



Girls in exceptionally difficult circumstances

Nearly 50 per cent of sexual assaults worldwide are against girls aged 15 years or younger

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1. Introduction

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 2

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parents' or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

We have seen that girls and young women continue to face discrimination in many areas of their lives. There are some, however, who have to counter a double or triple discrimination and who find themselves in especially difficult circumstances. Sometimes this is simply because they come from a poor family and may end up surviving on the street. Sometimes it is because they come from a group that is discriminated against such as indigenous groups, or those from a minority ethnic or racial background, or have

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a different sexual orientation.¹ Sometimes it is because a young woman is disabled in some way. Or it can be due to circumstance – living in a conflict area, becoming a refugee or a displaced person, or being orphaned. In all these situations, girls and young women have a particularly difficult time.

2. Girls from minority and indigenous groups

Girls from indigenous groups or from a minority ethnic or racial background are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse. They face discrimination because they belong to a particular group and also because they are female.

- There are some 300 million indigenous peoples in more than 70 countries, around half of whom live in Asia.²
- There are some 5,000 ethnic groups in the world and more than 200 countries have significant minority ethnic or religious groups.³
- Two-thirds of countries have more than one religious or ethnic group that accounts for at least 10 per cent of the population.⁴
- Almost 900 million people belong to groups

that experience disadvantage as a result of their identity, with 359 million facing restrictions on their religion.⁵

Dalit girls in India are one such group. Every day in India, a Dalit girl or woman is abused, raped or killed. In India, Nepal and other parts of Asia, Dalit girls and women – formerly known as ‘untouchables’ – are looked down upon by other castes who view their bodies as ‘available’, and are often also treated badly by Dalit men. Traditionally they do menial jobs that no-one else will do, such as scraping public latrines clean.

One five-year study in four Indian states found that 23 per cent of female Dalits interviewed had been raped, 43 per cent had experienced domestic violence, 47 per cent sexual harassment, 55 per cent physical assault and 62 per cent verbal abuse.⁶ Of all the cases studied only 0.6 per cent ever made it to court, due to obstruction by the police (who often harbour caste prejudices themselves) or by the dominant castes. Many Dalits simply accept that no-one is going to help them and don’t even attempt to seek justice.

Bangaru Sridevi – a Dalit girl fights back

Bangaru Sridevi is one of the many girls from such groups who fought back against the stigma and potential violence that she was born into:

“I was born into the safai karmachari (SK) community. My mother and grandmother used to clean shit in the public toilets. My mother had a hard life. She was married at the age of 14. My grandmother would not allow me to touch the broom. My mother was determined I would study. She saved money for me. Fought to get me a scholarship. Others told her: ‘Why make your girl study? However much she studies, she will be a sweeper.’ Once at home the broom fell down and I went to pick it up. My grandmother screamed: ‘Don’t touch that broom!’ She was obsessive about this. ‘Never touch a broom or you will be condemned to

sweep latrines forever. You must never be a sweeper. You must study.’

“School and college were bitter experiences. No matter how well we worked the upper caste teachers would always give us lower marks, even if we did better than the dominant caste students. Even the name of the students were divided on caste lines on the roll register.

“One experience stays with me forever. During the Vinayaka Chaturthi celebrations, an SK child fell into the water during the immersion ceremony. No one would jump in to save him because he was an SK. Touching him would pollute them. So the child drowned. I’ll never forget that.

“The best thing that happened to me was joining the Safai Karmachari Andolan in 2004. Every year we stop scavenging in different places. We identify dry latrines and take complaints to government officials. So far in Andhra Pradesh 1,000 people have stopped cleaning shit. Through the Scheduled Caste Corporation we have purchased small plots of land for rehabilitation. We are working with small scale industries too. There is a cashew nut processing project in the making.

“I am now the State Convenor of the Safai Karmachari Andolan, Andhra Pradesh. There are still 3,000 people engaged in cleaning shit in AP. Until every single person stops, our job will not be done.”⁷

3 Girls with disabilities

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 23

1. States Parties recognise that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions that ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community.

