GENDER EQUALITY
OUR VISION FOR WOMEN, GIRLS, MEN AND BOYS

Around the world today a group of people are repeatedly marginalised and discriminated against. In some circumstances, this discrimination is so engrained in everyday life that it is not always instantly identified. In others cases, it is explicit.

Despite making up more than half the global population, women and girls still experience inequality when it comes to opportunities, status and rights. This is often due to damaging traditions, cultures, social norms – and the policies and practices that reinforce them.

World Vision seeks to address this inequality through its local and international advocacy and its programming in communities around the world. Gender equality – when women, men, boys and girls have the same opportunities, status and rights – is essential to enable individuals to grow and societies to develop.

World Vision seeks to reinforce the value of women, men, girls and boys and the significance of their contributions to their families, communities and society.

Fast facts:
The realities of being a girl

- One in three women will experience gender-based violence in their lifetime.¹
- Approximately 1.5 to 3 million girls and women are killed annually through gender-related violence.²
- 142 million girls will be married before their 18th birthday, this decade (by 2020).³
- In 2008, 796 million adults worldwide (15 years and older) reported not being able to read and write and two-thirds of them (64%) were women.⁴
- 536,000 women die each year from pregnancy complications – one every minute. For every woman that dies, 20 or more are injured or disabled.⁵
- Women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours.⁶
- Women own only 1-2 percent of all titled land worldwide.⁷
- Globally, the female employment to population ratio in 2007 was 49.1 percent compared to the male employment to population ratio which was 74.3 percent.⁸

Note: All statistics are global estimates. See references for further details.

With the help of World Vision, Azmera escaped the fate of early marriage and has been able to remain in school where her grades reflect her hard work. Photo: 10x10
Why are women and girls treated differently?

"Gender" refers to what it means to be a man, woman, boy or girl. Gender is influenced by culture, tradition, values and beliefs about how women, men, boys and girls should be treated and how they should behave.

Gender inequality varies between countries, cultures, belief systems and communities. In some cases, it may be so deeply entrenched within societies that it can affect individuals’ behaviours towards one another – even though they may not be aware of it. Sometimes these beliefs influence laws and policies.

Gender inequality may seem like an intangible thing – an attitude or culture that cannot be seen. In reality, it is quite clear how females suffer compared to their male counterparts: poor health; higher mortality rates; higher illiteracy rates; longer working hours; less access to property or resources and higher rates of violence and abuse.

While men and boys also experience inequality, the inequality experienced by women and girls takes more severe forms.

Female genital mutilation/cutting

The practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is just one example of the inequalities faced by women and girls. Around 140 million girls and women (almost all in sub-Saharan Africa) currently live with FGM/C. Reasons for cutting vary based on context, and include social status, culture, controlling women’s sexuality, "rite of passage" into adulthood and religious obligation. Consequences of this practice include bleeding, infection, complications during childbirth, infertility, post-traumatic stress disorder and school drop-out.

Early marriage

Another example of the unfair treatment of women and girls is the practice of early marriage. Every year, 13.5 million girls around the world marry before their 18th birthday. Based on current trends, 142 million girls will be married in the decade to 2020, an average of 14.2 million girls every year.

Early marriage can be driven by a genuine need to survive. Poor families and communities unable to feed their children may view marrying off a young child as a necessity. Families may also receive a "bride price" to help their economic situation. When girls are married young, they often drop out of school early which means they do not learn the skills needed to support themselves. If a family has planned an early marriage for their daughter, they may not invest in her schooling, as she will not be around to support the family once married.

If a girl leaves her family to marry at a young age and is forced to bear children earlier than she is ready for, it can be physically as well as psychologically damaging. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 is childbirth.

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Maria* and her children were victims of domestic violence until her husband attended peace building workshops with World Vision. Photo: Crislyn Joy A. Faleuda/ World Vision
*Name has been changed.
In many cultures a woman’s chastity is so highly valued that losing her virginity outside of marriage can bring a lifetime of shame upon her and her family. In Cambodia, a traditional proverb says that while a boy is like a rock who can be wiped clean of his sins, a girl is like a piece of cloth who will remain tainted by that dirt. This is so explicitly adhered to that a girl who loses her virginity outside of marriage can be forced into prostitution, because she has little chance of securing a husband and no alternative way to make a living.

Working hours

In communities where World Vision works, a woman may work many hours of the day, fetching and carrying water and firewood for the house, cooking meals, tending to crops, looking after the house and children, as well as selling agricultural produce or other goods. Due to cultural norms regarding gender roles, a woman may not have control over the income she earns or be allowed to participate in decision-making on how household income should be spent.

It can be difficult to challenge gender inequality when it is embedded in a culture and accepted as the norm.

