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The Girl Child: The Future Depends on Her

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Introduction

The treatment of women and girls is the greatest violation of human rights in our world today.

Ninety-three million women and girls are “missing” from the world population because of sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, malnutrition, abuse and neglect of girl children. This is roughly equivalent to all the deaths in all the wars of the 20th century – the most violent century in human history. This is a holocaust many times over.

So why don't we as citizens of the world hear of this tragedy?

What kind of world are we living in where 93 million lives can be extinguished just because they're girls? Where's our shame? Where's our moral outrage?

Gender discrimination is the greatest moral challenge of our age. And, we will be judged by history on how we respond to this challenge.

Basic issues

The developing world faces problems that affect the entire global community: hunger, poverty, HIV/AIDS and population growth. The developing world also has the most severe discrimination of women and girls.

These facts are *not unrelated*. This severe discrimination of women and girls is a primary cause of the persistence of these problems.

Let's look at the facts.

- The vast majority of the world's poor are women and girls.
- Women and girls are 80% of the world's refugees.
- Two-thirds of the world's illiterates are female.
- And, of the millions of children kept out of school - 2/3 are girls.

India has the 12th largest economy in the world. Sixty million tons of grain in storage. And it has one of the highest rates of childhood malnutrition. When this inexplicable phenomenon was studied by UNICEF, it was found that “the exceptionally high rates of malnutrition in India are rooted deep in the soil of inequality between men and women.”

Africa has the highest rates of HIV/AIDS transmission in the world. This is a pandemic and there are two reasons for it: men have unsafe sex with multiple partners, and women lack the power to negotiate if or how sex takes place.

And, while it is well known that women and girls are the most affected by society’s problems, what is less well known is that the empowerment of girls and women has the greatest overall positive effect on the entire society.

Recent analysis by the World Bank and other institutions indicates that when women and girls are empowered, the overall health and well-being of a society is greatly improved:

- Decreased population growth
- Faster economic growth
- Less corruption in governance
- There is increased agricultural production
- More children go to school
- Health hazards are reduced
- And there is lower childhood malnutrition and lower child mortality

Today’s girls are tomorrow’s women. Girls cannot advance without the advancement of women. And no improvement in women’s lives will be sustained unless girls have education, good health and the opportunity to achieve their potential.

The Life of a Girl Child

As a human family, we are doing a really terrible job of taking care of our girl children.

While there are many countries where little girls are cherished, loved, and cared for, the vast majority of girls live in countries where this is *not* so. It is the condition of girls in these countries that is so critical to our future.

This is not to deny or diminish the desperate lives led by many of the world’s boys. Boys are conscripted as soldiers, trafficked in the sex trade and 40 million boys worldwide are without access to basic education. As appalling and unacceptable as these facts are, they in no way compare to the tragic conditions and mistreatment of our girls.

A little girl eats last and least and she is up to three times more likely than boys to suffer malnutrition.

She is often not taken to the doctor when she is sick and she is less likely to be immunized.

Girls are often kept out of school and put to work. Whether at home, in factories or in the field, little girls are at work. She starts work at a very young age, and works from dawn to dusk, proving the adage “A girl is never a child.”

If she does go to school, she’s still at risk. Rather than being a safe refuge and a source of empowerment, the school situation is often dangerous. A recent study showed that 32% of reported child rapes in South Africa were committed by school teachers.

This is the life of a girl in the developing world, if she is allowed to live at all. Each and every year, millions of sex-selective abortions are performed, virtually always on female fetuses.

If you go to one of the poorest states in India and take a car from the capital to the most remote village, you will not find health clinics, sanitation or clean water. What you *will* find is the latest technology to determine the sex of a fetus.

It is estimated that annually 1 million female fetuses are aborted in China and 5 million in India, even though laws have been passed to stop this despicable practice.

In addition to feticide, there is female infanticide – babies killed at birth – again, just because they are girls.

Infanticide occurs in 17 countries. In India alone, more than 10,000 girl babies are victims of infanticide each year. Many people feel that the actual number is much higher. This is nothing short of murder.

In China and India, there are growing disparities between the number of men and the number of women. In some areas, the disparity is as great as 710 women for every 1000 men.

If it doesn’t kill her by infancy, violence is an ever present danger throughout her girlhood and throughout the rest of her life.

If she is a girl in Africa, the Middle East or other parts of the world, she may be subjected to Female Genital Mutilation. Two million girls, usually between the ages of four and eight, fall victim to this practice each and every year.

Early in a girl’s life, she is often forced into sexual relations. 50% of *all* sexual assaults are committed against girls age 15 or younger.

