

Foreword

This report 'Because I am a Girl' is a significant contribution to the efforts to document discrimination against girls and fight gender inequality. Even though women and girls represent over 50 per cent of the world's population, they occupy second-class status in every society. Gender inequality is pervasive and it begins before a girl child is even born. In every part of the world, families and societies treat girls and boys differently, with girls facing greater discrimination and accessing fewer opportunities and little or sub-standard education, health care and nutrition.

Whether she is born in Afghanistan or Zambia, the life of a girl – from the womb to childhood and then adolescence – is marred with neglect, disadvantage, and exploitation. The practice of female foeticide has resulted in a gender imbalance in some parts of the world and means that millions of girls who should be alive today are missing. Infant girls are less likely to survive than infant boys in some countries because of neglect. Despite consensus that female genital mutilation violates the health and human rights of girls, the phenomenon is widespread, with at least 2 million girls at risk of undergoing the practice every year. And while access to primary education for girls is expanding, many developing countries have

yet to achieve gender parity in primary and secondary education. If a girl does have access to school, she is more likely to drop out or be pulled out of school by her family than her brother. Becoming a teenager, means a new host of challenges for girls. Over 80 million girls in developing countries will be married before their 18th birthday. Girls are infected by HIV/AIDS in disproportionately high rates – three-quarters of the 15-24 year-olds infected with HIV, are young women and girls. Pregnancy is the leading cause of death for young women aged 15 to 19. Commercial sexual work, domestic work and other forms of child labour, trafficking and other forms of exploitation – the list of harmful actions faced by girls goes on.

Without gender equality none of the Millennium Development Goals will be achieved. That is why this report is so valuable. 'Because I am a Girl' documents the impact of gender inequality on the lives of girls. It shows clearly and powerfully that our failure to make an equal, more just world has resulted in the most intolerable of situations. In today's world, to discriminate on the basis of sex and gender is morally indefensible; economically, politically and socially unsupportable.

We have the legal instruments – in the form of the UN Convention on the Rights

of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), both signed and ratified by countless governments – to promote and protect the rights of girls. Now we must create strong national laws and implement the declarations and policies we have established. We must hold our decision-makers accountable, and work to change and educate society and families. We can no longer hide behind the defence of culture or traditional practices. We can no longer accept that girls should not be valued simply because they are not boys. And, we can no longer sit idly while our girls are abused, ignored and kept down. Some would argue that there's much we don't know; that we need more evidence and data before we implement programmes. There may be gaps in our knowledge, but we cannot let another minute go by without acting decisively and urgently. Unless we do, we will be condemning millions of girls to a life of poverty and hardship. There's too much at stake – our daughters and granddaughters are counting on us.

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