

Survival

100 million girls are missing

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Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 6

- States Parties recognise that every child has the inherent right to life.
- States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.

1. Introduction

*"Oh, God, I beg of you,
I touch your feet time and again,
Next birth don't give me a daughter,
Give me Hell instead..."*
Folk Song From Uttar Pradesh¹

Discrimination against girls begins at birth, or even before they are born, through attitudes and patterns in behaviour passed down through generations. The disadvantage of being born a girl today includes the facts that girls are more likely to be killed in the womb, girls are more likely to be malnourished, and young mothers are more at risk of developing serious complications both for the mother and her unborn child. These will all have an impact at every stage of a girl or young woman's life.

In many countries, the birth of a boy is something to be celebrated, the birth of a girl a cause for commiseration. One report notes that: "While a number of national and international legal norms protect the rights of the girl child in theory; in practice cultural and social beliefs about gender and the value of girls and boys have been much more difficult to overcome... By age five, most girls and boys have already

internalised the gender role expectations communicated to them by their families, schools, the media and society as a whole, and these norms will influence their behaviour and their development for the rest of their lives."²

A United Nations High Commission for Human Rights report singled out Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Turkey, the Cameroon, Liberia, Madagascar and Senegal as countries with a strong preference for boys.³ Although the situation is generally better in Latin America, in Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay, under five mortality rates are higher for girls than for boys, which is a sign that boys are the preferred sex.⁴ These figures are all the more worrying since baby girls are expected to survive due to their natural resilience at birth.

Much of this is to do with the fact that in some cultures, a boy will grow up and look after his parents, while a girl will be married into another family, and is therefore seen as a financial burden to her own parents. Except in a few matrilineal or similar societies (for example, in some regions of Ethiopia), a girl takes her husband's family name, dropping that of her family. She is brought up from an early age to see herself as less important than her male relatives. Her contribution to the household in terms of cooking, cleaning, looking after siblings and fetching water or fuel is not valued. Her lower social status will have serious consequences for her health and well-being as she grows up and has children herself. Her daughters too are likely to repeat the same cycle.



First born daughter

“I am the first child of my parents. I have a small brother at my home. If the first child were a son, my parents might be happy and would be confident as their future is assured by having a son. But I am a daughter. I complete all the household tasks, go to school, again do the household activities in the evening and at night only I do my school homework and I study. Despite all the activities, my parents do not give value or recognition to me. They only have praise for my brother, as he is the son.”
 Girl, aged 15, Nepal⁵

2. Female foeticide

*“When a son is born,
 Let him sleep on the bed,
 Clothe him with fine clothes,
 And give him jade to play...
 When a daughter is born,
 Let her sleep on the ground,
 Wrap her in common wrappings,
 And give broken tiles to play...”*
 Chinese ‘Book of Songs’ (1000-700 B.C.)⁶

The desire for a male heir is so strong in some countries that it can lead to the infanticide of female babies. A recent development of this has been an increasing number of abortions of female foetuses after an ultrasound reveals their sex. Estimates of the number of ‘missing’ girls and women due to such practices vary, but some are as high as 100 million.

Biologically, there should be more women than men in the world, as around 105 female babies are born to every 100 males. In Europe and North America, this is roughly the proportion of women to men. But in South Asia, West Asia, and China, the ratio can be as low as 94 women to 100 men. Professor Amartya Sen notes: “These numbers tell us, quietly, a terrible story of inequality and neglect leading to the excess mortality of women.”⁷

In China alone this amounts to 50 million ‘missing women’. In a 2002 survey conducted

in a central China village, more than 300 of the 820 women had had abortions and more than a third admitted they were trying to select their baby’s sex. “We have to act now or the problem will become very serious,” said sociologist Professor Xia Xueluan.⁸

In India, a study of 1.1 million households came to the conclusion that: “Based on conservative assumptions, the practice accounts for about 0.5 million missing female births yearly.” It continues: “Anecdotal evidence suggests that access to ultrasound is fairly widespread, even in rural areas, and although prenatal sex determination has been illegal since 1994 the law is often ignored.”⁹ Over the past two decades, this “translates into the abortion of some 10 million female foetuses.”¹⁰ The practice is more common among educated families than poor households.