Disabled children face particular discrimination. A 2005 UNICEF report says children with disabilities in Eastern Europe often face a bleak existence.⁸ The report says that the numbers of registered children with disabilities are increasing since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The total number of children with disabilities in the 27 countries considered in the report has tripled – from about 500,000 in 1990 to 1.5 million in 2000. An additional 1 million children with disabilities are thought to go unregistered. Many of these children are placed in institutions, away from their families, and face a life of stigma and discrimination. By 2002, 317,000 children with disabilities were living in residential institutions in the region. Many come from poor families.

“Although children with disabilities have become more visible since the beginning of transition and attitudes towards them and their families are changing, many of them remain simply ‘written off’ by society,” said Marta Santos Pais, Director of the Innocenti Research Centre (IRC). Yet, as called for by UNICEF, every child has the right to grow up in a family environment and in conditions that ensure respect for their dignity, promote self-reliance and active participation in social life. However a girl living with a disability is likely to be subject to several layers of discrimination.

“Giving parents and communities the power to make their own decisions is, in itself, a valuable contribution to consolidate democracy in this region,” said Maria Calivis, Regional Director for UNICEF CEE/CIS region. “It means giving a voice to those most directly affected, backed by the necessary decentralized, local resources.” (See Chapter 3 – Education).

The report notes that some progress has been made in protecting the rights of children with disabilities. Previously negative attitudes are changing slowly and legislation is in place in many countries to try and help children to integrate into society. But, according to UNICEF, there is still a long way to go. The fact the basic data on children with disabilities is not disaggregated by gender does not help.

Living with disability⁹

“I spent the first two weeks of my life in a neonatal intensive care unit in Bremerhaven, Germany, on a United States military base. Shortly after I took my first breath, a young captain told my father that I had a condition that would cause most people around the world to take me to the top of a mountain and leave me there.

“The condition is a rare congenital bone disease called osteogenesis imperfecta... It causes brittle bones resulting in fractures and, in its most extreme form, death. I have a moderate type of osteogenesis imperfecta and have only had 55 fractures. I have undergone 12 surgeries to strengthen my legs through the insertion of metal rods into my bone marrow, as well as one attempt to prevent further curvature of my spine by fusing bone into the curves.

“In addition to the physical pain of operations and fractures, I have been plagued with feelings of shame and self-contempt as a result of the social stigma of disability. This is an issue I continue to grapple with today as a 24-year-old law student... Nowhere did I find positive images expressing the humanity of disabled people – only those in which we were depicted as objects intended to provoke pity or sympathy...

“Through these experiences, I came to understand how the stigma related to disability leads to social and economic oppression all over the world.”

Bethany Stevens is a law student at the University of Florida (UF) and has been a disability activist for five years. She directed a campaign and petition process that resulted in the opening of a testing centre for students with disabilities at UF. She is the president of the Union of Students with Disabilities, founder of Delta Sigma Omicron and recently directed the Building a Disability Movement conference hosted at UF.

4. Lesbian girls

It is impossible to estimate how many lesbian or bisexual or transgender girls there might be in the world today. The main reason for this is 'invisibility'. Lesbians tend to be 'doubly invisible' and doubly discriminated against due to a combination of patriarchy and heterosexism. A person's sexual orientation or even their profound gender identification is not always obvious. Heterosexuality and gender conformity are usually automatically assumed.

There are good reasons why many adults who do not conform to gender and sexuality norms keep quiet about their difference. Homosexuality remains illegal in some 85 countries and it is punishable by death in 10.¹⁰

Throughout Europe homosexuality is now technically legal. But a recent report shows that young lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people across the continent still face considerable discrimination and exclusion in their everyday life.¹¹ They experience estrangement from family, bullying and marginalisation at school, which can lead to such problems as under-achievement and school dropout, low self-esteem and mental ill-health.

These in turn have a negative impact on their capacity to manage the transition from school to work and to become confident and independent adults. (See Chapter 2 – *Family Life* and Chapter 3 – *Education*)

Some communities – especially with strong religious objections to homosexuality or a deep macho culture – can be very hostile places for lesbian girls. In India, two girls, convicted by a trial of village elders for committing 'immoral activities' with each other, were lynched by villagers in Assam's Kokrajhar District.¹²

In Medellín, Colombia, at the end of 2002, a 14-year-old girl was undressed in the street and a sign was attached to her saying 'I'm a lesbian'. According to residents from the area, she was raped by three armed men, believed to be paramilitaries. A few days later she was found dead with her breasts cut off.¹³

Research into the situation of lesbian girls is in its early days and much work still needs to be done. Because of the risks involved for the individuals concerned, research has to be based on those lesbians who feel confident, or safe enough, to come forward, either to take part in surveys or increasingly, to contribute to websites and chat rooms for young lesbians.

