THE GIRL CHILD

Introduction

The girl child has always been with us. Many years ago the girl child had very few problems. Civilisation and development has now compounded her problems and made it difficult for her to live a very successful life.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child says that the child should not be discriminated against by virtue of his/her parentage, race, colour, SEX, language, religion, political inclination of his or her parent, ethnic or social origin, disability, birth or status. However, the girl child today suffers discrimination in many countries, from the earliest stages of life through childhood and into adulthood. Most of these discrimination can be surmounted if concerted efforts are made by Governments, NGOs and individuals who matter, including you and I.

Who is the Girl Child?

The girl child is defined broadly to include girls between the ages of 1 - 18, also girls who are of school going age.

Where can the Girl Child be found?

The girl child is everywhere around us as
- a child of loving parents
- an over pampered child in a privileged home
- a pupil or student in a day or boarding institution of learning
- a hawker or carrier on our streets
- an apprentice to one of the several trades
- an abandoned girl because her parents can no longer care for her
- a young single mother caring for an unwanted baby
- a wife in a home
- a permanent patient because of an incurable illness like AIDS or vesico-vaginal fistulae (V.V.F.)
- a homeless girl because of political or ethnic conflict or drought
- an illiterate househelp in our home

The list can go on and on.

What are the problems of the Girl Child?

There are many of such problems but the most important will be treated here.

1. Girls are treated as inferior and socialised to be so. This undermines their self esteem.
2. Gender-biased educational processes like curricula, textbooks, teachers attitudes, strengthen existing gender inequalities.

3. Girls often receive several conflicting information from their parents, peers, teachers and the public.

4. The number of boys in school is more than girls. In 1990, of the 130 million children in the world who had no access to primary education, 81 million were girls. This may be due to:
   - customary attitudes
   - child labour
   - early marriages
   - lack of funds
   - lack of adequate schooling facilities
   - teenage pregnancies
   - gender inequalities in the society at large, and in the family
   - shortage of female teachers
   - heavy domestic chores at a very early age, so they cannot combine education with it

5. Percentage of girls in secondary school is low, which may also be due to the above mentioned factors. In addition, girls are not encouraged to pursue science and technology education, so this limits the knowledge they need in order to get good employment.

6. Girls are discriminated against in their access to nutrition, physical and mental health facilities, so their current and future health is endangered. Research has shown that about 450 million adult women in developing countries have stunted growth because of childhood protein energy malnutrition.

7. About 15 million girls between 15-19 years give birth each year. Early childbirth brings about
   - complications during pregnancy and delivery, like maternal death
   - children from young mothers who have high level of morbidity and mortality
   - impediments to improvements in the educational, economic and social status of the girls

8. Early marriage and early childbirth affects educational and employment opportunities of females and has a long term negative impact on them as women, and their children's quality of life.

9. Girls are vulnerable to sexual violence and STDs including HIV/AIDS caused by unprotected and premature sexual relations. Girls often face pressures to get involved in sexual activity due to their youth. These pressures are sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, sexual violence including rape, sale of their organs in trafficking.
10. Lack of protective laws or failure to enforce them makes girls to suffer sexual violence.

11. Most girls are forced into labour at a very tender age and made to remain in it, without any or with very little remuneration.

12. Abandoned, homeless and displaced street children, children who are discriminated against because of their ethnic or racial background are also vulnerable.

What can we - Governments/NGOs/Individual - do to solve problems of the Girl Child?

The discrimination against the girl child should not be allowed to go on indefinitely. This will rob the country of a sizable number of her population, who will assist in national development. The government, NGOs and well meaning individuals need to consider the following recommendations, to rid the girl child of discrimination.

1. All barriers must be eliminated to enable girls to develop their full potential and skills through equal access to education and training, nutrition, physical and mental health care and related information.

2. Government should promote active policies mainstreaming gender issues into programmes of children and youth, so that before a decision is taken, analysis is made of its effects on both girls and boys.

3. Sexual education should be given to the girl child with parental support and guidance to assist them to know their sexuality.

4. On the negative socio-economic issues:

a. Injustices and obstacles faced by the girl child must be eliminated so that all children will enjoy their rights without discrimination.

b. Laws should be enacted and enforced to ensure that marriage is only entered into with the full consent of the girl.

c. Laws should be enacted and enforced concerning the minimum legal age of consent and minimum age for marriage and raise the minimum age for marriage where necessary.

d. Develop and implement policies and programs for the survival, protection, development and advancement of the girl child to promote and protect the full enjoyment of her human rights and ensure equal opportunities for her.
e. Research should be undertaken on the situation of girls and integrate the results in policy formulation programs and decision-making for the advancement of the girl child.

f. Solicit and generate social support for the enforcement of the law of minimum legal age for marriage especially by providing educational opportunities for girls.

g. Efforts should be made to get parents, peers, teachers and the public to eliminate conflicting information to the girl child about what is expected of her.

