

Save the Children's Policy on:

# Gender Equity



**Save the Children**

The International Save the Children Alliance is the world's leading independent child rights organisation with members in 27 countries and operational programmes in more than 100.

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## Vision

Save the Children works for:  
a world which respects and values each child  
a world which listens to children and learns  
a world where all children have hope and opportunity

## Mission

Save the Children fights for children's rights.  
We deliver immediate and lasting improvements  
to children's lives worldwide

# Introduction

The International Save the Children Alliance (The Alliance) believes in social justice and challenges all forms of discrimination, especially that based on sex, age, social class, disability, HIV status, sexual preference, religion, race and ethnicity.

Through its work with children, the Alliance has unique opportunities to transform social attitudes towards boys and girls, as well as gender relations among boys and girls for the next generation. The Alliance recognises that the achievement of full and equal rights for girls will result from changes in social values, public policy and practice. The Alliance works to support both girls and boys to fulfil their potential and become active members of their societies and recognises the need to understand better the different needs of girls and boys, and to address those needs by directing resources through its programme work in order to improve their positions in society.

This policy document has been drawn up to reflect our principles and commitment to gender equity<sup>1</sup> and to provide guidance on the integration of gender equity into the structures of the Alliance and the programmes of its members. This policy document reflects our experience with gender issues, which are complex and deeply embedded in societies, and it is the basis on which Alliance members and their partners build their programmes and conduct themselves as organisations.

# The issue of gender equity

Non-discrimination is an important principle that forms the basis of Alliance members' work as organisations. The Alliance takes as the foundation of our practice the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to work to eliminate gender discrimination in societies at all levels. In particular Article 2 which specifies:

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 other status.

The principle of non-discrimination is relevant to all substantive articles in the CRC including those relating to health (Art.24) education (Art.28), standard of living (Art.27) and protection of vulnerable groups of children. The Convention further recognises that governments are obliged to take appropriate measures to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation (Art.35) and other forms of exploitation (Art.36).

Other guiding principles in the CRC that are particularly relevant to this policy are: the

principle of the "best interest of the child"(Art.3); the "principle of survival and development" (Art. 6); and the "principle of participation" (Art. 12) which gives "to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

The Alliance recognises that the options open to children are closely associated with the wellbeing and social position of women. In many societies women take the primary responsibility for raising and caring for children, and research has shown that the material condition, health and nutrition of children are positively associated with the skills, education and income of women. Therefore the rights of children and the rights of women are mutually reinforcing. Used together, the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)<sup>2</sup> provide internationally accepted standards for addressing the rights of children and the rights of women in the family and in society. The Alliance has undertaken to use both conventions and reporting procedures to raise issues of concern regarding the equality of both girls and women.<sup>3</sup>

# The context

Laws, culture, social structures and family relationships play a central part in defining gender roles and relationships but in many societies religion and tradition are a constraint in the realisation of women's and children's rights. In all societies, attitudes and beliefs about the roles, capabilities, the value and potential of girls and boys are deeply embedded. These are not static nor universal but vary between cultures, over time, between generations and in relation to other social identities such as social class, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, caste, sexuality, HIV status, ability or disability. However, a universal feature is that these gender roles and responsibilities are not equal and it is often the case that men and boys have greater control over resources and access to power and decision-making than girls and women, which leads to inequalities between the sexes.

## Gender roles and power relations

In many countries, both boys and girls are expected to play adult roles without receiving the same rights as adults. For example, they may be expected to fight in wars but they do not have the right to vote. Girls and boys do different types of work and families have different expectations about their future according to whether they are male or female. Girl's roles and responsibilities are usually associated with their future role as wives and mothers while boys are brought up in their role as bread winners. Even though girls and boys may carry heavy burdens of responsibility within society and the family they are often not allowed to make decisions about their own lives, including education, marriage, and child-bearing. Adults often decide children's access to resources within the family, even when children have worked to contribute to the family income.

In many cultures children marry young and there is often a lower age of marriage for girls than for boys, even while these countries have laws stating that adult men and women have equal rights. In some countries, girls cannot choose whom they will marry and after marriage, women are legal minors and subject to the control of their husbands. It is not in the best interest of girls to marry early as their education may be interrupted and the health risks associated with early pregnancy are high as their bodies are not physically mature enough to bear children.

## Discrimination against girls

In many societies there is a greater preference for sons, and girls are less valued than boys for a range of cultural, religious, social and economic reasons and consequently receive less favourable treatment. The rights of girls to survival and development are often violated at every stage of the life cycle: sex determination tests result in higher numbers of female foetuses being terminated; higher child mortality rates have been found among girls in many countries; girls receive less nutritious food and less food than boys do and this bias is exacerbated in times of famine; girls are less likely to be taken to doctors and clinics than boys; girls' right to play is often neglected due to their responsibility for household chores and care of siblings. In many societies inheritance laws mean that girls are not entitled to a share of family property or other resources and married women are not able to inherit from their husbands. Indeed, in some cultures young widows are forced to leave their husband's home or are forced to become the wife of a relative.