In one clinic in India, a woman waits for an abortion. She has two daughters aged 11 and seven years, and has had nine abortions in the hope of having a son. “Dr Geeta gives everyone a son. I hope she will give me one as well,” she says fervently. When asked the reason for her desperation, her voice cracks, “I want a son as we have a big business. I want what my husband has built from ‘scratch’ to go to his own blood. I can’t think of adoption. My daughters will marry and go away; our son would stay and look after the family.”¹¹

In Pakistan the ‘cradle baby’ programme of the Edhi Foundation saves around 1,500 abandoned children a year. A white metal cradle, lined with a thin mattress, stands outside Edhi centre entrances. A nearby sign urges desperate parents to deposit infants there rather than do anything harsher. Of the children abandoned 80 per cent are girls.¹²

In India, there have been a number of campaigns to end the sex selection of boy children before birth. In Haryana State, where sex ratio imbalances are among the highest in the country, women have banded together to form *jagriti mandals* (forums of awakening) aimed at promoting the rights of their daughters. To counter huge profits in sex identification services and abortions, these groups convince families and doctors of the

broader social costs. In Punjab, religious leaders have issued diktats and have threatened to excommunicate couples who abort female foetuses.¹³ Plan, together with the Indian Government, produced a 13-part soap opera ‘Atmajaa’ (Born from the Soul) to highlight prenatal diagnostic tests and to try and change opinion on the issue. They felt that using a Bollywood style soap, rather than a lack-lustre government warning, would reach a wider audience and start the process of change.

In 2005 the well-known and colourful religious leader and social activist, Swami Agnivesh, led a caravan of 25 vehicles and 200 people across five Indian states to campaign against female foeticide. “If you want to save your religion, you have to save your daughter first. God created the same sun and moon for both the sexes, so who are we to discriminate against the girl child?”, he said.¹⁴

3. Birth registration

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 7

The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to be cared for by his or her parents.

Article 8

States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognised by law without unlawful interference.

“I got my affidavit of birth registration in 2005 thanks to Plan. I became very happy because my father kept saying that he did not have money to ensure my birth registration. The document permitted me to apply for and be admitted to sit the secondary school entrance examination. Many of my friends were rejected due to the lack of birth certificates.”

Mawoussé, aged 10, Benin.

“It is for this reason that some young girls get discouraged with school and drop out at a lower class in the primary school as they cannot write the class seven final examinations for lack of birth certificate. They then choose to accompany their mothers to the farms or marry. What fate awaits these young girls at this age when they are not able to continue school because of the birth certificate? Knowing that educating a girl is educating a nation; what type of a nation are we building if the young girl is not educated?”
Nan, aged 15, Cameroon.¹⁵

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states clearly that it is a child’s right to be registered at birth. And yet 36 per cent of births are not registered. This amounts to 48 million babies who do not have a record of their right to exist.¹⁶ This means it is much more difficult to open a bank account, get credit, vote, get a job or have access to health care and sometimes go to school. Birth registration also helps to prevent child labour, protects girls from early marriage and boys from underage conscription. So why is birth registration an important right for girls in particular? It gives them access to education and health services, but also can protect them from early marriage, child trafficking and abuse.

On average, over half of births in the developing world (excluding China) are not registered. In South Asia, this figure rises to over

Registered births in developing countries, percentages

(Data refer to the most recent year available during the period 1999-2005)¹⁸

	Urban	Rural
Sub-Saharan Africa	54	32
East and Southern Africa	44	28
West and Central Africa	59	34
South Asia	47	25
East Asia and Pacific (excluding China)	77	56
Latin America and Caribbean	92	78

UNICEF, The State of the World’s Children 2007



ADAM HINTON

Registered and proud: children in Paraguay display their birth certificates.

70 per cent. In Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Tanzania and Uganda the rate of birth registration is less than seven per cent.¹⁷ The registration rate is lower in rural than in urban areas.

Launching Plan's global campaign for universal birth registration, South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: "It's time we made this one of the priority concerns of the international community. What happens when you can't prove your birth or your nationality? It's about the right to an identity and it's something that from then on will give you access to the privileges and rights of a citizen."¹⁹

Birth registration campaigns are beginning to make a difference. Plan's global campaign

has led to five million children being registered since 2004.²⁰ For example, in Bangladesh, UNICEF is supporting birth registration campaigns in 17 districts, several municipalities and four city corporations, starting in 1997. By the end of 2003, more than five million children were registered.

