“Born in one of the poorest regions of the world, I am one of the most disadvantaged people on Earth. Because I am a Girl, I will have fewer chances at every stage of life. I am less likely to go to school than my brothers. Because I am a Girl, I am likely to be forced to marry early, to a man two, three or even four times my age; to be subjected to violence, and have my sexual rights controlled by others. Because I am a Girl, I am too easy to ignore. But I am also a symbol of hope, Because I am a Girl. With a good education, I can in turn educate my community, and my country. I will earn more in the future, marry later and have fewer, healthier children. I have the right to this education, and I have the power to break the cycle of poverty forever, Because I am a Girl. You can help me, and four million girls like me, achieve our dreams. Because I am a Girl, I want to go to school, to learn the skills I need to succeed in life. I want to escape a life of poverty and help make a better future for everyone. If you believe in me, and millions of girls like me, raise your hand now.” This is the story of millions of girls living in poverty around the world. Help them escape this life and achieve their dreams. With your support, they can realise their potential. www.raiseyourhandnow.com
EU wise to invest in girls’ future

VERONIQUE MATHELU, JEAN LAMBERT, EDITTE ESTRELA, KATARÍNA NEVEDALOVÁ, ROBERTA ANGELILLI

“Girls’ education could boost sub-Saharan Africa’s agricultural output by up to 25%.”

Girls around the world deserve this day; they, and the contribution they are capable of making to the wellbeing of their communities and countries, deserve to be celebrated. They deserve to be heard, and to be recognized as the drivers of change they are and will become. Forgetting about girls means failing both them and young women. Forgetting that girls are more likely to be denied education, healthcare, freedom, democracy and human rights. That is not what international human rights standards and obligations prescribe.

The celebration of this day is the result of the persistent commitment of many individuals and organizations, including girls themselves. At EU level, we worked closely with civil society – particularly Plan, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girls Scouts, and the European Parliamentary Forum – and last year our fellow deputies demonstrated their solidarity by adopting our Written Declara- tion just days before the United Nations General Assembly officially designated 11 October as the International Day of the Girl Child. The European Parliament is rightly proud of its role as a bastion of freedom, democracy and human rights, and we have sent a strong signal that we stand united behind this cause.

Girls’ rights must be a priority

ROBERTA ANGELILLI

President of the European Parliament

Girls’ rights must be a priority, because we know that this investment will be paid back – with interest. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, it’s estimated that as many as 1.8 million children’s lives could have been saved last year if their mothers had received a secondary education, while the region’s agricultural output could be boosted by as much as 25% through girls’ education.

We should also condemn inequalities between girls and boys, whether at school, in social activities, care ser- vices, sports and in building relationships. The EU is a significant global actor and must, by its own action, make awareness of children’s rights.

Let’s not forget that times are also tough for our own citizens, and we have a responsibility to ensure their money is used wisely. We have an obligation to ensure the value of every cent is maxi- mized. There is no better investment than in a better future for all. That future starts with girls.
Better education for girls: better future for the world

Andris Piebalgs: Every development programme must contain the “female factor”

As I travel around the world to see the European Commission’s work in developing and partner countries I see time and time again how important women and girls are in helping their local communities to progress. Girls really can be the agents of change, but too often they are held back by poverty. The statistics speak for themselves and are a terrifying reminder of how much more needs to be done. Some 72 per cent of those living in Africa with HIV are females. One out of every three girls worldwide is denied an education, instead having to work or help to feed and look after their families, from an early age. Yet it’s also clear that investing in girls, particularly in education, makes a huge difference to both the girl and her community. It’s happening here, for example, that when a girl in the developing world receives seven or more years of education, she marries four years later and has fewer children. When women and girls are in school, they earn 30 per cent more at it into their families, as compared to only 10 per cent for a man. Women who spend more years in education have better maternal health, fewer and healthier children and greater job prospects.