5. Facing violence

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 39

• States Parties shall take all appropriate action to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation or abuse, torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading punishments; or armed conflicts.

"No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable. There should be no more excuses... None of us can look children in the eye if we continue to approve or condone any form of violence against them."
The UN Study on Violence Against Children

Children have a right not to be hurt, abused or tortured. But this right is violated on a daily basis for millions of young people around the world. As we have seen, girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, both in the home (see Chapter two – *Family Life*) and in times of conflict or insecurity. Nearly 50 per cent of all sexual assaults worldwide are against girls 15 years or younger.¹⁴

Increasingly, young women are standing up against violence and asking to be consulted about their protection. Those in power need to listen to their voices and respond with action.

Changing lives with Xchange¹⁵

Marleni Cuellar, 20, has dedicated herself to building a new youth movement called 'Xchange' which is launching in Belize and the rest of the Caribbean region over the next few months. Xchange is all

about building harmony and commitment against violence one person at a time, through musical events, dramas and other participatory methods.

"What we're trying to do is create a culture of non-violence in the Caribbean, because it is becoming acceptable to use violence as a way of dealing with difficulties," she says.

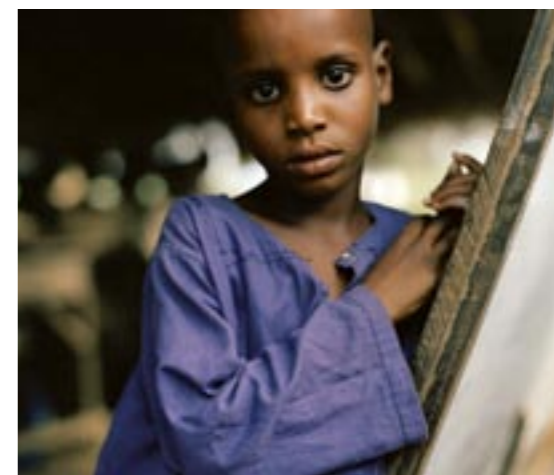
Marleni is especially concerned about gun violence and violence associated with street crime, which is on the rise in Belize. "Recently it's been a lot of 15, 16, and 17 year olds getting killed with guns, which wakes up anybody to think, 'Hey, this is getting out of hand,'" she says.

Marleni is also concerned about violence in the home, which she says is rife in Belize, especially sexual and physical abuse and corporal punishment. She says that corporal punishment "is almost culturally ingrained. We have grown up with that form of discipline. We have to be able to recognise that corporal punishment is a form of violence."

She points out that Belize was the fifth country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits all types of violence against children, and says that this is evidence of the nation's commitment to child protection. Marleni believes that the government should now fulfil this commitment through legal measures such as making corporal punishment illegal.

She also believes that cultural attitudes must change, and that this only happens through mass movements. This is one reason why she is so excited about Xchange: Marleni is convinced that the movement has the potential to effect change on a wide scale.

"We have to be able to spread the message, spread the word and get other young people involved as much as possible. And through that we can start the creation of a new culture that doesn't accept violence so easily."



Children in over 60 countries have been calling for an end to violence against children, including trafficking.

Children demand an end to violence against children¹⁶

Thousands of children in countries across six continents came together to demand their governments put an end to violence against children. Save the Children's Day of Action saw children in over 60 countries staging events to protest against all forms of violence suffered by children, including physical and humiliating punishment, sexual abuse and exploitation, early marriage, neglect and torture.

Children are calling on their governments to:

- Ban all forms of violence against children in all settings, including the home
- Create an effective national child protection system
- Support the appointment of a Special Representative at the UN to drive forward the global project to end violence against children
- Prevent children from coming into conflict with the law, and protect them if they do with child-friendly justice systems
- Mobilise men and boys in the fight to end gender discrimination and violence against children.