Phina's case illustrates how birth registration is crucial for protecting girls' rights. She is a 13-year-old from Uganda who was sexually abused. Her father Mukasa wanted to bring a case against her abuser. But when he tried to do so, he could not prove that she was underage – because she had no certificate. Mukasa says: "If only I had registered my

daughter at birth, I would have won the case. I would have protected her." A campaign in the area is now helping people to realise just how important registration is. One young mother said: "I want to protect my children's inheritance and property. I want them to have what I never got; access to education. I want them to know and have proof of who their parents are. Above all, I want them to realise that they are citizens of Uganda."²¹

In Benin, research uncovered a "vicious cycle of no identification papers and no representation at decision-making level."²² Because women had no birth certificates, they were not eligible to stand for election. For example, at local council level, only 38 out of 1,119 councillors nationwide are women. As a result, women were not able to push for campaigns for birth registration. The research noted that: "The great majority of women willing to run for the elections could not produce two of the most critical legal papers: birth certificates and identity cards." This was not surprising, in view of the fact that certificates cost \$21, whereas most of the population earn under \$2 a day. A project was set up which held meetings and undertook publicity and advocacy work about the problems and cost of getting birth certificates and to look at the underlying reasons why. The project ended with 1,848 women acquiring birth certificates, some successful campaigning on cost, and a more general awareness-raising about the importance of registration.

A girl's first gift

This is the view of Seema, a 17-year-old girl from Bardarpur, India.

"I am a member of Bal-Panchayat (Children's Council), which is initiated by CASP-Plan in Delhi. It is a group of children who are aware about their rights and responsibilities. It uses many mediums to spread its messages such as rallies, street play, community fair, sports day, working on children's communication skill etc. It has around 1200 children as its members..."

"We give the information to the parents about the importance and advantages of birth registration. Recently we have organised a community level parents' meeting in Badarpur where the members of Bal-Panchayat conducted the meeting."

"We saw many changes in our communities through our activities but we have to face many problems. Sometimes people removed the posters that we put on the walls, sometimes they tease us especially during performing street plays. Sometimes we face problems in organising parents' meetings but our unity helps us to organise these activities smoothly."

"The future of India will be bright and strong when the government, the people and parents will give their children their identity. This is the demand of my group and mine that every child should get its rights. Every child should have his/her first gift as birth certificate."²³

4. A girl's right to life

Very little of the data on infant and child mortality rates makes a distinction between girls and boys. In general, male infant and child mortality rates should be higher than female rates as girls have a biological advantage over boys. But inadequate feeding and care can reverse this biological advantage. Where this is the case, it is often to do with gender discrimination. This is true in many parts of South Asia and in other countries as well. In Ecuador, in 2001, 132 girls died for every 108 boys in the first year of life.²⁴

In 2000, Millennium Development Goal Four pledged governments to reduce mortality in children aged younger than five by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015.

Each year 4 million newborns die before the age of 4 weeks.²⁶ In 2004, an estimated 10.5 million children and infants died before the age of five. That means 30,000 children dying every day. The health and survival of newborn

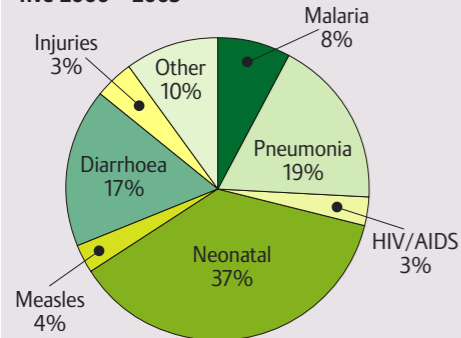
Under five mortality rates

(rate per 1,000 live births, 2004)²⁵

	1999	2004
Sub-Saharan Africa	188	169
Eastern and Southern Africa	167	146
Western and Central Africa	209	190
Middle East and North Africa	81	54
South Asia	129	84
East Asia and Pacific	58	33
Latin America and Caribbean	53	35
CEE/CIS	54	38
Industrialised countries	10	6
Developing countries	105	83
Least developed countries	182	153
World	95	76

UNICEF. The State Of The World's Children 2006.

Major causes of death among children under five 2000 – 2003²⁹



WHO. Child and Adolescent Health and Development. Integrated Management of Childhood Illness. Table "Major causes of death among children under 5 years of age and neonates in the world, 2000-2003." Available at: http://www.who.int/child-adolescent-health/OVERVIEW/CHILD_HEALTH/map_00-03_world.jpg.

children is closely linked to that of their mother. Poor children are more likely to die than those born in richer families – a survey of 56 countries showed that poorer children are more than twice as likely to die as children from richer families.²⁷ In Bolivia, for example, newborn babies born to poor families are 70 per cent more likely to die than those born in richer families.²⁸ The same is true for babies born in rural areas – in Bolivia, Niger, Peru and



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Vietnam, rural babies are 50 per cent more likely to die than those born in urban areas. And the real tragedy is that so many of these deaths are from preventable diseases.

Most deaths under one month old occur in the developing world where mothers may be undernourished, lack access to clinics, hospitals and antenatal care, or give birth in unhygienic surroundings. In the industrialised world, there are relatively few newborn deaths.

