

# The Girl Child at Risk

by Noeleen Heyzer



A sherpa girl carrying  
hay in her *doka*

B.M. Chetri



*Many girl children are treated as excess population to be eliminated. Others are controlled, reshaped and harnessed to changing social ends.*

**T**he indigenous inhabitants of Alaska, Canada and Greenland, the Inuit, say, that we do not inherit land from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children and we have, indeed, borrowed it. But what kind of a world are we handing over to them? It is a world in a crisis of unsustainability that threatens our human future. It is a world torn apart by conflicts, drained of resources, poisoned by toxic wastes. It is a world of increasing impoverishment and increasing wealth—where the bottom 20 percent of the world's population struggle to survive on only 1.4 percent of the world's resources, while the top 20 percent of the rich own and control 85 percent of the world's resources. Can such a world provide for our children and their children thereafter?

We need a global shift in the direction of development—from the current pattern of unsustainability to a mode of development that is truly sustainable. Sustainable development is a life-or-death necessity and not simply a "soft option" to be added to mainstream development. Sustainable development is about children because they are the future. The 21st century and the next millennium belong to them and their descendants.

Indeed, when the concept of "sustainable development" was

first introduced in *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), the children's needs were placed at the core: 'Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'

Sustainable development is thus about the "world's children"—a concept of global responsibility introduced by Mr. James Grant, the late Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). To fulfil this global responsibility, sustainable development also has to be about "the children's world"—that is, a world that will ensure their security and well-being not just in the next generation but in the generations to follow. Ultimately, sustainable development must mean sustainability from one generation to the next.

All over the world, the girl child is the child whose life and body are most at risk.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has defined "sustainable development" as "development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it; that em-

powers people rather than marginalising them. It gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities and providing for their participation in decisions affecting them. It is development that is pro-poor, pro-nature, pro-jobs and pro-women."

Sustainable development is also necessarily pro-children—pro-girls in particular.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women that took place recently in September 1995, 40,000 women gathered to affirm the kind of world they want to live in. In the work they envisioned, development processes will empower people, particularly women. Such a world will be founded on sustainable livelihoods and stable lives in healthy communities. It will be built on peace and long term conflict-resolution. In such a world, children can grow up safely to take ownership of the future that is theirs, for the future belongs to children only if they actually live long enough to see it.

### **GIRL CHILDREN AT RISK**

There can be no sustainable development if the lives and bodies of children are constantly put at risk. "In 1979, the International Year of the Child was launched, accompanied by internationally televised accounts of children whose lives were devastated by famine, war, and poverty ... [There is] a chasm between ... idealised concepts of childhood and the realities of many

children's lives, both in the Third World and in the heart of First World urban centres. A decade later, an explosion of media coverage of child abuse, and particularly child sexual abuse, again challenged traditional beliefs about childhood and made public



the private lives of children with no access to the mythic 'walled garden' of 'Happy, Safe, Protected, Innocent Childhood'."

All over the world, the girl child is the child whose life and body are most at risk. As noted in the introduction of the book *Children and the Politics of Culture*, edited by S. Stephens, not only are children put at risk, they are often seen as "the risk." Thus, "some children [are treated] as people out of place and excess population to be eliminated, while others must be controlled, reshaped, and harnessed to changing social ends."

Girl children are the ones who are most often regarded as "risks." In many societies, girls live in peril because the risk factor lies simply in being female.

In countries of every economic and social profile, gender inequity works against girls throughout their lives. A wide range of discriminatory and violent practices are institutionalised in cultural traditions and thereby legitimated as 'social norms' so routinely practised that they become invisible. These systemic forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child cannot be discounted as random accidents. Such practices have to be eliminated in an equally systematic manner in all contexts where they are perpetrated.

Violence against girls can occur at birth or even before. Despite the increased life expectancy of women, there are now one hundred million "missing girls" who should be alive yet are not. The unbalanced sex ratio of the world population is a grim indicator of the persistence and severity of discrimination against girls and women.

Female infanticide continues to be practised in many countries. Worse still, its scope has been enlarged through the misuse of medical technology—in particular, the misuse of amniocentesis and abortion as the means of terminating the gestation of female fetuses. Sex-selective abortions are nearly 100 percent female.