6. Girls in times of conflict

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 38

- States Parties undertake to respect and ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child.
- In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.

Conflict is a major factor in keeping a country poor – of the 34 poor countries that are furthest from reaching the Millennium Development Goals, 22 were in or emerging from war. Such conflicts are increasingly taking place within as well as between countries.

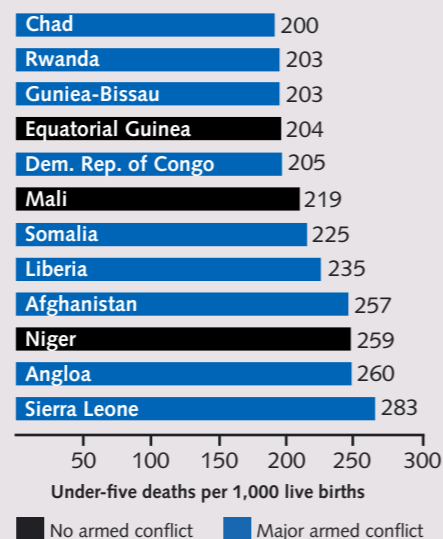
Young people between 10 and 25 comprise around 30 per cent of those affected by conflict and are more likely than other age groups to be directly caught up in violence.¹⁷ UNICEF state that over the past decade, more than 2 million children have died as a result of conflict and at least 6 million have been permanently disabled or seriously injured.¹⁸ As is so often the case, no-one knows what proportion are girls and what proportion are boys. Most of the countries where one in five children die before the age of five have experienced major conflict.

Boys (and sometimes girls) may be recruited to fight at a young age; girls are at risk of rape and sexual violence. They may miss out on years of education and face the psychological trauma of having lost family, friends and home. And returning home may not be the welcome with open arms that they had hoped for, as Milly Auma's story shows.

Milly's escape¹⁹

In Uganda, over a 20-year period of conflict, the Lord's Resistance Army has abducted an estimated 25,000 children,

Most of the countries where 1 in 5 children die before five have experienced major armed conflict since 1999.



UNICEF, The State Of The World's Children 2006

including some 7,500 girls. Many were forced into relationships and conceived children. Milly Auma was taken from her community by the Lord's Resistance Army when she was still in primary school. It was 10 years before she was able to escape – and by that time she had two children of her own. But instead of being welcomed when she returned home to Gulu, many in her village rejected her.

"People said I had joined the LRA willingly," says Milly, now 26. "They would say, 'Why do you taint us with your evil spirit?'"

Many other children who were abducted report similar stigma and discrimination on returning to their communities. Life became so difficult for Milly that she even considered going back to the LRA if she couldn't find acceptance for herself and her children, then aged two and four.

In the end, it was the determination that had helped her survive captivity that

enabled Milly to adapt to her new adult life. She was helped by the Youth Social Work Association (YSA), a community-based organisation supported by UNICEF and its partners. The YSA works to reintegrate formerly abducted children and other vulnerable adolescents into mainstream society.

In 2005, using her new skills, Milly started a business transporting freshwater fish from the Nile River in Jinja and selling them in the local markets of Gulu. She made an initial profit of approximately \$50, and a second trip doubled her income. Now she is planning to lease a plot of land to grow vegetables for sale.

"I now have a business and people see me as being successful," says Milly, who is also training as a counsellor for vulnerable adolescents. "I should not be portrayed as being useless. If anyone says something negative about me, I now ignore it."

Rape as a weapon of war

Over the last decade or more, rape has increasingly been used as a weapon of war. According to the UN this has been "the least condemned war crime."

- In Bosnia in 1992 – 1995, rape was used against thousands of girls and women.
- In Rwanda, it is estimated that half a million girls and women were raped during the genocide and that 67 per cent were subsequently infected with HIV, triggering the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic.
- In Sierra Leone, young girls in particular were singled out for rape. Many did not survive. An estimated 70 to 90 per cent of rape victims contracted HIV.
- In Colombia, rape is used by guerillas and paramilitary forces as well as soldiers in government armed forces. The rate of rape of adolescent girls is estimated at 2.5 per 1,000 although only an estimated 17 per cent of sexual violence is reported. Some girls who are raped are as young as five years old.²⁰

In Darfur, in Sudan, many thousands of girls and women have been raped. Many are the victims of multiple rapes. The UN says that around 40 per cent of the victims are under 18 years of age.²¹

Like the teenager below, those who have been raped may face the added persecution of being rejected by their families and possibly of becoming pregnant by the rapists.

