

Get the Facts

Violence against Young Women and Girls

Many adolescent girls and young women across the world live a silent pandemic of violence and abuse. This includes domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse, date rape, marital rape, sexual exploitation, trafficking, incest, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child and forced marriage, as well as so-called honour killings, femicide and murder by intimate partners.

This reality is mostly ignored, hidden and neglected, despite being so widespread:

- Worldwide, up to 50 percent of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16¹.
- Up to 1 in 5 girls and young women under the age of 15 experience sexual abuse, most often by a male family member (other than a father or stepfather).²
- According to WHO estimates from 2002, 150 million girls under 18 experienced some form of sexual violence.³
- Young women are trapped in sexual slavery, and represent many of the women and girls trafficked across national borders every year. An estimated 80 percent of the 800,000 people trafficked annually are women, with an overwhelming 79 percent trafficked for sexual exploitation.⁴
- Approximately 100 to 140 million girls and women in the world have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting, with more than 3 million girls in Africa annually at risk of the practice.⁵
- Over 60 million girls worldwide are child brides, married before the age of 18, primarily in South Asia (31.3 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (14.1 million)⁶. Violence and abuse characterize married life for many of these girls.⁷
- Many adolescent girls are forced to withdraw from school due to child marriage and school-related violence. Sexual violence increases absenteeism, dropping-out, and undermines educational achievement.⁸

¹ UNFPA. 2003. UNFPA and Young People: Imagine 2003. UNFPA, New York.

² WHO. 2005. WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes and Women's Responses (p. 49).

³ WHO, cited in General Assembly. 2006. Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence against Children. United Nations, Geneva (p.10).

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). 2009. Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. UNODC, Vienna (p.11).

⁵ World Health Organization (WHO). 2008. Female Genital Mutilation - Fact Sheet No. 241. WHO, Geneva.

⁶ UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). 2008. ChildInfo: Statistics by Area: Child Protection. UNICEF, New York.

⁷ UNICEF. 2005. Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice. New York, United Nations.

⁸ Pinheiro, P.S., World Report on Violence against Children, United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, United Nations, Geneva, 2006, pp. 128, 130. In Regional Consultations for this Study, physical and psychological abuse, verbal abuse, bullying and sexual violence in schools were consistently reported as reasons for absenteeism, dropping-out and lack of motivation for academic achievement.

Get the Facts

Young Women and Girls and HIV/AIDS

More than 30 million people are today living with HIV. Globally, women now account for half of all infections. Gender inequality and violations of women's rights make women and girls particularly susceptible, leaving them with less control than men over their bodies and their lives. The sixth Millennium Development Goal calls for reversing the spread of HIV and AIDS by 2015. For that, more resources and programmes are needed, targeting women in particular. At the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV and AIDS in 2001, more than 180 countries agreed that gender equality and women's empowerment are fundamental to reducing girls' and women's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS.

- Globally, women and men are affected by HIV and AIDS in almost equal numbers. However, the proportion of women living with AIDS is increasing and young women constitute a growing share of new infections. About two-thirds of all new cases among people aged 15-24.⁹
- Discrimination, violence and coercion against adolescent girls and young women fuels HIV and AIDS: Young women represent approximately 60 percent of all the 5.5 million young people in the world living with HIV and AIDS.¹⁰
- In Southern Africa prevalence among young women aged 15-24 years is on average about three times higher than among men the same age. In Asia roughly 95 percent of infections among young people are among adolescents and in the Caribbean women account for approximately 50 percent of all infections, with prevalence being especially high among adolescent and young women¹¹.
- In 2009, the World Health Organization reported that HIV is the leading cause of death among women 15-44 years, in low and middle-income countries.¹²
- Women and girls often have less information about HIV and fewer resources to take preventive measures. They face barriers to the negotiation of safer sex, including economic dependency and unequal power relations. Sexual violence, a widespread and brutal violation of women's rights, exacerbates the risk of transmission. And while it is widely assumed that marriage provides protection from AIDS, evidence suggests that in parts of the world it can be a major HIV risk factor, especially for young women and girls.¹³