The impact of education for girls goes beyond gender equality, it has positive impact on health, on population, on economic development, on civic engagement and more. The completion of nine years of education for girls can be considered a key measure of progress towards the transformational changes needed to reduce global poverty.

Once the framework is in place, there must be sufficient money available to ensure “the world we want” becomes a reality. EU member states and the European Commission are providing the opportunity to look at how we can really give girls the tools that they need to become the future of development.

European Week of Action for Girls

Girls’ rights are not often the centre of attention. But the European Week of Action for Girls, which takes place from 8-12 October, aims to change that. This week of events and activities is a moment to focus on the particular challenges and opportunities that come with being a girl. The highlight of the Week of Action is the first ever International Day of the Girl Child, which will be celebrated in Brussels and in national capitals around the world on 11 October. This is a chance to think about how far we have come in terms of gender equality, and remind ourselves how far we still have to go. Girls’ rights are human rights. That means they apply to all girls, everywhere, and nobody can take them away. The reality, however, is somewhat different. Around the world, girls’ rights are undervalued with impunity. Girls, who are one of the most vulnerable groups on the planet, face multiple challenges in accessing their rights. The European Week of Action for Girls will confront these challenges, providing the EU with recommendations on what needs to be done to overcome them.

The European Week of Action for Girls is organised by Plan EU Office under the patronage of the President of the European Parliament and in partnership with United Nations Brussels, supported by partner civil society organisations.

Follow the debate on Twitter #weekOfAction. For more information, go to www.plan-eu.org

"I want to see a world where we shouldn’t have a campaign on girls’ education anymore. A world in which it is a given that girls should go to school. No ifs, no buts.”

2011 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE CO-LAUREATE LEYMAH GBOEWEE
International Day of the Girl Child

Every day should be the Day of the Girl

Standing together, today and tomorrow

What about girls with disabilities?

Catherine Ashton: “Ensuring girls feel respected and valued in society is the first step to breaking down discriminatory barriers.”

Catherine Ashton: High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice President of the European Commission

I am frequently reminded that everything I do as EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy affects the lives of girls. I see this every time I meet people struggling against daunting odds to give their families a better future, such as Nita, a 16-year-old in Haiti, or Lala, a 14-year-old from Pakistan. I am shocked but not surprised by statistics that show that women make up two thirds of the world’s poor and children make up one third of the world’s population. Yet it is a sad reality that the discrimination that girls often face does not receive the attention it deserves. I have made a strong commitment to both children’s rights and gender equality, and I am proud to help facilitate the first ever International Day of the Girl Child.

We know the power that can be unleashed by investing in girls. Every extra year a girl spends in school is likely to improve her health and result in smaller families, greater income for her family and a greater sense of empowered participation by her community and her nation.

We are getting close to achieving gender parity in primary schools, but far too many girls drop out rather than go to secondary school. We need to concentrate on what is holding girls back. That is why I strongly support UN Women. I want it to be properly supported and funded. I was delighted to sign an agreement with Michelle Bachelet to allow greater EU-UN Women cooperation.

The European External Action Service, which I head, is also pursuing specific initiatives to fight the harmful traditional practices that are barriers to girls, such as early and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation. Indeed, I have long fought to end the scandal of early and forced marriages. As a UK government minister before joining the EU, I secured a new law banning forced marriages in Britain – including banning people from taking British girls abroad to enter into forced marriage. I was delighted to support Plan’s campaign at last year’s Commonwealth Summit, which agreed to push this important cause higher up the Commonwealth’s agenda.

One in three girls in the developing world is married by the age of 16. One in seven marries before they reach 15. Married young girls are often taken out of school, and are at a higher risk of HIV infection, early pregnancy and disease. In some countries – such as Niger, Chad, Mali, and Bangladesh – the rate of early and forced marriage is 50 per cent or even more. It is terrible statistic that one thousand girls die every day, mostly in the poorest world, in childbirth. What should be one of the happiest days of their lives is for many the most dangerous. Even if a teenager survives childbirth, her children are less likely to survive infancy than if she had been to school, continuing the cycle of poverty for generations to come.