In the world’s least developed countries, 17 percent of girls are married by their 15th birthday,\(^\text{11}\) an estimated 3,500 girls every day.\(^\text{12}\)

Amukusana\(^*\) is one of these girls. She is the first born in a family of five children and lives in Zambia with her father and stepmother.

“For all the years I lived with my father and stepmother I never imagined they were planning to push me into marriage at a tender age. One night … elderly women, including my grandmother, walk into the room and picked [me] up,” Amukusana says.

“They dragged me to some place where I [was] secluded for some days. There they told [me] I was grown up so they were going to prepare me for a man whom they had approved to marry me. I was therefore made to go through initiation traditions. Before the man took me to his home per custom, he was authorised to sleep with me at my parents’ home.”

Amukusana says the man abused her sexually at the age of 14 but, under their traditions, this is when an official marriage begins because it had the blessing of parents and other key relatives like her grandmother.

“My husband then was still living with his parents, brothers and sisters. When I got there as his wife, I suffered [at] the hands of my in-laws especially his sisters; I used to do almost everything for them. I would be working for them from morning to sunset,” Amukusana explains.

“I was worried about my education which came to an end. More so, I was worried about having children as young as I was.”

Ruth Mwilima, a caregiver in Amukusana’s community, reported the matter to World Vision.

“Together with World Vision staff, we approached the parents to reverse their decision but they were tough. They couldn’t accept. Reversing the decision would have meant that the parents pay back the K900 ($180) so they stood their ground not to reverse the decision,” Ruth explains.

The situation became complicated but, after three months of marriage, Amukusana was allowed to leave her marriage and return home.

Amukusana worked to raise money to pay back her parents and then returned to school. “I wrote exams, two months after being rescued, and I managed pass to Grade 8,” she says proudly.

*Name changed to protect privacy

What you can do to help end early marriage:

Join our campaign to end the exploitation of vulnerable children at donttradelives.com.au

donttradelives.com.au
When communities embrace gender equality, both girls and boys benefit

Girls and boys are enabled to enjoy good health

World Vision believes that girls and boys should enjoy good health, but sometimes gender inequality makes this a challenge. In some contexts, girls may be seen as a less "valuable" asset than a boy, so may not receive medical treatment as quickly. Having information regarding health issues is critical — for boys and girls. Studies show that girls who attend school will marry later and tend to choose motherhood at an older age, when they are in a better physiological state of health to give birth safely. An educated girl will also have better knowledge about maternal health and childcare issues, so she can give her children the best start.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a child born to a literate mother is 50 percent more likely to survive past the age of five. Education can also help girls reduce their risk of contracting diseases, such as HIV and AIDS. It is also vital that boys have access to health information. Knowledge about health issues helps prevent risky behaviours among adolescent boys and helps boys develop a greater awareness of issues such as HIV and AIDS.

Girls and boys can be educated for life

In many countries where World Vision works, it is common for girls to be kept out of school because it is seen as an unnecessary expense. If a girl does start school, she is likely to drop out to do household chores to support her family. Because of these attitudes towards education, around 67 million girls are currently out of school globally. In a community where girls are treated as equals, they are more likely to stay at school. This education can help prevent a girl from entering an unwanted early marriage and, as an informed parent, will help her to influence future generations. An educated girl has the chance to get a better job or to start her own business. The World Bank says a girl with an extra year of education can earn 20 percent more as an adult.

Girls and boys can be cared for, protected and participating

In many contexts, women and girls are at high risk of exploitation, abuse and violence. Cultural norms regarding the status of women are so pervasive that security and safety becomes a huge issue. Violence often results in girls becoming socially marginalised, isolated and left without support or protection. Girls may be forced into situations they do not like and be trapped there.

World Vision works to prevent gender-based violence such as rape and harmful traditional practices, to ensure that girls are protected and aware of their rights. We ensure both girls and boys are cared for by supportive parents and caregivers and that they can participate in decision-making that affects their lives. We ensure girls and boys are equally celebrated and registered at birth.
WHAT IS BEING DONE ABOUT IT?

For generations, efforts have been made to promote gender equality. Although progress takes time, change is occurring.

Addressing women’s rights issues is essential if we are truly going to ensure sustainable development. In 2000, when the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were set, participating countries made a commitment to ensure eight fundamental issues for tackling global poverty were addressed. Of these, two goals specifically addressed issues related to women and girls.

While there have been criticisms about the extent to which the Millennium Development Goals incorporate gender inequality issues, they have played an important role in getting them on the international agenda. There have also been demonstrated improvements in some of these areas.

World Vision is strongly advocating for the next MDGs (due in 2015) to focus more on addressing gender inequality.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) and others in the development sector implement programs that target gender inequality and increase women’s and girls’ access to essential services, like health and education, as well as livelihood development projects.

The Australian Government aid program focuses on gender equality. It seeks to empower women to participate in the economy, leadership and education; save the lives of poor women through the provision of quality maternal healthcare services; and enable more girls to attend school.