⁹ World Health Organization. Gender Inequalities and HIV. http://www.who.int/gender/hiv_aids/en/

¹⁰ UNICEF, UNAIDS, WHO and UNFPA. 2008. Children and AIDS: Third Stocktaking Report: 16. UNICEF, New York; and UNICEF. 2009. HIV Prevention with Young People: The Key to Tackling the Epidemic: 3. UNICEF, New York

¹¹ UNAIDS. 2009 AIDS Epidemic Update

¹² World Health Organization. "Women and health: today's evidence tomorrow's agenda". Geneva, 2009.

¹³ UNIFEM. Gender Issues. HIV & AIDS. http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/hiv_aids/

Get the Facts

Peace and Security for Young Women and Girls

War has always impacted men and women in different ways, but possibly never more so than in contemporary conflicts. As much as 90 percent of casualties are among civilians, most of whom are women and children. While women remain a minority of combatants and perpetrators of war, they increasingly suffer the greatest harm, including as direct targets of systematic sexual violence. Even after conflict has ended, the impacts of sexual violence persist, including unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and stigmatization. Yet, women's voices are hardly included when peace is negotiated.

- Sexual violence exacerbates conflict and perpetuates insecurity. It holds entire communities hostage, and has an economic, social, cultural and inter-generational impact. Increasingly, sexual violence against women and girls is systematic and widespread. In 1994, 250,000–500,000 women and girls were raped during the genocide in Rwanda;¹⁴ 20,000–50,000 women and girls were raped during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s¹⁵; 50,000–64,000 internally displaced women in Sierra Leone were sexually attacked by combatants¹⁶; an average of 40 women and girls are being raped every day in South Kivu, DRC.¹⁷
- Young women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violations during armed conflict, including rape, genital mutilation, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery and enforced prostitution. In Darfur and Congo rape of girls and women is systematic, and used to displace and terrorize populations.¹⁸
- While international law clearly prohibits the use of girls and boys in hostilities, government or rebel armies around the world have recruited tens of thousands of children. Worldwide estimates suggest girls may account for between 10 to 30 percent of children in fighting forces.
- During their time in captivity, adolescent boys are used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, medics, spies, lookouts, raiders, and domestic and agricultural labour. Adolescent girls perform the same roles, but are also forced to serve as sexual slaves to numerous males in forces. Sometimes, a girl is given to one male for his exclusive use as a captive “wife”.
- Forced cross-border migration due to internal armed conflict often results in girls being trafficked and forced to provide labour in illicit commercial operations, including mineral mines, rubber plantations, and logging operations.
- In contravention of numerous global commitments and UN resolutions, women's participation in peace negotiations remains ad hoc, not systematic — it averages less than 8 percent of the 14 peace processes for which such information is available. Fewer than 3 percent of signatories to peace agreements are women¹⁹. Exclusion of women from peace processes risks the neglect of women and girls' interests and concerns in the peace agreements that set the roadmap for the post-conflict period.

¹⁴ UN Special Rapporteur to the Commission on Human Rights, ‘Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Rwanda’ (E/CN.4/1996/68) para 16.

¹⁵ Ward, Jeanne on behalf of the RHRC, ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina’, If not Now, When?: Addressing Gender-based Violence in Refugee, Internally Displaced, and Post-Conflict Settings, 2002, p.81.

¹⁶ Physicians for Human Rights, ‘Executive Summary’ War-Related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone: A Population-based Assessment (2002) 3.

¹⁷ Rodriguez, Claudia, ‘Sexual Violence in South Kivu’, Forced Migration Review, 2007 (27), p.45.

¹⁸ Carlson, Khrisopher and Mazurana, Dyan, ‘The girl child and armed conflict: Recognizing and addressing grave violations of girls’ human rights’, 2006, p.7.