An anti-dowry demonstration in Delhi

Sheba Chhachhi

The underlying causes for the systematic homicide of girl babies are:

- ◆ A gender hierarchy that makes the birth of a girl child an unwelcome arrival of a socially inferior being whom the family sees as a liability, not an asset
- ◆ Social and economic conditions that further pressure the family to rid themselves of such a liability.

Accordingly, action needs to be undertaken both in the long and short term. In the longer term, we must eliminate the gender hierarchy that threatens the life-chances of women, girls and even female fetuses. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, it was recognised that the rights and realities of girl children are inseparable from the rights and realities of adult women. In societies where discrimination and violence constitute the routine treatment of adult women, girls too will be routinely discriminated against and abused. If women are regarded as socially inferior beings, then girls too will be so regarded. The gender hierarchy is not a static structure, but one that is actively reproduced through the inter-generational transmission of discrimination and violence against all female persons of all ages.

In the shorter term, we need to change or eliminate those policies and practices that have the effect of placing the lives of girl children in danger. An example

of this would be "one-child" population control policies. In male-biased societies where sons are desired, such policies tend to lead to female infanticide, because many families want their one child to be a son, not a daughter. Such a situation is reinforced by kinship structures that award the rights of descent, ownership, and inheritance only to males. If only a son can inherit and transmit the family name and the resources that go with the name, then in a situation where only one child per family is allowed, female infanticide comes to be seen as a "rational solution" for ensuring family continuity.

Another example would be dowry systems, which have led families to impoverish themselves through offering unaffordable dowries to marry off their daughters. Such dowry systems are based on deeply patriarchal kinship patterns where "wife-givers" are structurally inferior to "wife-takers," so that a dowry has to be given as compensation for "wife-takers" to take away a family liability. In cases where the dowry is deemed inadequate, "dowry deaths" have occurred, where brides have been literally burnt to death. Everyday in India, five women are burnt in dowry-related disputes. Each dowry death not only kills a young woman; it also reinforces the gender hierarchy, telling poor families how unaffordable daughters are. Therefore, if



dowries cannot be afforded and daughters cannot be married off, then in a society where women have no social status except as wives, female infanticide comes to be seen as a "rational solution" for reducing family liability.

This is the disturbing characteristic of systemic violence: it is not an accident of unthinking impulse, but the outcome of "opportunity-cost" calculations of the relative worth of female lives and male lives. In this situation, policy interventions must be targeted not just at individual acts of violence but at the underlying causes that lead to the systemic violence—namely, the processes and structures that systematically reduce the worth of female lives.

### INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

A key policy intervention is the comprehensive promotion of the empowerment and rights of women and girls, including rights of descent, ownership and inheritance, as well as full social and legal status as human persons. The Platform for Action that has emerged from the Fourth World Conference on Women must be taken seriously as a charter for action, because the fate of today's women directly affects the fate of today's girls who may or may not become tomorrow's women. To do this in earnest, we need greater commitment, accountability and resources from governments and society at large. The challenge is to implement the recommendations that have been agreed upon by the international community, so that they will actually improve the life-chances and realities of women and girls everywhere.

The gains made by women in expanding the scope of human

The massive process of globalization, while opening up new opportunities for some, exposes many others—especially girl children—to new risks.

rights to the familial domain are also gains for children, in addition to the advances institutionalised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As pointed out by M. John in "Children's Rights in a Free-market Culture" in the book *Children and the Politics of Culture*: "Possibly one of the most contentious assertions in the Convention is that the rights of young people can best be promoted within the context of a 'protective' and 'nurturing' family."

But of course, while a protective and nurturing family may be the desired ideal, the reality is often otherwise. Indeed, as noted by Stephens: "While the family is still privileged as the ideal protective frame for children's well-being, the Convention also acknowledges that many children live outside families in situations of war and abandonment, and that children should also be protected against abuse and neglect within families."

Family violence occurs more frequently than is acknowledged. It is a form of systemic violence that is usually invisible or, worse still, condoned. Like women's rights, children's rights are human rights, especially the rights of girl children in the familial domain.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo held in 1994 was a watershed for its visible demonstration that women's empowerment, health and reproductive rights must be recognized as de-

velopment priorities.