The social consequences of rape in Darfur

"I am 16 years old. One day, in March 2004, I was collecting firewood for my family when three armed men on camels came and surrounded me. They held me down and tied my hands and raped me one after the other. When I arrived home, I told my family what happened. They threw me out of the home and I had to build my own hut away from them. I was engaged to a man and I was so much looking forward to getting married. After I got raped, he did not want to marry me and broke off the engagement because he said I was now disgraced and spoilt. It is the worst thing for me..."

"When I was eight months' pregnant from the rape, the police came to my hut and forced me with their guns to go to the police station. They asked me questions so I told them I had been raped. They told me that as I was not married I would deliver the baby illegally. They beat me with a whip on the chest and back and put me in jail. There were other women in jail who had the same story. During the day, we had to walk to the well four times a day to get the policemen water, clean and cook for them. At night I was in one small cell with 23 other women. I had no other food than what I could find during my work during the day. And the only water was what I drank at the well. I stayed 10 days in the jail and now I have to pay the fine, 20,000 Sudanese dinars (\$65) they asked me. My child is now two months' old."²²

Building peace

“During the transition to peace, a unique window of opportunity exists to put in place a gender-responsive framework for a country’s reconstruction. The involvement of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction is in fact a key part of the process of inclusion and democracy that can contribute to a lasting peace”

Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director, UNIFEM²³

There are many laws, both national and international, to protect girls and women in times of conflict. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, passed unanimously in October 2000, calls upon all parties to protect women in armed conflict and to integrate gender perspectives into peacekeeping operations, UN reporting systems and peacebuilding programmes.²⁴ But when situations are violent and unstable it is almost impossible to enforce. As the previous examples in this chapter indicate, state endorsed violence against young women may well violate the international laws in place. Unless the laws are enforced, girls will continue to suffer.

7. Refugees and displaced people

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 22

1. States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties.

In 2005, there were approximately 12.7 million refugees in the world, approximately half of



LORNA ROACH

whom were women. At the end of 2004, roughly 48 per cent of all refugees worldwide were children²⁵ and 25 million people were displaced within their own countries by conflict or human rights violations.²⁶ They have not only lost their homes and very often family and friends, but young women in particular are at further risk of abduction, trafficking and sexual violence.

In Colombia, studies have found that two out of three displaced young women became pregnant by the age of 19 and that there had been a “marked increase in teenage pregnancies and unsafe abortions” due to violence and displacement.²⁷

Women refugees are usually responsible for looking after the sick, or wounded, or dying or displaced, often on their own as husbands and partners and older sons are fighting. Girls can find themselves in this situation if their parents are killed or separated from them.

8. When disasters strike...

“In these days I realised that youngsters want to participate and make a better world. All [their] ideas show that young people are united and willing to help the people that need their support. The youngsters are acting locally and that’s great because they show their urge to live in a better world.”

Catalina, aged 18, Colombia²⁸

A makeshift school for girls displaced by earthquake in Pakistan.

Disasters hit the poorest worst. According to UNDP, 85 per cent of the people exposed to earthquakes, tropical cyclones, floods and droughts live in countries having either medium or low human development.²⁹ More than 95 per cent of all deaths caused by disasters occur in developing countries. And women and girls are the most vulnerable when a disaster strikes. It is estimated that after the tsunami in 2004, four times more women died than men.³⁰

There are many reasons for this. Girls and women are likely to hear about an impending disaster later than men and boys. Often based in the home, their access to public spaces and to radios, television and telephones may be controlled by the men in the household. Men may also make the decisions about when to evacuate the household and women may not be used to going out without a male relative to accompany them.

Girls are often the ones looking after their younger siblings as well as trying to protect themselves. In Sri Lanka, after the tsunami in 2004, women sometimes died because they were searching for their children.³¹ They are often less likely to know how to swim, climb or have the physical know-how to escape in times of danger. Again, after the tsunami, women’s clothes prevented them escaping and most did not know how to swim.