¹⁹ UNIFEM's research on women's participation in peace processes (forthcoming, 2010).

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Young Women and Girls: New Technologies

Today, more than half of the world's population is under 30, and an estimated 96 percent of them have joined an online social network. New technologies are changing the way we communicate. There are over 200,000,000 blogs out there, and if Facebook were a country it would be the world's 3rd largest ahead of the United States and only behind China and India.²⁰ In one minute 24 hours of videos are uploaded to YouTube.²¹ Social networking presents an unparalleled opportunity to reach, communicate, inform and advocate, particularly on issues that concern women and girls.

- Nearly 46 percent of global internet users above 18 years are female. Although currently women are slightly in the minority as internet users, they are catching up quickly. Differences are most significant in developing countries where internet connection is still low. In many developed countries, the split is about equal.²²
- Once online, women are more connected than men: women spend 30 percent more time on social networking sites than men.²³
- Worldwide, 77 percent of young women between 15 and 24 engage in social networking.²⁴
- Globally, social networking reached a higher percentage of women online than men in 2010. Social networking's reach among women is highest in Latin America where it reached 94.1 percent of females online, and in North America where it reached 91 percent of females. Europe saw 85.6 percent of its female online population visit a social networking site in May 2010, while in Asia Pacific, where parts of the region still face low broadband, reported a 54.9 percent reach.²⁵
- Facebook has more than 500 million active users, and 56.2 percent of them are female. 14 million female Facebook users in the United States are between the ages of 18-25.²⁶
- Twitter has more than 190 million users and they tweet 65 million times a day.²⁷
- On an average, women tweet 12 percent more than men²⁸, and 59 percent of all Twitter users are female²⁹.
- Among bloggers, 50.9 percent are women.³⁰

²⁰ Qualman, Erik. 2010. Social Media Revolution 2 (Refresh). <http://socialnomics.net/2010/05/05/social-media-revolution-2-refresh/>

²¹ Nielsen/NetRating. 2009. US Audience.

²² Women on the Web: How Women are Shaping the Internet, Whitepaper by Comscore http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Presentations_Whitepapers/2010/Women_on_the_Web_How_Women_are_Shaping_the_Internet

²³ Same as above

²⁴ Same as above

²⁵ Same as above

²⁶ Inside Facebook, www.insidefacebook.com

²⁷ Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.com/twitter-190-million-users-and-they-tweet-65-million-times-a-day-2010-6#ixzz0wWYbzdig>

²⁸ 5 Huffington Post, 25 May 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/25/women-twitter-tweet-12-mo_n_588693.html

²⁹ US Demographic Data, illustrated by Pingdom, www.pingdom.com

³⁰ Inside Blog Demographics, Sysmos, <http://www.sysomos.com/reports/bloggers/>

- Women surpass men in every age group in both reach and time spent on photo sites. 46.5% of women worldwide share photos online, versus 41.5% of their male counterparts.³¹
- Online video consumption between men and women are roughly similar, but wide discrepancies exist in countries such as the United States, Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom. In the U.S., for instance, men watch more than 15 hours of online video per month, roughly triple the average time spent by women. However, women spend a much higher share of their time watching videos on YouTube than men compared with any other online video source.³²
- Women comprise 48 percent of YouTube's demographics in the United States. Even in areas where YouTube is not the leading online video provider (e.g., Hong Kong and Japan), women are still far more likely to watch a video on YouTube than on any other video platform.³³

³¹ Women on the Web: How Women are Shaping the Internet, Whitepaper by Comscore
http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Presentations_Whitepapers/2010/Women_on_the_Web_How_Women_are_Shaping_the_Internet

³² Same as above.

³³ Women on the Web: How Women are Shaping the Internet, Whitepaper by ComScore
http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Presentations_Whitepapers/2010/Women_on_the_Web_How_Women_are_Shaping_the_Internet and YouTube, Nielsen/NetRatings, December 2009, US Audience.