The solution lies in addressing the root causes of poverty and social stigma, as well as introducing new laws against early marriage, and programmes that encourage families to choose educated marriages. This is not an overnight project, but a longer-term commitment to change what in some cases are long-established practices. It is important work.

Following the momentum events of the ‘Arab Awakening’, I have made sure that the active involvement of women in North African societies at every level is central to the EU’s policy in that region.

The EU now works in Egypt, Libya and, with UN Women, in Tunisia, to advance the rights of girls and women. We are funding programmes in nine countries, specifically to implement gender commitments such as combating one of the great, hidden scourges of so many countries, rich and poor: domestic violence against women. A €46m programme on gender equality was approved last year in Morocco for women and men to influence development programmes and policies equally.

Ensuring that girls feel respected and valued in society is the first step to breaking down discriminatory barriers, and in building more prosperous societies for men and women alike. I hope that the International Day of the Girl Child will be an opportunity, not only to highlight the challenges faced by girls around the world, but also a moment to celebrate their accomplishments and their potential.

Catherine Ashton: “Ensuring girls feel respected and valued in society is the first step to breaking down discriminatory barriers.”

Standing together, today and tomorrow

MICHÉLE BACHELET, UN Women Executive Director

All of us at UN Women are so excited about this first International Day of the Girl Child. We are excited because girls have rights that need to be respected. Girls demand equal rights, equal opportunity and equal participation. We all are equal. Yet today too many girls suffer sexual abuse and violence. Some 32 million girls are not in primary school. Too many girls are married while they are still children. And too many adolescent girls are denied their right to sexual and reproductive health information and services.

Girls around the world want their voices to be heard and they want their rights to be promoted and protected. Research shows that investing in girls is one of the best investments to reduce poverty, improve health and education standards and advance equality. We need to learn from girls and support their courage and creativity. When girls cannot reach their potential, this is a loss to all of us. As long as girls continue to face violence and discrimination, as long as girls are married against their will as child brides, as long as girls are deprived of their voice and their choices, as long as girls are robbed of their hopes and dreams, denied their dignity, denied their basic rights, then we have lost something. We will stand beside girls to support their rights.

We will work with governments and all our partners to enact laws, to adopt policies and to design programmes that protect girls’ rights and advance their education, health and well-being. Programmes that should be there for girls to live their dreams for their future. We will work to create conditions that encourage families to choose educated marriages. That is why I strongly support UN Women. We need to ensure that our partners have the tools to work together to advance gender equality. Equality is smart. Equality is healthy. Equality benefits families and communities and makes nations stronger. Let us work for a world where every girl and woman can live free of fear, violence and discrimination.

Together, every day, let’s make lasting progress so that girls today, tomorrow, and for generations to come, can live the futures they want.

When girls cannot reach their potential, this is a loss to all of us

Photo: The Sound of the European Union

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Photo: UN Women/Karim Selmaoui
Learning for life: From poverty to opportunity
DEEPALI SOOD
Because I am a Girl
Global Campaign Director

Globally, one in three girls is denied an education by the daily realities of poverty, discrimination and violence. Too often, poverty forces families to choose which of their children to keep in school. When faced with this impossible choice, girls are the ones who lose out, because they are valued less than boys. Many girls instead become child brides – married off due to tradition, or because they will be one less mouth to feed, when in reality it will leave them more vulnerable to violence, isolation and discrimination. Learning opportunities, a right within, and through education – a right that gender equality is a basic human right for everyone.

Achieving girls’ rights and a more gender equal society benefits everyone

But even if girls are lucky enough to make it into the classroom, their challenges don’t end there. When girls reach puberty, many will face an increased threat of abuse and violence, including for grades and sexual harassment. One young girl from Sierra Leone explains, “My mathematics teacher asked me to fall in love with him, but I found it difficult to imagine that girl. “My mathematics teacher asked me to fall in love with him, but I found it difficult to imagine that girl.