## Division of labour

In most societies there is a gender division of labour and certain tasks and types of jobs are defined as male and others female. Boys and men generally work outside the home while girls and women carry out household tasks and those associated with their biological, reproductive role. Girls and women also work outside the home on the land and in production but their heavy workload is often not recognised or valued. Girls and women often migrate from the countryside, to the cities and to other countries to work in domestic service or in assembly line production for national and multinational companies.

In many societies it is accepted that children's best interest is subordinated to family interest and both girls and boys are expected to work to support their families. Boys are often expected to support their parents financially throughout their lives. Changes in local and national economies resulting from the global integration of markets are having significant effects on the employment and lives of men, women, boys and girls throughout the world and this is leading to changes in gender relations. As opportunities for work shrink world-wide, and wage levels fall below levels necessary to meet minimum family needs, men and boys are less able to meet their traditional roles as providers. This is a great threat to male self-esteem and emotional development. With the increasing number of women-headed households, often as a result of male migration in search of employment, many boys grow up without a positive male figure or male role model to demonstrate positive and equal relationships with women.

## Education and socialisation

Rigid socialisation of boys and of girls limits their ability to reach their full potential and girls often

grow up to reproduce the subordinate roles into which they are socialised. Boys are also limited by expectations of masculinity and they are often brought up to believe that they are superior to girls and have greater status. This socialisation can lead to the subordination of women and girls, to domestic violence, to irresponsible paternity and to a lack of male involvement in family life.

In many societies families believe that education for girls is unnecessary, or is a low priority given expectations that they will marry and leave home. In addition, the cost to the family and the loss of girls' labour in the home are disincentives to educate girls. It is still the case in many countries, that girls who do manage to enter the education system are often discriminated against by their teachers, both male and female, who assume girls to be less capable than boys of abstract thinking and complex problem solving. The text books and curricula used in schools often promote stereotypical images of girls and boys roles.

In some societies families encourage their daughters' education and give less priority to their sons attending school. This has led to the under-achievement of some groups of boys and to their dropping out of school because they do not see the value of education or its relevance to their lives.

## Violence

Cultural norms and values in relation to gender differences can lead to negative attitudes, stereotyping and prejudice. Gender-based violence against girls and women is universal and takes different forms including female genital mutilation, incest, sexual abuse, rape and sexual harassment.

In most societies, boys learn from an early age that conflict can be resolved by physical violence and

this socialisation encourages violent measures to resolve problems, putting young males at particular risk. Male domination of women through physical, sexual and psychological violence is widespread in societies in the North and the South.

Corporal punishment of children conveys strong messages about the acceptability of violence, and reinforces boys' and girls' perceptions of violence as socially acceptable behaviour. The elimination of all forms of violence is an important indicator of the quality of life for all members of societies.

## Save the Children's Policy

The Alliance will ensure that its work is based upon and promotes equity and justice towards all groups of children and will work to change discriminatory social values and attitudes in order to promote a more equitable allocation of government, NGO and family resources between boys and girls.

The Alliance will seek to ensure that girls are not discriminated against and have equal access as boys to adequate food, education, healthcare, shelter, leisure, emotional support and respect. It will promote activities to enhance girls' self-esteem, their and knowledge about their rights and their participation in activities and decisions that affect their lives.

The Alliance recognises that boys and girls have different socially defined gender roles and responsibilities and as a result will seek to be aware of these differences and design appropriate programme and advocacy work in order to respond to these needs.

The Alliance will challenge all types of violence, including violence against women, girls, and boys but also among boys and men, and among girls and women.

The Alliance recognises that gender issues vary between cultures and over time and will address issues of gender equity with great sensitivity in different cultural contexts. Equality, partnership, respect and co-operation between the sexes are values that will be promoted throughout our work.

The Alliance will ensure that its principles for gender equity are mainstreamed within the organisation. The principles will be applied to structures and practices within the Alliance, and to its members. The Alliance will foster an organisational culture that promotes the equitable participation and distribution of power between men and women within the organisation, including on decision-making bodies.

# Elaboration of the Policy

The Alliance recognises that raising awareness among policy-makers and communities about children's best interest and of the benefits to families and communities of both girls and boys reaching their full potential is a long-term and complex process that must be approached in a manner that is respectful and culturally sensitive. Care will be taken to ensure that the development of girls' and boys' full potential is seen to contribute to the children's own future and to the long-term well-being of their families and societies.

