

# Gender equality



## Some basic concepts

“It ought to be a beautiful position in life: to be young and to have a life ahead for which you can plan and dream. It ought, furthermore, to be equally beautiful whether you are a young woman or a young man. In reality, however, many young people are deprived of their rights to make plans and have dreams, as well as of their rights to security and dignity in life. In reality, it also makes a substantial difference if you are born a girl or a boy. Young women run a much higher risk of having their fundamental rights as human beings violated.”<sup>23</sup>

While in the 1970s and 1980s women activists talked about “integrating women into development”, in the 1990s the emphasis was on the integration of gender issues as part of development policy and planning.

Today, both the terms “women’s rights” and “gender equality” are used. What do the terms mean and what is the difference between them? The phrase “women’s human rights” is used to emphasise the point that women’s rights are human rights, rights to which women are entitled simply because they are human. This idea integrates the topic of women into the human rights movement, and integrates human rights principles into the women’s movement at the same time.

Gender equality means an equal level of empowerment, participation and visibility of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Gender equality is not to be thought of as the opposite of gender difference but rather of gender inequality. It aims to promote the full participation of women and men in society. Gender equality, like human rights, must be constantly fought for, protected and encouraged.

The term ‘gender’ refers to the socially-constructed roles of women and men which are attributed to them on the basis of their sex. Gender roles therefore depend on a particular socio-economic, political and cultural context and are affected by other factors including race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and age. Gender roles are learned and vary widely within and between cultures. Unlike a person’s biological sex, gender roles can change.

“The discussion about socialisation and stereotypes revealed the ‘old’ forms of socialisation created spaces for new forms of identity and individuality. ‘New’ forms of socialisation are taking their place but they may be replicating similar stereotypical expectations and producing similar consequences as before. The influences of the family, school and the workplace may no longer be so powerful, but new information technologies and burgeoning cultural practices (in music, media and television) may be stepping into the breach, strengthening the social power of men and maintaining the subordination of women.”<sup>24</sup>



**How easy is it for men to adapt to the changes that have come about as a result of the recognition of women’s rights?**

## Related activities

- Different wages, page 107.
- Domestic affairs, page 114.
  - Heroines and heroes, page 142.
  - Let’s talk about sex, page 156.
- Path to Equality-land, page 185.
- Who are I?, page 257.
- Work and babies, page 260.

## Examples of violations of women's rights

### Domestic violence

The most common form of violence against women is domestic violence. Domestic violence has for many years been considered a private affair, in which the state and the judicial system has no business interfering. Yet domestic violence is not only a violation of the physical and psychological well-being of the women concerned, and therefore a direct attack on their human rights, it is also a criminal offence.

Statistics show that a woman is more likely to be beaten, attacked and even killed by her partner or former partner than by any other person.

- Depending on the European country concerned, between 20% and 50% of women are victims of domestic violence.
- Domestic violence affects all sectors of society and all ages.
- Domestic violence takes many forms: physical, sexual, psychological and structural.
- One woman in five is subjected to sexual assault at some stage in her life. The age of the victims ranges from two months to 90 years.
- 98% of aggressors are male, and 50% are married men or living in a *de facto* marriage or as a couple.
- 70% of rapes are premeditated and only 3% of aggressors are mentally unbalanced.
- There is an increase in the phenomenon of multiple rape.
- Figures show an increasing number of cases of assault against very young girls.

"Statistics are grim, no matter which part of the world one focuses on ... No country or region is exempt from domestic abuse". So says a UNICEF report on domestic violence against women and girls, published in 2000, in a first attempt to establish the global dimensions of this phenomenon.

### Trafficking of women and girls

Every year, millions of men, women and children are the victims of trafficking worldwide in conditions amounting to slavery. Among these numbers, many thousands are young women and girls who have been lured, abducted or sold into forced prostitution and other forms of sexual servitude. The process is made even easier by globalisation and modern technologies. The underlying causes of trafficking include poverty, unemployment and a lack of education, all of which force people to take risks to improve their quality of life. One worrying trend in industrial countries is "the use of cheap and undeclared labour forces as well as the exploitation of women and children in prostitution and pornography."<sup>25</sup>

Trafficking in human beings is hardly a new phenomenon, but selling naïve and desperate young women into sexual bondage has become one of the fastest-growing criminal activities in the global economy. "The trafficking flow between certain developing countries (Northern and Central Africa, Latin America and Asia) and Western destination countries continues. However, the most striking factor ... is the increase in the number of women and children trafficked into the European Union from central and eastern European countries. Estimates of up to 120000 women and children being trafficked into western Europe each year are made."<sup>26</sup> For several years now, the trafficking of women and children - and of people in general - has been a priority issue on the working agenda of the Council of Europe.

### Female genital mutilation

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) affects an estimated 130 million girls and women and is most prevalent in Africa. FGM is a cultural practice harmful to women, which violates

## Key dates

### 8 March

International Women's Day.

### 25 November

International Day against Violence against Women.

Every year in the world, two million little girls are circumcised in this way, and that is in addition to the 130 million circumcised women.<sup>27</sup>

women's human rights to life, body integrity, health and sexuality. Because it is practised mostly on young girls, female genital mutilation also raises serious questions about children's rights.

