Policy recommendations to the European Union

For millions of girls worldwide, their dreams, ambitions and plans are shattered simply because they are girls. **Poverty, discrimination and violence combine to deny millions of girls around the world their basic rights**, including to education, healthcare, adequate and nutritious food, and protection.

Girls are more likely to miss out on school, to be expected to participate in domestic chores and be married at a young age. They are also less able to make free choices, even concerning their own lives and bodies. Lastly, girls and women face a greater risk of suffering from gender-based violence.

The simple fact of **being born a girl is often the greatest barrier** they face to realising their human rights. Gender-based discrimination is often deeply rooted in social and cultural attitudes and norms, compounded by religion, and reinforced through discriminatory national legislation or policies, social structures, and education curricula.

Yet gender and age are just two reasons for discriminating against girls. In reality, a girl may suffer from **multiple forms of discrimination** if she also has disabilities, comes from a minority background, lives in a rural area, is poor, or suffers from any other discriminatory factor.

Experience shows that when girls are not explicitly mentioned as a unique cohort, interventions do not reach them. Girls face **particular and acute challenges** which are different to those of women, men, and boys. At the same time, girls’ experiences differ according to their age, with adolescent girls facing different challenges from younger girls.

However, if **girls are empowered to participate in decision-making, in the life of their communities and in economic, civic and political life, everyone stands to benefit**. Girls having access to education and economic activity, marrying later and having fewer and healthier children has a positive impact not only on their lives and the lives of their children, but also a country’s economic growth and overall development. For example, a 1% increase in girls’ secondary school attendance adds, on average, 0.3% to a country’s Gross Domestic Product.

The European Week of Action for Girls 2013 therefore calls on the EU institutions to promote and protect all girls’ rights worldwide by ensuring **girls are visible in policies and programming**. By doing so, the EU will play an important role in helping girls to unleash their potential as powerful drivers of change.

In this paper, we highlight a number of recommendations in key thematic areas of EU policy and programming, as well as improvements in policy-making processes which are fundamental to creating lasting change in girls’ lives and to enabling them to fulfil their potential, without any type of discrimination.
Improving policies and programmes

We urge the EU to increase its support to partner countries to offer a minimum of nine years of quality education in a safe and secure environment to all girls and boys.

Why?

Despite good progress towards gender parity in education, girls are still more likely than boys to drop out of school before they have completed the minimum recommended nine years of schooling. Child marriage and early pregnancy, gender-based violence, including in and around schools, and being forced to bear the brunt of domestic labour are but some of the barriers preventing girls from accessing and completing education.

However, it is not just a question of accessing and completing basic education which counts. To fully equip girls, as well as boys, for life, education must also be of good quality: in addition to literacy and numeracy, quality education must include critical thinking and life skills, and learning to be a responsible and active citizen. Teaching methods, curriculum and school governance must promote gender equality and convey values of human rights and non-discrimination.

Education must also be delivered in a safe and secure learning environment that is girl-friendly. While this is a particular challenge in fragile, emergency and conflict situations, education is critically important to girls in these contexts as it also plays an awareness-raising and protection role.

What should the EU do?

I. Work closely with governments of partner countries to put gender equality at the heart of all national policies and programmes on education; encourage partner countries to conduct a gender review of their Education Sector Plans and support action to address the identified gaps.

II. Increase funding for secondary education, but at a minimum ensure that nine years of education are fully funded for all children.

III. Emphasise the improvements in quality that are needed to ensure that girls are able to develop to their full potential.

IV. Highlight that measures must be taken to reduce gender-based violence in and around schools if girls are to complete basic education.

V. Ensure that the provision of safe spaces and education is an integral part of all humanitarian responses within the first phase.

We urge the EU to prioritise girls as a target group in its support to health systems strengthening in partner countries.

Why?

Girls face unique health risks and have different health needs from women, men and boys. In many parts of the world, girls are less likely to have the resources to protect their health, and tend to have less access to health information and appropriate health care, in particular sexual and reproductive health services and information.¹

One thousand girls die every day in childbirth, mainly in low- and middle-income countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, more than 60% of adolescents who wish to avoid pregnancy do not have access to modern contraception, among whom 80% will face unintended pregnancy, often forcing girls to drop out of school.² An estimated 7.3 million young women live with HIV and AIDS, in comparison to 4.5 million young men.³

Despite these specific health-related challenges, there is a widespread lack of services tailored to girls' needs and many obstacles to accessing healthcare, many of which are linked to discrimination and particularly concern marginalised groups, while others include the (distant) location of the health service, inconvenient hours, concerns about confidentiality or high costs.