She is married without her consent and becomes pregnant long before her body is ready. The leading cause of death for girls age 15-19 is complications from pregnancy.

Annually, two million girls between the ages of five and 15 are forced into the commercial sex market.

By the time she is 15, a girl is most likely malnourished, unhealthy, and has little or no education. She has worked the majority of her life. And she's been mistreated, exploited and abused, probably by someone she knows.

And, with each new generation of girls who continue to be mistreated, those basic issues that face our human family continue to be perpetuated.

The time is now

It doesn't need to be this way. And it can not continue to stay this way if we want a healthy, productive, just and peaceful world.

Kofi Annan has said: "There is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition and promote health – including helping to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS."

USAID has stated, "We know that girls' education is perhaps the single most important investment a developing country can make."

And from the World Food Program we hear "If we want to change the world – and we all do – there is one way to do that: educate girls."

The constraints and the shackles that have been put on girls' lives for centuries are beginning — just beginning—to be removed.

- China launched a "Caring for Girls" program to combat sex-selective abortion.
- Over the past 30 years, the number of teenage girls who marry young has declined both in South Asia and in Africa.
- In Bangladesh, over the past 10 years, a scholarship program has resulted in doubling the number of girls in high school.
- Nigeria now has a law requiring girls to remain in school to complete their education.
- In Ghana, the Ministry of Education initiated a Math and Science clinic specifically for girls.
- February 9, 2004 marked the first International Zero Tolerance of Female Genital Mutilation Day. And ten African countries have recently criminalized this practice.
- Kenya has raised the penalty for child rape to a mandatory life sentence. Previously, this crime was rarely, if ever, punished.
- And in 2004, for the very first time, Afghan women and girls competed in the Olympics Games.

We're at a moment in history when finally a girl's value to society can be recognized and supported, enabled and empowered.

The Hunger Project

The Hunger Project has made the empowerment of women its highest priority. Through our commitment to women and the success of our work, the lives of girls are being transformed. Here's how:

In Africa, in The Hunger Project's HIV/AIDS and Gender Inequality Workshop, adolescent girls and women learn to protect themselves from unsafe sex.

In our **African Woman Food Farmer** credit program, in order for a woman to receive a loan, her daughters must be in school.

In India, the women trained in our **Women's Leadership Workshop** now stand up to their families to protect their daughters from being forced into early marriage.

Five years ago in Bangladesh, The Hunger Project created **National Girl Child Day**. Each year, even in the most remote corners of the country, hundreds of thousands of girls march and speak out. They are lauded in the media. The girl child is celebrated for who she is and what she means for the future of Bangladesh.

And in Latin America, at the Fourth Continental Meeting of Indigenous Women in Peru, women from 20 countries declared their commitment to train girls as tomorrow's leaders.

We are making this issue known worldwide. I speak at international conferences, I have testified before the US Congress, and I am a member of the Hunger Task Force of the United Nations Millennium Project.

What needs to be done?

And it is clear to me that it is time for a new kind of action. It is time to change the way we do business.

Even if every country in the developing world increases its education budget, there is no assurance that girls will be educated.

If every country increases its health budget, there is no assurance that little girls will be healthier.

Unless a government takes specific actions on behalf of women and girls, increased funding will only perpetuate and widen the gender gap. And the world's basic problems will persist.

And so I recommend the following actions to governments:

- I would mandate **farm extension agents** to actually show up and work with the women farmers to increase their incomes and reduce their drudgery, since it is the daughters who inevitably share and inherit their mother's workload.
- I would expand the mandate of the **health workers and midwives** to teach mothers to breastfeed their girl babies as long as their boy babies. And ensure that their daughters are as well fed as their sons.
- I recommend that governments provide **scholarships for girls** through secondary school, and provide incentives to parents to keep their girls in schools.
- I would expand the mandate of **school teachers** to create equal opportunities for girls to learn and to become leaders. And there would be zero tolerance for violence against girls in school.
- It is essential for governments to provide farm extension agents, health workers and teachers with **adequate supplies and sufficient training**.
- It is also essential for governments to increase – and increase *significantly* the number of women in these professions.
- The developed world can express its partnership by increasing the amount of aid, and making all development aid conditional on countries improving the lives of women and girls.

Conclusion

We know what the world looks like with half of its population devalued – with half of its population treated as inferior and insignificant.

We truly don't have a clue what the world would look like if girls and women could express themselves and be "everything they can be."

At a minimum, we would live in a more peaceful and humane world: a world with greater social justice, economic progress, lower population growth and better health.

One thing is clear, and it is unequivocally clear – the world would be a lot better place than the one in which we are living today.