**In conflict areas...**

In recent years, episodes of violence against women were reported in Bosnia, Cambodia, Chechnya, Haiti, Peru, Somalia, Sierra Leone, East and West Timor, and in other conflict zones of the world. At some point, the international community will have to find alternative responses to the small number of *ad hoc* international criminal tribunals - such as the ones for Yugoslavia and Rwanda. While these are useful and necessary, they are clearly inadequate and insufficient for protecting women's rights.

**The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe**

"regrets that despite the fact that rape has been recognised as a war crime, it continues to be systematically used - and has been so in recent conflicts (Kosovo and Chechnya) - as a war weapon inflicting not only psychological trauma but also forced pregnancy."<sup>28</sup>

**? What can be done to put an end to violence against women and girls?**

**Existing international human rights instruments**

Since the United Nations held the first world conference on women (Mexico City, Mexico, 1975), important progress has been made towards achieving equality between women and men.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was set up in 1976 to fund innovation and change in this area. Since then, it has supported numerous projects and initiatives throughout the developing world, promoting the political, economic and social empowerment of women.

The first legally binding international document prohibiting discrimination against women and forcing governments to take steps in favour of equality for women is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ("Women's Convention" or CEDAW). This was adopted in 1979 and came into force in 1981.

The convention aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. This is defined in Article 1 as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition of enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, social, cultural, civil or any other field". States Parties are obliged to submit periodic reports on their compliance with the convention.

Over the past decade, a global movement has emerged to challenge the limited notions of human rights that see the rights of women as secondary to other human rights questions.

In 1999, the General Assembly of the United Nations added an optional protocol to the CEDAW that had been elaborated by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The Optional Protocol entered into force in 2000. It marks an important step in the protection of women's rights, in so far as it allows individual women or groups of women to submit allegations of human rights violations directly to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. It also provides the Committee with the ability to initiate inquiries into cases of grave or systematic violations of women's rights around the world. However, the

"Inequality and disparities between women and men in the field of human rights are inconsistent with the principles of genuine democracy."

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 1216 (2000).

force of the protocol is limited, since ratifying states have the option of rejecting a request from the Committee to investigate violations of women's rights on their territory.

Within the Council of Europe, the issue of equality between women and men is seen as a fundamental human right and is the responsibility of the Steering Committee for Equality between Women and Men (CDEG). This is an intergovernmental body within the Council, which carries out analyses, studies and evaluations, defines strategies and political measures and, where necessary, decides on the appropriate legal instruments.

The 1995 Fourth World Conference of Women, held in Beijing, China, drew together almost 47000 women and men, and to date it remains the largest gathering of government and NGOs representatives at any United Nations conference. At this historic event, 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. National governments committed themselves to promoting gender equality in the formulation of all government policies and programmes. They identified the following twelve common critical areas of concern: poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for gender equality, human rights, media, the environment and young girls.

### **Education ... the solution.**

A very important step would be to move from rights recognition to rights empowerment. All human rights educators need to appreciate the sensitive nature of the human rights vision and to honour the differences among individual women's needs and responses. Without such sensitivity, human rights education could become just another form of manipulation or oppression of women. *Education* is a key target for gender equality, since it involves the ways in which societies transfer norms, knowledge and skills.

"Combating gender-based violence and promoting gender equality requires education and active involvement of all sectors of society, especially young women and men and members of minority groups, from the beginning"<sup>30</sup>



**As an educator or youth leader, do you use a gender focus in your work with young people?**

### **References**

- Connell, R. W., *Gender and power*, Stanford University Press.  
 Mertus, J., Flowers, N., Dutt, M., *Local action, global change, UNIFEM and the Center for Women's Global Leadership*, 1999.  
 Williams, S., and others, *The Oxfam gender training manual*, Oxfam Publication, 1994.  
 Ramberg, I. *Violence against young women in Europe, seminar report, Council of Europe*, 2001.

### **Some useful websites on women's issues**

- OECD-DAC Gender, [www.oecd.org/dac/gender](http://www.oecd.org/dac/gender)  
 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco), [www.unesco.org/gender](http://www.unesco.org/gender)  
 United Nations Statistics Division Gender Statistics, [www.un.org/depts/unsd/gender](http://www.un.org/depts/unsd/gender)  
 United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), [www.undp.org/unifem](http://www.undp.org/unifem)  
 Women Watch, [www.un.org/womenwatch](http://www.un.org/womenwatch)  
 European Women's Lobby (EWL), [www.womenlobby.org](http://www.womenlobby.org)  
 Women Against Violence Europe (Wave Network): [www.wave-network.org](http://www.wave-network.org)  
 Men Against Violence Against Women (MAVAW), <http://menagainstviolence.tripod.com>  
 Young Women from Minorities (WFM), [www.wfmonline.org](http://www.wfmonline.org)

The main problem is that the definition of equality used is a very narrow one of *de jure* equality and this does not always provide protection against discrimination. A second problem lies in the fact that women have traditionally had to work on these questions outside the "mainstream" of society. A third problem is that women occupy a weak position in decision-making structures in most countries.<sup>29</sup>