5. On the negative cultural attitudes:

a. Educational programs should be set up and teaching materials developed to sensitize and inform adults about harmful effects of some traditional and customary practices on the girl child.

b. Curricula and teaching materials should be developed to encourage the girl child to improve her self-image and opportunities especially in mathematics, science and technology.

c. Educational facilities should be set up to cater for married/pregnant girls and young mothers to return to or complete schooling.

d. Develop programs for formal and informal education -to enable girls acquire knowledge and develop self esteem and take responsibility for their lives.
   -to enable parents know the importance of a girl's physical and mental health and well-being especially in eliminating discrimination against her in food allocation, early marriage, violence against her, female genital mutilation, child prostitution, sexual abuse, rape and incest.

6. On the Rights of the child:

The girl child must be educated on her fundamental human rights, especially those in difficult circumstances.

7. On discrimination in Education:

a. Universal and equal access to and completion of all levels of education by ALL children, must be ensured and existing gaps eliminated.

b. Functional literacy and numeracy programs must be provided especially for out-of-school girls.
c. Enrolment must be increased and level of retention in school improved for girls by providing funds, seeking support from parents and community through campaigns, ensuring flexible school schedules, providing incentives like scholarships, etc.

d. Training programs and materials must be developed for teachers and educators raising their awareness about their role in the educational process of the girl child especially in strategies for gender sensitive teaching.

e. Ensuring that female teachers have the same status and opportunities as males.

f. Provision of education and skills training for girls to increase their opportunities for employment.

g. Promoting full and equal participation of girls in extra-curricular activities like sports and drama.

8. On discrimination against girls in Health and Nutrition:

a. The girl child, parents, teachers and society must be sensitised on good general health and nutrition and raise awareness of the health dangers connected with early pregnancies.

b. Strengthening of health education/services especially primary healthcare programs including sexual and reproductive health. Here, quality health programs which meet the physical and mental health needs of girls and young expectant mothers must be designed and implemented.

c. Peer education programs must be set up to reduce the vulnerability of girls to STDs and HIV/AIDS.

d. Girls should be educated and information disseminated to them, especially adolescents, on their reproductive and sexual health.

e. Counselling and appropriate services must be provided emphasising the role and responsibility of adolescents in sexual and reproductive health behaviour.

f. Information and training programs should be developed for health planners and implementors of the special health needs of the girl child.

g. All necessary measures must be taken towards the abolition of traditional practices detrimental to the health of the girl child.
9. On the exploitation of Child Labour and Protection of young girls at work.
   a. Laws should be enacted defining the minimum age for a person to work and enforce it.
   b. Young girls who qualify to work must be protected through:
      - strict monitoring of work conditions
      - provision of insurance coverage
      - provision of continuous training and education

10. On the eradication of violence against the girl child.
    a. Laws must be enacted and enforced to protect the safety and security of girls from all forms of violence.
    b. Measures must be taken to eliminate incidents of sexual harassment of girls in educational and other institutions
    c. Appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures must be taken to protect the girl child in the household and in the society from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse.
    d. Gender sensitive training must be provided for those involved in rehabilitating girls who are victims of violence and in addition programs for information, support and training must be put in place for such girls.
    e. Laws must be enacted and enforced to protect girls from all forms of violence like F. G. M., incest, sexual abuse and exploitation, child prostitution etc and programs must be provided to assist rehabilitate girls who are subjected to such violence.

11. On Strengthening the family's role in improving the status of the Girl Child
    a. Programs must be put in place to assist the family to support, educate and carry out roles which emphasise the elimination of family discrimination against the girl child.
    b. An environment which will strengthen the family in order to provide supportive and preventive measures which will protect, respect and promote the potential of the girl-child must be provided.
c. Parents, guardians and educators must be educated to treat girls and boys equally, share responsibilities equally between girls and boys in the family and society and see girls and boys as equal partners in the development of the nation.

Conclusion

The girl child problem is a very sensitive and important national issue. With the population of females being more than males, if the current trend, where many factors are militating against the education of females, occasioning many dropouts and young mothers, if care is not taken, the nation will in the near future have a very small number of educated persons who will be mostly males, and this will very much affect national development. We are hammering on this girl child discrimination issue, it is hoped that our "noises" will fall into some good listening ears, so that more serious and continuing efforts will be put into removing these discriminations, for effective national development.

** Paper presented by Helena R. Asamoah-Hassan to 1st & 2nd Cycle Teachers in Zone 1, Kumasi on 26th June 1996 under the auspices of PPAG.**