After a disaster, food distribution is normally targeted at the male head of the household. Women are often the last to be given shelters and other forms of relief. Emergency provision often ignores women’s needs for items such as sanitary towels, and the need for private space for personal hygiene, or space away from men, or provision for women who are pregnant or breast feeding.

Girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse in times of disaster, and may even resort to selling their bodies for food. They are also the ones left looking after the rest of the family. For this reason, after a disaster, they are less likely to go back to school.

Because disaster plans do not look specifically at girls’ and women’s needs, they also ignore the skills and experience that they bring, in terms

of social networks as well as practical skills that are needed after a disaster strikes. As a result, they fail to include girls and women in decision-making processes. Women’s groups advocated for the right of women to take part in decision-making and this may have been one of the factors that pushed the Sri Lankan government to approve a proposal for gender equality in future relief and rehabilitation.³²

Zimbabwe

Jessica Pedzura, 17, lives in Mutorashanga, a Zimbabwean community affected by food shortages in 2003. Save the Children (SCF) was one of the organisations distributing food aid. In an evaluation of their work, they found that many people, including children, felt they had not been adequately informed about the food distribution process. Children complained that distribution points were too far away, the loads were too heavy and distributions took place during school hours.

In September 2003, SCF set up children’s feedback committees to channel complaints. Children were chosen to lead information collection and dissemination because they were principal beneficiaries and they could identify issues that adults were unwilling or unable to see.

Over eight months, 70 children collected invaluable feedback from their peers. Foster children said their guardians denied them rations or forced them to work long hours for a share of the aid. They complained of guardians selling off food to buy beer. The committees called for vigorous promotion of children’s rights within the community. According to Jessica, “Our community now knows a lot more about abuse and I believe awareness is now higher about the rights of children. I have not heard of ill treatment of foster children in Mutorashanga since the child feedback committees were established.”³³

9. Girls on the streets

“I had my first child at 14, and I gave birth on the streets.”

Nana Pierre, 18, from Port au Prince, Haiti.³⁴

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 20

- 1. Provides for “A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.”

There are many reasons why children leave home. Some may have lost parents, but by no means are they all orphans. Girls on the streets tend to be older, and for this reason they often start life on the streets having “experienced serious family problems, with more frequent histories of sexual and physical abuse before leaving the household. Drug addiction, prostitution, and the street is the last resort for these girls.” Girls are more likely to continue to endure abuse at home because they know how dangerous the street is for them, but they are also less likely to return once they have taken the decision to leave.³⁵ For sexually transgressive girls eviction from home may have nothing to do with choice but the means by which a family may rid itself of a source of shame. (See Chapter 2 – *Family Life*). Many girls on the street are forced to turn to prostitution, with a high risk of HIV as a result. (See Chapter 4 – *Health*).

Street children are often the visible face of poverty, and as such are abused by the public and sometimes the police. In Bolivia, they are called ‘urchins, little bugs, little criminals, fruit birds, dirty faces, vermin, mosquitoes, or little farts’. Such stigmatisation can have fatal consequences. In 1997 in Brazil, a group of 50 street children were fired on by police. Five were killed, and a poll a few days later found that the “majority of the public approved of the actions”.³⁶ In Bogotá,

Colombia, street children are murdered by vigilantes, merchants and police in a practice commonly known as ‘social cleansing’.³⁷

It is impossible to quantify the numbers of street children, but they are likely to run to tens of millions. They may be visible to the public, but they are the hardest to reach with services such as education and health. In Latin America and Africa, 75-90 per cent of street children are boys. There has been little research on the reasons for this, but one study in Brazil found that girls were more likely to be involved in work in the home and because they were able to help in this way were “more often welcomed in their relatives’ households when families disintegrated”. Although they are among the most vulnerable, girls on the street are also the hardest to protect.³⁸

“These children are deprived of affection and protection. They do not have access to food and education, and are constantly under the threat of all kinds of violence, including sexual abuse and exploitation,” said Sylvana Nzirorera, UNICEF Communication Officer for Haiti. There are many thousands of children on the streets of the capital, Port au Prince.³⁹

The Lakou Centre⁴⁰

The Lakou Centre is headed by Father Attilio Stra, an Italian native who has been working with Haiti’s children for 30 years. Every day about two hundred children and young people pass through the large courtyard of the centre (‘Lakou’ means ‘courtyard’ in Creole).