Summary of global progress against the Millennium Development Goals

The total progress of developing countries against MDG targets 2010 or latest. The percentages above are the proportion of the required change under each MDG achieved to date. Data from 2011 UN MDG Report or other more up to date UN source. Note on indicators used: Hunger – children less than five underweight, gender equity – share of wage employees that are women, AIDS etc – share of people requiring ARV’s receiving them.
In many societies, gender inequality means that men make the decisions about women's health, often without knowledge of health practices, such as nutrition and antenatal care. A woman may not go to hospital to get the healthcare she needs, because cultural values prevent her from travelling alone or childbirth at hospital is seen a sign of weakness. As a result, every year around 350,000 women in the developing world die from complications during pregnancy or childbirth.

In some cultures, male promiscuity is overlooked and women may not be allowed to negotiate the use of protection method. This puts women at increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases.

Olive was abandoned by her husband when he blamed her for being diagnosed as HIV positive. Her two-year-old daughter Fabrice is also infected with the disease. With no income, Olive depends on the feeding programs at Nyarugolga Health Centre in Rwanda, that World Vision helped establish.

Fabrice has suffered from severe malnutrition and has also contracted tuberculosis.

Since receiving medical care at the clinic, Fabrice's health has improved.

"I am overjoyed with this," Olive says, but she recognises their struggles are not over: "I want badly to have a livelihood so I can take care of my daughter."

Around the world, the burden of poor health and caring for children alone is a constant struggle for women. Unless the cycle of poverty and gender inequality is broken, this will continue to be perpetuated generation after generation.

What you can do for girls' health:

Join the international campaign to put pressure on global leaders to help improve maternal and child health. Sign up at childhealthnow.com.au

Olive was abandoned by her husband when she was diagnosed as HIV positive. Photo: Cecil Laguardia/World Vision
More than 35 million girls do not go to school. Families may keep their girls out of school to do chores, work or even marry young. Poor health and a lack of access to good water and sanitation when at school – for example to stay clean when menstruating – may mean girls miss classes and fall behind, eventually dropping out of school.

Sheuli has a different story to tell. She is 11 and from a poor family in a remote village in Bangladesh. In Sheuli’s village few girls get the opportunity to go to school and, if they do start school, find it difficult to stay there and rarely make secondary level.

Sheuli is determined to stay in school. Sheuli and her parents chose to accept academic support provided through World Vision’s sponsorship program, so Sheuli received special coaching during her primary school certificate examination last year.

Sheuli’s mother Shongkor never went to school and acknowledges that her life may have been better if she had. Like all caring mothers, she wishes for a better future for her daughter.

“I am a poor day labourer,” Shongkor says. “If my daughter doesn’t study life will be hard for her. If she studies, who knows? She may even become a doctor!”

Many people in the community find Shongkor’s actions strange and do not understand why Sheuli would want to be in school. She is often asked why she continues to study instead of getting married.

Over time, families in the community are beginning to learn from Sheuli’s example and the World Vision program. Mothers, most of whom never had the chance to go to school themselves, have reorganised the household chores to allow their daughters time for homework. Girls’ passing rates in the region increased and simply by finishing the 5th grade, these girls are reaching well beyond the expectations of traditional female roles.

Poverty and societal attitudes can be huge obstacles to education for girls. However, as Sheuli’s parents demonstrate, attitudes are slowly changing and give hope for a more positive future for girls around the world.

What you can do for girls’ education:
Give the gift of education – for example school pencils, sending a girl to school or training a teacher – at worldvision.com.au/gifts

worldvision.com.au/gifts

Sheuli is determined to stay in school. Photo: Gloria Das/World Vision
WORLD VISION’S APPROACH

World Vision understands that gender inequality hinders the growth of individuals and the development of countries and societies.

World Vision’s approach to promoting gender equality is comprehensive, child-focused, community-based and integrated. We focus on empowering women, men, girls and boys to be agents of change in their own lives, families, communities and networks.

In partnership with communities, World Vision:

- identifies values and behaviours that are harmful in specific country contexts, and tailors programs to address these issues and promote change;
- partners with community leaders and faith leaders so they can act as “champions” in the community, who can challenge cultural and social norms;
- works with families to explore and challenge the reasons for treating men, women, boys and girls in particular ways;
- ensures women and girls have access to information and services, as well as control over resources, enabling them to have the freedom of choice;
- empowers girls, boys, women and men equally to participate in decision-making that affects their lives;
- encourages boys to grow up to be supportive men in their households and communities, with healthy attitudes and behaviours about masculinity, fatherhood and being a good husband;
- influences policy makers, legal institutions and duty bearers to address rights issues like early child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting; and
- advocates for policies and strategies that reflect the perspectives and needs of women, girls and boys.

REFERENCES:


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