During the past two decades, child deaths have been decreasing. Two million fewer children died in 1999 than a decade earlier. But in some countries, the rates of decrease seem to be slowing down, and in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa child mortality is actually increasing and one in five children still die before the age of five. UNICEF reports that almost 100 countries, over 40 in Sub-Saharan Africa, are not on track to reach the goal of two-thirds reduction of the under-five mortality rate by 2015.

5. Girls who lose their mothers

The experience of birth can be a death sentence for many women. Every minute of every hour of every day, a woman meets her death during pregnancy or childbirth. An estimated 529,000 – 585,000 women³⁰ (no-one knows quite how many) die unnecessarily each year from pregnancy-related causes.

Weighing time in Senegal.

The survival of a child or infant is closely related to the survival and well being of their mother. A study in Kenya found that when a mother dies, only one-third of babies who survived the delivery were alive and healthy a year later.³¹ This pattern is repeated elsewhere, and is especially true of girl babies who are more likely to be neglected if their mother dies. In South Asia, a girl's chances of dying are increased by 400 per cent if her mother dies.³²

It also has an impact on the other female children in the family, as older female siblings are pulled out of school to look after the home if their mother dies in childbirth.

Many maternal deaths are the result of illegal abortions or lack of access to family planning. It is estimated that preventing unintended pregnancies through access to family planning could avert 20 to 35 per cent of maternal deaths. This would save the lives of more than 100,000 mothers a year and consequently many of their young children too.³⁴

6. Girls who become mothers

Pregnancy is the leading cause of death in young women aged 15-19. And the youngest mothers-to-be are the most vulnerable.³⁵ Young women, who have been married early and whose bodies are still not ready for them to become mothers, are especially at risk, as are their babies.

This is what happened to Amadou's sister, Khadja, in Mali:

"Khadja was my older sister. She died two years ago. She wasn't even 20 years old... She was only 14 years when she married but all the girls in our community marry very young... As the pregnancy advanced, my sister's husband wanted her to rest but my aunt refused, saying that Khadja was not the only woman who ever got pregnant. One day her waters broke when she was splitting wood. She carried on as if nothing had happened because she didn't understand what this meant. A couple of days later, Khadja had horrible pains. We did not take

A woman's lifetime risk of maternal death, by country³³

Top 10		Bottom 10	
Sweden	1 in 29,800	Sierra Leone	1 in 6
Slovakia	1 in 19,800	Angola	1 in 7
Austria	1 in 16,000	Malawi	1 in 7
Denmark	1 in 9,800	Niger	1 in 7
Canada	1 in 8,700	Sudan	1 in 7
Finland	1 in 8,200	Mali	1 in 10
Germany	1 in 8,000	Rwanda	1 in 10
Japan	1 in 6,000	Tanzania	1 in 10
Kuwait	1 in 6,000	Chad	1 in 11
Serbia and Montenegro	1 in 4,500	Burkina Faso	1 in 12
		Burundi	1 in 12

Save the Children, 2006. State of the World's Mothers. "Saving the Lives of Mothers and Newborns"

her to the hospital, which was far from the village. She died two days later, without anyone trying anything to save her. I think that the baby died inside her. My mother said this must have been meant to be, but deep down she has never accepted it and she still suffers."

Amadou, Mali³⁶

A Population Reference Bureau report from 2006 states the following about early pregnancy: "The highest proportion of births among young women occurs in Sub-Saharan Africa, where more than one in every four young women has a child by age 18. In South-Central and Southeast Asia, the odds are similar; while in Latin America, Western Asia, and North Africa, the chances of becoming a mother at a young age are much lower. For men, parenthood before age 18 is very rare in all regions."³⁷

Early pregnancy can kill³⁸

- 70,000 teenage girls in the developing world die from the complications of childbirth and pregnancy each year
- Girls aged 15-19 who get pregnant are twice as likely to die from pregnancy and childbirth than older women
- A study in Bangladesh shows that girls who become mothers between 10 and 14 are more than five times more likely to die than those aged 20 – 24

- **Babies born to adolescent girls have a 50 per cent higher chance of dying before their first birthday than babies born to women in their twenties**

Chapter 4 – *Health* goes into more detail on the subject of girls’ reproductive health.