“Almost all the children who come to the centre are traumatised by bad experiences. They were treated badly,” said Father Attilio. “You can hardly find a child who doesn’t have a scar on his body. We invite them to the centre and teach them vocational skills to prepare them for a better future.” The children can learn a range of skills including mechanics, metal work, hairdressing and tailoring. The centre also runs a nursery for the children of street children who became mothers at a very early age.



Life on the streets in Togo.

“I have three children, the first was born when I was 16. This is my son, and he is four years old. I gave birth to them on the street,” said Marienette Azor, 20.

Young women like Marienette are the most vulnerable. Poor living conditions and the dangerous nature of a street life have made them easy targets for sexual exploitation and HIV/AIDS.

Although the Lakou centre has been a safe haven for many homeless boys, girls and babies, it can only shelter them for so long. Each day, after of a few hours of peace and comfort, the need to make a living will once again drive the children back onto the streets.

The Lakou Centre fulfils one of the crucial needs for street children – providing them with a safe environment and equipping them with the skills to help them re-integrate into society. Such safe environments are rare but crucial in preventing

violence against street children.

But the root causes which drive girls and boys onto the street, such as poverty and family violence and breakdown, also need to be addressed. And governments and NGOs need not only to find resources to train and support street children but also organise training workshops for all those involved – police, social workers and psychologists. Only then will girls and boys like those in the Lakou Centre have the future they deserve.

10. Girls in conflict with the law

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 40

1. States Parties recognise the right of every child alleged as, accused of, or recognised as having infringed the penal law to be treated in a manner consistent with the promotion of the child’s sense of dignity and worth, which reinforces the child’s respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others and which takes into account the child’s age and the desirability of promoting the child’s reintegration and the child’s assuming a constructive role in society.

There is little data on children in detention, and even less on girls, but estimates are that more than a million children are living in detention as a result of being in conflict with the law. Often they are treated as adults and many suffer violent abuse. This includes physical and sexual violence by adult detainees, guards, police or other juvenile inmates. They may be put in inappropriate or unsanitary conditions.

While more boys are detained than girls, girls in detention face particular problems that are often not recognised. They may be detained simply because they are victims, rather than perpetrators, of violence. A United Nations report notes that this includes: girls fleeing forced marriages, trafficked children and children in the commercial sexual exploitation industry as well as girls being put in so-called

‘protective custody’ to escape ‘honour crimes’. It also pointed out that children deemed ‘beyond parental control’ or girls who get pregnant out of wedlock may also be handed over by their parents to the juvenile justice system.⁴¹

Children in prison are likely to be vulnerable and living in challenging circumstances. One study for Britain’s Prison Reform Trust noted that: “Many children in prison have a background of severe social exclusion. Of those in custody of school age, over a quarter have literacy and numeracy levels of an average seven-year old. Over half of those under 18 in custody have a history of being in care or social services involvement and studies have found that 45 per cent have been permanently excluded from school.”⁴²

It also noted that: “Behavioural and mental health problems are particularly prevalent amongst children in prison. Of prisoners aged 16-20, around 85 per cent show signs of a personality disorder and 10 per cent exhibit signs of psychotic illness, for example schizophrenia”.⁴³ In addition, drugs and alcohol are a major problem. “Of prisoners aged 16-20, over half reported dependence on a drug in the year prior to imprisonment. Over half the female and two-thirds of the male prisoners had a hazardous drinking habit prior to entering custody.”⁴⁴

Because the prison populations of women are much smaller than those of men, girls are more likely to be detained with adult prisoners and therefore to be denied their right to protection, deprived of the specialist care they need, and possibly subject to abuse. Treatment of young people in prison, even in the North, can be inhumane, as one UK report points out: “Many young prisoners spend up to 20 hours locked in shared cells designed only for one person, forcing them to use the toilet in front of their cellmate and eat their meals in the same cramped, unhygienic conditions. Over-crowding in prisons is leading to the frequent movement of young people from one jail to another, sometimes over great distances. This causes distress and instability as well as disruption to educational and training courses vital for young people’s rehabilitation.”⁴⁵

Nkeiruka’s story⁴⁶

Nkeiruka became pregnant while unmarried, which is considered a taboo among the Igbo community in Nigeria to which she belongs. In December 1999, the then 15-year-old Nkeiruka gave birth unassisted at home, and her child died as a result of complications. Her uncle accused her of killing her newborn, and Nkeiruka and her mother Monica were arrested and taken to prison in Anambra state.

