



RIGHTS: Ignoring Girls' Welfare Carries High Price

By Abra Pollock, 2/1/08

WASHINGTON, Feb 1 (IPS) - Investing in young women and girls in developing regions must be a top priority for governments, multilateral agencies and the private sector, say the authors of a report released here this week.

Titled, "Girls Count: A Global Investment & Action Agenda," the 89-page report highlighted the systematic disadvantages faced by girls and women in developing countries in areas ranging from health, education, and nutrition to workforce participation and the burden of household tasks.

Countries that do not address these significant disparities risk perpetuating a "cycle of poverty" within their populations, the report said -- yet by investing in women and girls, countries can reap significant benefits in the spheres of political and economic development.

Among the report's proponents is former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and former president of Ireland Mary Robinson.

"This report is a call to action," Robinson said. "It challenges institutions in all sectors to take a fresh look at their investments and consider where adolescent girls have been built in. The truth is they haven't been, and ignoring that will come at a great price to us all."

Although addressing poverty is already key development priority, young women and girls in less developed regions are even more vulnerable to poverty's impact, said the report, which was co-authored by experts from the Centre for Global Development (CGD), the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), American University, and the Population Council.

Approximately one-sixth of the world's young people live on less than two dollars a day, the report said. This level of extreme poverty determines the lives and possibilities for many young women and girls, such as the 122 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa who live on less than one dollar a day.

Without adequate skills and training, and without access to economic self-sufficiency, many girls in developing countries enter into child marriages. One in seven girls in developing countries marry by age 15, and in 15 countries throughout South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, almost half of all girls are married before age 18, the report said.

Child marriage can have serious effects on girls' health. While up to one-half of girls in developing countries become mothers before age 18, adolescent mothers are up to five times more likely to die from pregnancy complications than women in their twenties, the

report said.

"Child marriage shapes the lives of girls and all of their possibilities," said Margaret Greene, one of the report's authors and the director of the ICRW's Population and Social Transitions team. "If people understood what the implications are for early marriage for girls, they would step away from it."

Educating girls and providing them with skills training and social services will springboard their potential as young women, while also contributing to a country's political and economic development, the report said.

A study examining "investment returns" on education for young men and women cited by the report found that just a single additional year of secondary education can boost girls' economic earnings and workforce participation -- even more so than for boys.

In order to promote education, and economic and civic participation for girls, authors of the report outlined several key actions for governments, multilateral agencies, and members of the private sector.

Within the private sector, businesses should not only practice nondiscrimination in hiring and pay, but can also take proactive steps like providing on-site savings accounts for young women employees who otherwise could only open a bank account with permission from a family member, the report said.

Since household tasks like carrying water and fetching firewood often bind women to the home, businesses can encourage developing countries' government to invest in infrastructure -- and thereby build the electricity and water systems that reduce the burden of work on girls.

Governments of developing countries can invest in young women and girls as well, according to the report. Key steps include maintaining "a legal environment that treats girls fairly, delivering social services equitably, and ensuring that public works and employee guarantee programmes targeted to the poor benefit young women."

According to the report, although multilateral bodies, such as the United Nations, currently run various programmes with a focus on young women, they could better highlight their existing efforts to inspire others.

"Everybody has a role to play," said Laura Laski, a coordinator for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Yet experts are somewhat concerned that despite its clear benefits, not everybody will agree with the "Girls Count" agenda.

Ruth Levine, a co-author of the report and a CGD vice president, points out that some of the recommendations would fundamentally shift gender relations within developing

countries, which is not likely to happen overnight.

"When you improve access to education for girls in places where there are differentials in power between men and women -- [such as] in many parts of South Asia, much of Africa, and parts of the Middle East -- you really disturb the existing social order," Levine said. "I think you have to expect that there's going to be backlash and resistance.

For now, authors and proponents of the report are focusing on reaching out to leaders and decision makers within the different sectors to highlight "quick wins" that can dramatically take off from small steps.

Some progress seems evident so far. After much hard work, co-sponsoring organisations of the report were able to secure a working session on "Girls Count" at the 2008 World Economic Forum, which was held Jan. 23-27 in Davos, Switzerland and which traditionally brings together the world's most powerful economic actors.

According to ICRW president Geeta Rao Gupta, who was present at the forum, the "Girls Count" session was so popular that there was not even enough space for everyone who wanted to attend.

Towards the end of the session, participants were asked to speak up and explain the commitments they would make in their work towards investing in women and girls, Gupta explained. Among the participants was Peter Piot, executive director of the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

"We need champions in order for [this agenda] to work, and they need to be nontraditional champions," Rao Gupta said. "They have to be champions from within these large institutions who make big decisions regarding the allocation of resources. They're the ones who have to champion the cause of women."

Like Rao Gupta, Levine agrees that when it comes to investing in girls, actions must speak louder than words. She and other report authors hope that this is what their collaborative work will inspire.

"What's unconscionable is that there is so much rhetoric both in development agencies and in developing country governments about how, 'We have to respond to our young people,' and... 'We value our mothers and women,' but there is a huge lack of correspondence between what people say, and what is being done," Levine said. "At this point, what we're hoping to do is really provoke some action."