7. Under fives, under threat – and especially if they are girls

One out of every four children under five is underweight.³⁹ Seventy-three per cent of these live in just 10 countries. Many suffer from vitamin A and iodine deficiency. In India, under-nutrition is the underlying cause for about 50 per cent of the 2.1 million deaths of children under five each year.⁴⁰ The numbers of girls and boys under five who are underweight is similar in all regions except South Asia, where 47 per cent of girls are underweight compared to 44 per cent of boys.⁴¹

The taste of watermelon

Seven-year-old **Rahera, from Afghanistan, eats her breakfast of bread every morning. The loaf must last three days for her family of five. At school she looks forward to a small pack of 12 biscuits from which she eats six and saves the rest for her two younger brothers. Rahera goes home for lunch, which is bread and a cup of tea. In the evening the family eats dinner, which is usually bread with some oil, and yoghurt with a little salt. Three times a week the family buys two glasses of yoghurt. When they have extra cash, they buy some onions. In summer they twice enjoyed a special treat – watermelon.**⁴²

It is clear from the statistics (where they exist) that girls are more likely to die of malnutrition than boys. For example, in Ecuador (2000), for every 69 boys aged 1-4 who died due to malnutrition, 91 girls died of the same cause; in Peru (2000), the ratio was 99:110 (boys: girls); in El Salvador (1999), the ratio is 12:12. In Uruguay, in 2000, four boys to every seven

girls died from nutritional deficiencies.⁴³

In Bangladesh, a baby girl is fed less and lower quality food than a boy. Girls have an 11 per cent higher under-five mortality rate than boys.⁴⁴ In Pakistan, 12 per cent more girls than boys die between the ages of one and four.⁴⁵ In India, girls are breast fed for shorter periods than boys; they are taken to fewer medical consultations, and often very late, or not at all, to hospitals; this is so especially in north India.⁴⁶

Comprehensive support for the poorest families has had a positive, and in some cases unintended, effect on nourishment and health of young girls. India’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the world’s largest integrated early childhood programme, focuses on millions of expectant and nursing mothers, and children under the age of six. The programme provides a package of services including supplementary nutrition, pre-school education, immunisation, health check-up, referral services and nutrition and health education. There is emerging evidence of its positive impact on the nutritional status of children who benefit from the programme.



Big lunch for small girl in Niger. But in many parts of the world girls are fed less than boys and are malnourished.

8. What still needs to be done?

Child mortality, maternal health and poverty are all high up the agenda of the Millennium Development Goals. The right to survival is enshrined in many international agreements signed by governments, including the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Because of this, there are many different programmes that are trying to tackle these issues. Many of the interventions are simple and not costly. For example, recent research in the British medical journal *The Lancet* showed that approximately 41 per cent of under five deaths and 72 per cent of neonatal deaths could be prevented each year with simple interventions at the right time and in the right place.⁴⁷

But there is very little research on the specific situation of girls. We know about the ‘missing’ girls, and that girl babies are less likely to receive proper care than boys, but it is very difficult to find statistics in this area that differentiate girls from boys. For example, research has shown that mass immunisation campaigns rarely include separate statistics on girls and boys. Although there are some disaggregated statistics according to sex for under five mortality rates, these are not generally included in global reports. These statistics are essential in order to target programmes more effectively for both girls and boys.

As is clear from the examples of positive action in this chapter, some of the ways to counter infant and maternal mortality do work and are relatively cheap.

Priority areas for action on girls are:

- Ensuring that all mothers-to-be, including young mothers, have adequate nutrition and access to clean water, good antenatal care, safe delivery, and good neonatal and postnatal care
- Ending sex selection before birth and female infanticide
- Promoting birth registration in order to ensure that girls can access the services they are entitled to
- Ensuring equal care, stimulation and nutrition of girls while they are under five

- **The poorest and most vulnerable families could benefit from a small and regular injection of cash directly into the hands of mothers or grandmothers. This could potentially impact positively on the welfare of girls**

Change will come from promoting programmes that change attitudes towards the girl child, ensuring that her status is equal to that of a boy and that she is valued and supported in both the family and the community, and therefore inherently less at risk of female foeticide, malnutrition, and general emotional and physical neglect.

9. Girls’ voices

“I wish I had not married so young and had babies so young. For me it is too late now, but my message to all teenage girls is do not marry before age 20 and wait to have children until you are 22 – that is the right age for childbearing, when a woman is mature and can look after herself and her baby.”

Ganga, aged 19, Nepal⁴⁸

“I don’t want to get married and have children, at least not anytime soon... I want to work and study. I don’t want to be like another girl I know who is 13 years old and already pregnant.”

Yuleni, aged 13, Venezuela⁴⁹

“I lost my first baby during pregnancy because I always had to carry very heavy objects. Now I am in classes that teach us how to keep our pregnancy, how to be healthy, how to eat a well-balanced diet and how to get pre-natal care regularly. I am learning to schedule my chores to decrease the daily workload. I can also identify the signs of a high-risk pregnancy to avoid losing my second baby.”

Safa, aged 18, Egypt⁵⁰