Now 21, Nkeiruka faces an uncertain future: deprived of a formal education while in prison and possessing few skills, she is uncertain of the reception she and her mother will receive from the community and family when they return home. A proper investigation was never conducted, no evidence of the alleged crime was found and the original case file disappeared.

Nkeiruka and her mother slept in a cell with up to 37 women for around 1,971 days. “Much like the many other children and young people who are incarcerated in Nigeria, they were forgotten,” says Nkolika Ebede of the International Federation of Women Lawyers in Anambra, who helped secure their release.

Nkeiruka was one of over 6,000 children and teenagers in Nigeria who are in prison or juvenile detention centres. About 70 per cent of them are first-time offenders... Many of these children come from broken homes and large poor families, or are orphans. Young people, especially girls, are also victims of criminal acts such as domestic violence, rape, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Juveniles in prison are often cut off from family and friends. Stigmatisation and rejection by society further affect the reintegration of victims. During her five and a half year incarceration, Nkeiruka received only one visitor, a sibling, in the

week before her scheduled release date.

The UN recommends that detention of children should only be used as a last resort.

11. What still needs to be done?

The gender discrimination faced by girls, as outlined in the previous chapters of this report, means that they are particularly vulnerable to a series of risks to their development and well-being, and are less likely to attain their rights. These risks increase at times of uncertainty and insecurity, or when girls face several layers of discrimination because they have a disability for example. This can mean that girls descend into or remain within an intergenerational cycle of poverty and violence.

Girls’ vulnerabilities as well as their capabilities need to be recognised. **So how can girls and young women in particularly difficult circumstances be protected and how can these situations be prevented?**

- The right of girls and young women, particularly those who are in exceptionally difficult circumstances, to protection from violence and abuse must be respected through the promotion of non-violent values in school and through girl-friendly reporting systems and support services.
- Where girls and young women have to be detained, gender-appropriate treatment is necessary and particular attention paid to children’s right to be detained separately from adults for their protection.
- Rape continues to go unpunished in many countries leading to the impunity of rapists and the stigmatisation of their victims. There are several successful models of medical, psychological and physical support that can help girls and young women to live with what has happened to them and develop their full potential as adult women.
- In times of conflict or disaster, provision must be made specifically for girls and

young women to ensure their protection, particularly as their safety is often at risk. Girls have the right to express their views and have them given due weight in the design, planning and implementation of policies and programmes. Young women need to be involved in post-conflict and post-disaster planning.

- The layers of discrimination faced by particular groups of girls will only be changed by a combination of supportive and protective legislation and the promotion of attitudinal change.

12. Girls’ voices

“Children do not start wars. Yet they are most vulnerable to its deadly effects. Millions of innocent children die in conflicts, which is of no fault of theirs – just because some greedy leaders rob powers with the barrel of the gun. During such times everything freezes, no education, no potable drinking water, no electricity, food shortages, no shelter, and most of all some girls are raped leading to HIV/ AIDS.”

Girl, 17, Ghana⁴⁷

“Violence against children, especially girls, has crossed all limits... People feel that a girl is meant to be used – either as a doormat, a maid, a birth-giving machine or as a source of physical pleasure. Something CONCRETE seriously needs to be done to change the current scenario because now a girl does not feel safe even in her own house, let alone the streets.”

Girl, 16, India⁴⁸

“It is not only the government and NGOs who can take care of us but we ourselves must find ways to protect our rights. Let us all be aware of the problems we are facing now. Girls, don’t let other people abuse you. Stand up! and fight for your right!”

Stephanie Marie, 13, Children’s Association in San Francisco, Camotes Islands, the Philippines⁴⁹