What should the EU do?

I. Prioritise girls as a target group in EU support to health systems strengthening and in all policy and political dialogues with partner countries.

II. Support partner countries to ensure full access to available, accessible, affordable and quality healthcare, offering girl-friendly and girl-specific services and information, including comprehensive sexuality education for both girls and boys.

III. Allocate 20% of EU development funding available under the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework and 11th European Development Fund to health and basic education.

We urge the EU to work with partner countries to produce fully costed nutrition plans focusing on girls' and women's needs and combatting discrimination in food intake.

Why?

Malnutrition is an underlying cause of 2.3 million children’s deaths per year. Furthermore, it contributes to limited cognitive development and seriously impacts on a child’s chances of achieving their full potential, thereby locking them into a cycle of poverty and perpetuating inequalities. Owing to discrimination against girls, they are even more likely than boys to suffer from undernutrition, wasting and stunting. In many cultures, social norms prevent women and girls from accessing sufficient food, especially when food is short (for example, men and boys eat before women and girls).

Lack of adequate nutrition from an early age affects a girl not only as a child but also into her adult years and leads to problems during pregnancy and childbirth. A woman suffering from malnutrition is more likely to give birth to low-weight children who in turn are more likely to die during infancy or to experience physical and mental underdevelopment. The consequences are even more severe in the case of adolescent pregnancies as girls' bodies are not yet fully developed and are forced to compete with the foetus for important nutrients.

**What should the EU do?**

I. Encourage others to show strong political leadership in tackling undernutrition, to ensure adequate nutrition for all.

II. Offer technical and financial support to countries to produce fully costed nutrition plans which include investments in the 13 proven interventions. Such plans should have a particular focus on women and girls from adolescence through child-bearing age and all children during the critical 1000-days window of opportunity.

III. Prioritise awareness-raising in nutrition policies and programmes in order to address the root causes and effects of gender inequality in nutrition.

IV. Ensure a nutrition-sensitive approach to EU policies with a significant impact on nutrition, such as agriculture, so that they support the EU's nutrition objectives as set out in its Communication on Enhancing Maternal and Child Nutrition in External Assistance.

**We urge the EU to work with partner countries to strengthen national child protection systems and prioritise gender-based violence.**

**Why?**

Violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect faced by millions of children, and by girls in particular, remain a major problem impacting on their physical, psychological, emotional and social development. 150 million girls across the world are subjected to sexual violence and it is estimated that more than one-third of women experience physical or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime. Each year, 14 million girls are married before the age of 18 and three million girls and women are subjected to female genital mutilation. During emergencies and conflict situations, girls are even more vulnerable to gender-based violence and exploitation.

National child protection systems are often weak, fragmented and under-resourced, particularly in low-income countries, with situations of conflict, disaster or fragility only serving to weaken still further national or community protection schemes.

**What should the EU do?**

I. Provide technical and financial assistance to countries to support the establishment of comprehensive, adequately resourced child protection systems.

II. Support partner countries to take specific measures to identify and address violence and abuse faced by children, with a particular focus on gender-based violence.

III. Increase knowledge and understanding of and address the implications of situations of fragility, conflict and disasters on girls and the levels of violence or exploitation they face.

IV. Ensure that, in emergency situations, implementing organisations include a gender and age analysis so that targeted action can be taken to increase the protection of girls and bridge the gender gap in access to humanitarian assistance.

**We urge the EU to adopt a true Human Rights-Based Approach to all its policies, but especially to those impacting on marginalised people in partner countries**

**Why?**

All children, regardless of age, sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, have the same human rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which regroups all the rights that children have, be they civil, political, economic, social or cultural, has been ratified by all EU member states, and the internal policies of the EU and its external relations are based on the full respect and promotion of the Convention’s principles. As such, the EU and its member states have both a legal and moral obligation to progressively realise all of its provisions.