Not only is this unjust, it’s also a huge waste of potential with serious global consequences, because ensuring a quality education for girls is one of the single best investments we can make to help and support girls. We believe educating girls is the right thing and the smart thing to do. We know from research that if girls receive at least nine years of quality education they themselves become agents of change: they marry later; they are able to bring up their children healthier; they will become economic actors; they will have higher self-esteem and take part in the political process in their country. That is why UNESCO has placed gender equality at the heart of all its work.

The stakes are high. Girls and women have far fewer opportunities to access and complete education than their male counterparts. This is a cause and also a result of multiple, often overlapping reasons including poverty, geographical isolation, early marriage and pregnancies, gender-based violence and other discriminatory socio-cultural practices and attitudes. The progress and retention of girls in school is affected also by negative gender stereotypes and discrimination in education laws, policies, learning content, and teaching practices along with unequal and unsafe learning environments and school-related gender-based violence.

UNESCO acts at multiple levels to tackle these challenges. Our position is that gender equality is a basic human right to, within, and through education – equal to education, in terms of equal access to learning opportunities, a right within education, in terms of gender-sensitive content, teaching practices, environment and treatment, and a right through education, in terms of learning outcomes, life and work opportunities.

Advocacy is our first task, and this draws on a unique evidence base – including the flagship EFA Global Monitoring Report, which contains extensive gender analysis and new statistical tools, and also the newly launched World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education.

IRINA BOKOVA
Director General of UNESCO

Education for girls and women is a basic human right and a breakthrough strategy for sustainable development. This is why UNESCO is promoting education and gender equality through formal schooling as well as alternative, non-formal learning opportunities. As the lead agency of the Education for All (EFA) movement, UNESCO has placed gender equality at the heart of all its work.

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‘Blatant’ gender disparities in transition from primary to secondary

UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova with aspiring scientists from a French high school on the occasion of World Teachers’ Day 2011

To succeed, we need to act quickly, with focus and across the board

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EU must ensure girls realise their human right to health

ELISA BALDINI
Action for Global Health

Health is a human right and all human rights should apply to people everywhere. However, this is not a reality for vulnerable groups, like women and children. For young girls being a child and a female can prove to be a double disadvantage. Girls face particular challenges. During early childhood, the neglect of young girls’ health care and nutrition leads to high girl-child mortality. Later in life, girls may be forced into marriage, which often results in early pregnancy and prevents them from going to school. Not receiving an education makes girls more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and to sexually transmitted infections, as they are not empowered to know their rights and in many areas are unable to provide for themselves. In 2009, girls accounted for nearly two-thirds of new HIV infections among women, who now make up 60 per cent of the 15 to 24 year olds living with HIV. Girls are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and to sexually transmitted infections,

FIONA SALTER and EMMA DUDDING
IPPF and PPEN

There is consensus that girls are central to development. Yet, girls continue to bear the brunt of poverty and ill-health, including maternal mortality, unsafe abortion and HIV. Issues relating to girls’ sexuality and their sexual and reproductive rights remain largely neglected. Some 14 million girls between 15 and 21 give birth each year. For them, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death. Some 80 million girls in developing countries will be married before their 18th birthday. This will disrupt their education, even though women with more years of schooling have better maternal health, fewer and healthier children and greater economic opportunities. Biologically, girls’ health can be more vulnerable than men’s. Of particular concern are the dramatic increases in HIV infection among young women, who now make up 60 per cent of the 15 to 24 year olds living with HIV. Girls are also more exposed to various forms of violence from harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and the growing problem of trafficking to early and forced marriage. Differences in the way girls and boys are raised and treated are at the root of sexual and reproductive ill-health and development challenges. For boys, adolescence can mean new freedoms and greater participation in community life. Girls, however, may face the opposite restrictions in their access to choices, education, services and support. Traditional gender roles give girls little say about their own hopes and dreams. Yet we know it is possible to take effective practical actions that enable girls to tackle gender inequality and ill-health and to fulfil their potential.