While recognising that girls face discrimination, it is important to move away from the perception of girls as victims or members of a "vulnerable group", towards a more positive view of girls and boys as constructive members of and contributors to society when their rights are recognised. This will involve addressing assumptions that girls' interests are subordinated to those of families, or that resources should be directed to girls mainly because of their roles as future mothers and care givers. It will demonstrate that investment in both girls and boys is economically and socially productive.

The Alliance will monitor changes within the external environment in relation to globalisation of the world economy and communications in order to assess positive and negative impacts on gender relations and the division of labour in families and communities.

The Alliance supports the active involvement of women and men in the care and nurturing of their children; positive and responsible male and female role models for boys and girls; and training in gender-sensitive parenting skills. The Alliance will encourage the positive participation of boys and men in household work and social recognition of

the contribution of women and girls labour outside as well as within the domestic sphere.

The Alliance will work to change socialisation processes that encourage or condone any form of violence, including female infanticide, female genital mutilation and early marriage and will promote a holistic approach to address the issue of violence at all stages of children's development.

## Principals of Operation

Analysis of existing social and cultural values and attitudes that are the foundation of gender discrimination in specific contexts is essential to plan programmes and policies to address gender discrimination.

In order to support both the rights of women and the rights of children, the Alliance will work to ensure that comprehensive analyses of needs and social and economic relations are undertaken at the early stages of programme planning. This will involve including gender analysis in basic needs assessments and baseline surveys and monitoring programmes to address gender needs that are identified as projects develop.

In order to take steps toward transforming gender relations and achieving equality of results for boys and girls, the Alliance will ensure that all members integrate gender analysis into their programmes, their organisations and their relations with partners. It will ensure that gender and age disaggregated data is collected in all projects, distinguishing between adults and children and different categories of people. This analysis will also strive to consider possible effects of macro-economic policies and structures, and social policies and their impacts at the community and household levels.

Members of the Alliance will work to make girls' and boys' contributions to society visible in families, communities, nationally and internationally and support actions that change discriminatory attitudes and practices towards girls and women.

### Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation

The Alliance recognises that the use of gender neutral terms such as “children”, “teenagers”, “adolescents” and “youth” perpetuates the invisibility of girls and adolescent women to policy makers. Unless the needs of girls and women are explicitly taken into account in planning, monitoring and evaluation of programmes, their needs may be overlooked or ignored.

The Alliance seeks to understand patterns of discrimination by developing, refining and using methodologies to analyse relations between women and men and boys and girls within different societies in which it works. By learning through this process, and by involving boys and girls in needs assessment and programme planning, the Alliance will work to eliminate gender discrimination.

### Programmes

Members of the Alliance will design programmes that promote both girls and boys' rights. These will work towards equality of results for girls and boys by promoting equality of opportunity, access to resources and benefits and by addressing the results of long-term, systemic discrimination.

Members of the Alliance will implement programmes in a way that respects national and local customs while working to change practices that are discriminatory and prejudicial to girls and marginalised groups.

### Children's Participation

The Alliance will encourage and support both girls' and boys' right, from a young age, to give their opinions, express their ideas and participate in decision-making concerning their lives and the allocation of family resources. The Alliance will support girls' and boys' right to reach their full potential by promoting and supporting the representation of girls and boys on decision-making and advisory bodies. In addition, the Alliance will raise awareness in communities of the importance and benefits of girls' participation in decision-making about their lives.

### Advocacy

The Alliance will press for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at national and international levels in a manner that raises an awareness of the different experiences and needs of girls and boys, and the diversity of societies. The Alliance will co-ordinate efforts with women's rights advocates to promote women's and children's rights and use the reporting procedures under CEDAW and the CRC to raise issues of concern regarding the equality of girls and women. Through its advocacy and project work, the Alliance will address issues concerning the ways in which men and women relate to each other, to boys and girls, and how boys and girls interact with each other.

### Organisational / Institutional Culture

The Alliance will integrate gender perspectives into all projects and programme work and will promote gender equity in the workplace culture and organisational structures.

The Alliance recognises the importance of including women as decision-makers in all its work and supports the empowerment of women.

# References

1 Moving beyond a focus on equal treatment, the concept of gender “equity” also highlights the importance of equality of results. It calls for differential treatment of groups in order to achieve equality.

2 CEDAW was adopted by the UN in 1979 and since then has been ratified or acceded to by over 161 States. The Alliance recognises that children’s rights activists have not fully utilised the opportunities provided by the CEDAW to promote the rights of the child.

3 See report of the Consultation on The Human Rights of Women and Children, January 1998, organised by the Alliance, UNICEF, IWRAC and the UN Division for the Advancement of Women.

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