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***Socio economic empowerment:
A route towards equality of the girl child ****

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

Introduction

Legal frameworks and traditional inequalities against the girl child

As in many countries, the girl child in Egypt is still discriminated against from the moment of birth, through her childhood, adolescence and into her womanhood. In the 1990 Declaration of the World Summit for Children the girl child's survival, development and protection was given priority attention.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that "States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or status. (art.2, para.1).

Despite the existing international legal framework, girls continue to face de jure and de facto inequalities in virtually all societies. Unfortunately many signatory countries have saddening indicators showing that the girl child is discriminated against from the earliest stages of her life, from her conception to her birth and through her childhood and adolescence into her marriage, motherhood and old age. Her mere survival through her life cycle is often submerged as a result of harmful attitudes and practices, such as prenatal infanticide, son preference, even in breast feeding and basic attention for the newly born, female genital mutilation - early marriage, including child marriage, and forced marriage, violence against women, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, discrimination against girls in food allocation and other practices related to health and well-being. As a result, in some areas fewer girls than boys survive into adulthood. Some often maintain a lifelong downward spiral of deprivation and exclusion from the social mainstream, and others become part of the harmful cycle of self hurt and accept and become active members of the new household cycle of violence against their own girl child.

Social traditions and physical abuse against the girl child

Physical abuse is quiet recurrent in the Egyptian homes, in addition to different forms of ill treatment and humiliation that affect children under the umbrella of parental methods of upbringing. Girls are more prone to such parental abuse and ill treatment than boys especially when they reach the age of puberty under the justification of protecting them and controlling their behaviour.

Girls are considered socially weaker in a prevalent culture that discriminates against them. The battering of some wives by their husbands left the female children of these families in full acceptance of such parental violence, as a usual part of their life cycle. Brothers and male cousins observe this violent behavior and then participate in this violence against the girls in the family to show their manhood to peers and family male members. Male children become more violent when they grow up. This causes many psychological problems to those children and creates most of the current broken families

Existing laws and girls' rights

In spite of the fact that progress has been made by many countries in the advancement of the girl child, in particular in the recognition of the human rights of the girl child through the adoption of appropriate legislation and in increasing access to some primary services especially education, the law alone does not ensure the realization of a right. The Egyptian constitution, for example, decrees the principle of equality and child legislation prohibits discrimination between Egyptian children. Notwithstanding, they could not “stop” our daily life reality. There are many forms of discrimination against children, especially the girl child, which do not merely derive from traditions; the discrimination is compounded by the image of the girl and the women as portrayed by the educational curricula-taboos and the media, particularly local television. Among the girl children as such there is also discrimination related to social status, which sometimes affects their access to most basic services. There is a distinct geographical discrimination between the rich and the poor girl, the urban and rural girls, those of the Delta and those in Upper Egypt.

There is a great gap between the services provided for children in large cities in contrast to rural areas; there is a huge discrepancy in access and in quality of services between the Delta and Upper Egypt. The NGO coalition on child rights in Egypt reports on “Discrimination between children in difficult circumstances: disabled children, especially those with a mental disability, working children, street children, and delinquents..... A large percentage of them do not have basic rights such as education and health insurance (the latter only includes school children).”

Monitoring girl child rights from a holistic perspective: A proposed legal reform with tangible accountability

To attempt to create an environment that has some future prospects for the appropriate protection for the girl child, we will require a broad range of actions.

The international legal framework needs to be much more effective and measurable.

A call for the decentralization of legal awareness on girls' rights coupled with strong legislation, and enforcement of such laws, is vital.

This may take the form of a new legal reform policy. Most institutions dealing with the girl child will also need to reassess their service capacities, their budgetary allocations and access to basic services in relation to the rights and needs of the girl child and adolescent.

The Egyptian Ministry of Justice has a very successful institutional accountability system which could be adopted as a best practice. “*Al Magless Al Hassby*”, or the accountability council, is an institution well decentralized to cover all rural and remote areas of Egypt as well as urban areas. The council deals with child inheritance rights after

the loss of one or both parents. The council is extremely effective in auditing every single expenditure detail of a child's financial rights in heritage.