A human or child rights-based approach to development policy is guided by the values, norms and principles of international human rights law. It creates a framework for a more inclusive, participatory way of doing development, enabling and empowering those not enjoying their rights to claim them and highlighting the accountability of governments and other actors to respect, protect and fulfill obligations and responsibilities towards children. Outcomes are monitored and evaluated in terms of their children’s rights impacts.

**What should the EU do?**

I. Strengthen the pillars of a child rights-based approach in all the EU’s work, emphasising non-discrimination and equality, participation and empowerment, and accountability.

II. Ensure that a ‘do no harm’ approach is applied across all EU policies and monitor them for any potentially negative impact on children’s, and especially girls’, rights.

III. Establish consultative mechanisms in order to include the voices of girls and boys in EU policy formulation and programming.

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We urge the EU to promote **just and inclusive governance** in international fora and with partner countries.

**Why?**

Poverty, inequality and human rights violations are not accidents of fate. They are the results of specific power relations and policy decisions which are discriminatory, exclusionary and unjust. In order for governance to be just, it must be human rights-based, participatory, transparent, equitable, accountable and it must guarantee access to justice, respect the rule of law and combat corruption. An important part of ensuring just governance is therefore the institutionalisation of norms and practices that allow women and girls to participate in decision-making at all levels, and to hold the government and state as a whole to account for the realisation of their rights. For this to be possible, girls need to be empowered from the earliest age and investment made in developing her skills to their fullest capacity.

**What should the EU do?**

I. Encourage partner countries to guarantee freedom of information and to provide civic education programmes to enable an informed, critical and meaningful engagement by civil society and individuals in decision-making and in monitoring budgetary and policy processes and outcomes.

II. Support programmes that actively promote the full and effective participation of young women and girls in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national policies and services.

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We urge the EU to fulfil its commitments to **Policy Coherence for Development**

**Why?**

A lack of policy coherence in areas such as climate change, trade, investment and finance, agriculture, energy, food security, health, migration, and conflict, fragility and security policies can have devastating effects on the poorest and most marginalised people in the world. Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) refers to the requirement for all actors to ensure that their policies in any area do not negatively impact on people’s prospects for progress or on the realisation of their rights and should, preferably, support those objectives. While the EU has a legal obligation under the Lisbon Treaty to ensure that all policies take account of the development objectives set out in the Treaty, including notably poverty eradication, in practice much progress is still needed in order to implement the commitments required to fulfil this ‘do no harm’ principle.

**What should the EU do?**

I. Establish a PCD mechanism which functions across all policy areas and includes a monitoring mechanism and a means for redress.

II. Ensure that indicators which are pertinent to girls are included in the impact assessments that must be carried out to determine policy coherence.

III. Work with other actors, including the private sector, to improve understanding of obligations not to violate or undermine the realisation of people’s rights.

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We urge the EU to make **Data Collection and Monitoring** relevant for girls.

**Why?**

Currently, data which is disaggregated by age and sex is rare, particularly qualitative data. Girls are not considered as a target group per se but are included either under child rights or gender empowerment projects in EU aid. Currently, only quantitative, often access related, statistics are reported. Qualitative data are not measured in the current Millennium Development Goals system or in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development database, and compliance with the international human rights framework and mechanisms is not included in current monitoring frameworks. Likewise, other key aspects of social and human development from a sustainability perspective such as decent work, quality education and healthcare are not taken into account. Finally, some crucial factors, such as the recognition of the unpaid work of women, or the value of the informal economy, are simply absent and have no accountability mechanisms.

**What should the EU do?**

I. Establish specific markers for measuring EU assistance to girls and ensure these are monitored.

II. Call for both qualitative and quantitative targets and indicators on girls within the post-2015 framework’s set of universal goals.

III. Support expanded gender-disaggregated and age-based research, at both national and regional levels.

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1 CONCORD-Beyond 2015 European Task Force paper, Putting People and Planet First : Business as Usual is not an Option, has been drawn on extensively for this section.

2 Reports include CONCORD’s biannual Spotlight on Policy Coherence for Development (most recent: Sept 2013); European Parliament Committee on Development Report on the EU 2011 Report on Policy Coherence for Development (2012/2063(INI))


Signed by:

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**European Week of Action for Girls**

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[Images and logos of various organisations associated with the European Week of Action for Girls]