be employed to ensure gender equality in education.

D. Address the rights of adolescent girls

69. Girls face increased discrimination in adolescence. While gender discrimination is a factor even before birth and gender stereotypes are typically introduced early in the life of the child, when girls reach adolescence, they often face new restrictions and limitations. Much too often, they find themselves prematurely in adult roles of wife, mother, worker or caretaker, losing the special provisions and protections of childhood. Educated, healthy and skilled adolescent girls can help advance social justice, support economic development and contribute to eradicating poverty. It is important to invest in the rights and protection of adolescent girls and to ensure they are no longer neglected in development policies and programmes.

E. Strengthen data collection and analysis

70. There is a need for better sex- and age-disaggregated data to provide a better understanding of the situation of girls. It is also necessary to go beyond disaggregating data by sex and to analyse data that reveal the multiple forms of exclusion that girls face, including discrimination because of disabilities, living in the poorest communities or belonging to indigenous or minority groups. This should include the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data and information.

F. Promote inclusive policies and programmes

71. Programmes should also take a holistic approach to addressing the full range of discrimination girls may face in order to protect their rights effectively. Part of respecting girls as human beings with rights involves recognizing the realities of their lives and the diversity of their circumstances. This includes ensuring a gender-focused response to the recovery process in relation to the global economic crisis. National commitments that support and protect girls' rights through adequate and sustained investments in health care and nutrition, clean water, basic education, child and social protection services and participation mechanisms must be upheld and, where possible, expanded. Responses, including in the form of special measures focused on the most marginalized and vulnerable, should be introduced to ensure the enjoyment and protection of the rights of children, including girls and other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society.

G. Expand and improve services for girls

72. Health, nutrition and other services should be expanded and improved so as to address the needs and rights of girls. For example, comprehensive services should be provided for adolescent girls and young women living with HIV. Male and female health and nutrition service providers should receive training to use gender-responsive approaches. Multisectoral referral and response systems should be established providing links to childcare, livelihood, microfinance, vocational education and employment programmes. Inequalities in access to health care should be addressed through efforts to reach girls with disabilities by promoting inclusive health services, including age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health services, so that all girls can realize their right to health. Dedicated outreach programmes are needed to reach the youngest first-time mothers to enable them to better access life-saving maternal health services. Efforts should also be made to ensure access to safe water close to the home in order to reduce the workloads of girls, so that they can stay in school, care for their health, play and undertake other activities on an equal basis with boys. Such services should be carefully designed, wherever necessary, to address the particular vulnerabilities and needs of girls. This is of particular importance in humanitarian situations, where the needs of girls, including adolescent and marginalized girls, are in danger of remaining neglected or overlooked when using a "one size fits all" model.

73. Dedicated resources should be earmarked for programming specific to girls, whenever required. The identification and response to the rights and needs of girls should be ensured across the scope of humanitarian action, including in the context

of disaster risk reduction, as well as in relation to preparedness, response and recovery from humanitarian crises. To be effective, this work should be carried out within a broader gender equality framework that analyses the needs and capacities of girls alongside that of boys, women and men and that mobilizes not just women and girls, but also men and boys around the common goal of a more just and equitable society.