The Millennium Development Goals have given policy-makers a unifying framework for global development...
Georgieva: We live in ‘an increasingly fragile world’

LOUISE HAGENDUK
Plan EU Office

Living in “an increasingly fragile world”, EU humanitarian aid Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva has never been more concerned about averting crises before they arise. “I have one single minded objective, and it is to make humanitarian action more effective as early as possible,” she told Karen Schriber, Head of Plan EU Office, in an exclusive interview. “We must move to action early to prevent suffering rather than reduce it… My obsession is with preparedness, prevention, disaster risk reduction.”

This, she says, depends on much greater coordination between humanitarian aid and development actors, tackling both the immediate emergency and the structural causes of vulnerability. “If we combine our muscle, we can have real impact,” Georgieva said, “because an emergency is not a one-off, it is a crisis that we have to deal with decades.”

Humanitarian aid can be an instrument for longer term resilience,” explained Georgieva, who is a former World Bank Director for Sustainable Development. “Building our strength together, we can prepare.”

Last year, the European Commission spent €1.4bn on humanitarian interventions, reaching 110 million people. With cities for the better, ensuring vulnerable populations become more prepared and are not affected by disasters is of the utmost importance. “We know the EU funds humanitarian activities – a significant increase since 2010. “The results are not just very good, they are originating in the context of hardship at home,” she said. “When there is a crisis, it generates a tremendous outburst of support from Europe.”

In humanitarian emergencies, she said, “We do not take such generosity for granted. It is our duty to do our utmost to deliver aid and protection in a compassionate, professional and efficient way.”

This challenge will be how to maintain this support for spending on prevention, rather than response. As Georgieva explained, it is unfortunately easier to raise money for humanitarian action when a situation has already reached crisis point. “People just don’t want to see children dying,” she added.

“Traditional” development organisations such as Plan are ideally suited to support Georgeva realise her long term vision. “Our work is grounded on the needs of the communities we work with, and our staff have built up expertise and relationships over an extended period of time.” And, crucially, “We remain accountable to our development cooperation counterpart.”

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Kristalina Georgieva, European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response

"Education makes the difference between the capacity to be independent, to hold your life in your hands and make decisions for yourself, and not having it. My message to the women in Congo, in the Sahel, everywhere is: send your girls to school. This is the best you can do for their future.”

KRISTALINA GEORGIEVA, EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, HUMANITARIAN AID AND CRISIS RESPONSE

Girls in emergencies: Making the choice

Within the aid sector, 2012 has seen an increased focus on the specific effects emergencies on adolescent girls. From the Coalition for Adolescent Girls releasing a May report entitled “Missing the Emergency” stating the priorities for “how to help girls in emergencies” to the UK’s Department for International Development and the Nike Foundation committing €100m to adolescent girls, it’s a sign of the times.

This year, MDGs are expected to be reached in 2015. But the programme interventions can include programmes for girls and young women, with a particular focus on water, sanitation and hygiene. The aim is to help to make these girls financially literate. Progress has been made, but with the combination of increased food prices, the effects of climate change and the need to feed the world’s growing population, the challenges are immense.

Partis of Cameroon have been devastated by the worst flooding in a generation.

KATIE TONG
Plan International Specialist on Adolescent Girls in Emergencies

The response to every disaster is different and, often, fraught with difficulty. “In any emergency, children – girls in particular – are among the most vulnerable, and the role NGOs play in identifying and prioritising needs is critical to donors such as the European Commission. “We are always driven by a good assessment of needs – who are the most vulnerable, who are they,” said Georgieva. “For this, we rely on our partners, like Plan or UniC, to be able to direct assistance to these people.”

The Sahel, in particular, faces multiple risks when a disaster occurs. Citing a 2008 policy paper produced by the Commission which looked at children at risk of conflict and natural disaster, she argued, “Small things” can be done to improve the situation for girls, such as ensuring there is lighting and security in the bedroom area of camps.

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