However, we lack the presence of an institutionalized structure that deals comprehensively with the legal implementation of the human rights of the child in general, and with the girl child in particular, while both parents are alive. Incorporating child and girl rights into the agenda of the accountability council could help in developing a national system for monitoring girls' rights within a de facto legal system.

children's quality of life.” (Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China - September 1995: Action for Equality, Development and Peace).

In most of the villages I worked, both in Egypt and Yemen, there was substantial discrimination against the girl child during meals, her access to the tray came after the adult men, the young boys and often even her

with other male servants and drivers which by itself can start a chain of untoward consequences to being beaten, abused, molested, raped, to reaching the “finale” of committing suicide in the most dreadful / dramatic of means possible - setting themselves on fire!!All of those are inhumane experiences, that can totally damage the very well-being of the child at the time and her well-being as a woman in the future if she manages to survive the household abuse, or after her discharge, the actions of her paternal family members, who in defense of their “claimed” honor might kill her if she was proven or accused of losing her virginity in her money yielding city job.

A study entitled “Analysis of media discourse on house servants between the years 1993-1998” in one of the widely distributed national newspapers showed that the majority of servants who were killed by their masters or committed suicide were girl children. They are sometimes treated in an inhumane fashion such as physically being abused and beaten as well as not receiving enough food, clothing or cover (see Seham Abdel Salam, January 1999).

The minimum age for employment should be applied to domestic servants and the public at large should be obliged to inform on anybody who does not obey that law. Families that take in servants even from 15 years of age until the age of twenty one should be held legally responsible for the adolescent girls’ legal and human rights. In addition, for those who are older, their work should be initiated through registered contracts between employment institutions which are under the supervision of government and civil society and between the families that require these services.

became popular and that many children who had dropped out of school went back to the formal system within one year of participation of their mothers and themselves in the program.

The scheme was expanded from central villages to satellite ones and the trained communities became the trainers of other communities in remote areas making it possible for them to earn from home crafts sufficient capital to pay for school, basic health needs and even other less basic ones within three years of the beginning of each intervention. Most of the girl children were back in school - after school hours helping their mothers for a couple of hours. The UNICEF project did not only stop the “export” of girl children from Sohag to urban big cities but also many male mobile labor caravans that depended totally on such internal migration; male members of those communities have resorted to helping women in marketing their new crafts in the major cities of Egypt.

It took much more than teaching them a craft; it required raising awareness with mothers on the way their earnings should be spent - their initial income was 2 L.E /month from selling milk and eggs, and with the craft income it rose to an average of 200L.E/ month reaching 500 L.E/month per person - to keeping their children in school throughout the whole period of time, bearing in mind that they could support their own basic socio economic and health needs. For maintaining their membership in the income generating team certain prerequisites had to be complied with, such as not buying gold bracelets; or televisions, before all the family children were back in school. Families were not allowed to conduct FGM if they wanted to continue with the income generation project. And literacy courses were mandatory for all young girls that subsequently brought them back into formal education. Vaccination papers had to be presented by participants of vocational training course

in their families for having become such good support to their economic needs without having to cause them the troubles implicit in outdoor labor.

Removing obstacles and strengthening the capacity of girls to build their self-esteem and take on leadership roles, through the use of their own skills and available resources, are central to their empowerment and to their safety net. These projects laid the ground work for other similar projects that emphasized the empowerment of women and girl children and it was the lessons learned from those projects that assisted me, from 1999 until 2004, in fostering the position of women and girls' empowerment in the Hudaidah / Yemen health system support that helped in raising the health status in the Tehama area. Many trainers came from those villages and distant areas trained by UNICEFF and ILO, and together with the Tehama people; we managed to make their dreams of a better life come true using the same recipe. A better health status was achieved by the people of Tehama - not by pills but by reaching and maintaining a more dignified life and livelihood in the remotest hamlets. Access to basic services became possible to all and safe motherhood comfort to all, child marriage came to a halt and birth spacing followed. (HPHSSP. RNE 1999 – 2004)