Women's empowerment at ICPD is also children's empowerment. Women give birth to children. The promotion of women's reproductive health and reproductive rights would help ensure that every child who is born is a wanted and healthy child. Because population policies target the fertility of certain categories of women, these policies have the power of determining the very existence of particular categories of children, especially the children of poor women and the children of indigenous women. These children are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

ICPD thus moved the gains of the World Summit for Children one step further. At the Children's Summit, governments made commitments to providing universal pre-natal care and trained attendants during childbirth, and recognised women's special health and nutritional needs at all stages of their lives. However, ICPD addressed the reproductive policy framework which sets the parameters for the very existence of children.

Women can exercise their reproductive rights only when they are empowered to do so. The control of women's fertility is also related to the control of their sexuality. Female genital mutilation continues to be inflicted on girl children as a customary means of controlling their sexuality and therefore their fertility. Women's rights over their own bodies thus constitute the foundation of their rights to economic and political resources.

The UN has designated 1996 as the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty. In this year, national policies and strategies should be formulated or strengthened to reduce substantially overall poverty in the short-





A girl's sad eyes tell it all.

new risks. Capital, labour, goods and resources are moving much more rapidly across national boundaries, unleashing intense international competition. Production and communications systems are increasingly computerised and technologised. Employment patterns have changed: while new economic opportunities have been created for the "info-rich" and "techno-rich," many existing livelihoods and jobs are being destroyed

among the "info-poor" and "techno-poor."

These trends are symptomatic of a global shift to unregulated markets based on flexible capital. They have dramatic consequences for the shape of the world in the 21st century, the world that our children will live in. In the global shift to unregulated markets, social safety nets and other support systems have been eroded or stretched to breaking point. Policies come to be made by people and institutions that are more and more remote from the suffering of the poor. Deregulation on the current scale has freed too many economic actors of any social, ethical or political constraints. One trillion dollars currently change hands every day in the global financial market. While some billionaires are created overnight, many others are impoverished. The revenue of transnational corporations in 1992 was US\$ 5.5 trillion, untouched by any form of in-

ternational regulations or code of conduct.

The unregulated market is creating simultaneously the new rich and the new poor. Unfortunately, women and girls constitute the majority of the new poor. They have become steadily poorer in the struggle for scarce resources and a denser concentration of wealth at the top of a steep pyramid. The feminization of poverty is thus growing because of women's reduced access to increasingly scarce resources. In the context of competitive unregulated markets, women are affected by the fierce scramble over scarce resources, in particular, land and the means of livelihood.

When resources are scarce, gender hierarchies tend to be more rigid in the allocation of resources. In the absence of safety nets, the coping strategies of families in crisis are also usually gender-biased. Women's assets are often sold before men's assets. Women often end up having no land, fewer livelihood resources, less food, less health care, less education, and lower economic returns for their labour. In the extreme cases where children are sold off as family resource, it is the daughter, not the son, who is the first to be sold.

Impoverished mothers have scarce resources to share with their impoverished children. In developing countries, over 95 million children are working. The transmission of poverty from one generation to the next includes the transmission of gender injustice, where it is the girl child whose rights to life and her own person are not assured. First of all, the girl child born into poverty is more likely to suffer an early death either through deliberate infanticide or through—less deliberate but no less fatal—infant mortality, deprivation of food, clothes and health care. If a girl child is allowed to live, she is often vulnerable to abuse, condemned to remain illiterate, or reduced to being a family resource to be sold into bondage—whether as child-bride, prostitute or debt-slave.

est possible time, to reduce inequalities, and to "eradicate absolute poverty by a target date to be specified by each country in its national context." These policies and strategies must necessarily address the economic realities, needs and rights of women and girls since they now form the majority of the poor. If poverty is not eradicated for women in this generation, then that will become the inheritance of girls in the next.

## **SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION**

There is an urgent need to implement the international agreements that have come out of the UN conferences on global development held since 1992. This need is particularly acute as the world undergoes a massive process of globalization, a process that has opened up new opportunities for some but exposed many others to



Even if the girl child is not sold off, she may still be caught in the poverty trap, as she is deprived of scarce household resources, held back from school and expected to be the family's secondary nurturer. Women currently form 60 percent of the one billion adults who have no access to basic education. Girls currently constitute the majority of the 130 million children who have no access to primary schooling.



B.M. Chattri

Older sister gives little brother a snack. In many places, boys eat first.

## POLICY DIRECTIONS FOR GENDER EQUITY

Sustainable human development has to be founded on sustained peace at all levels of human society—familial, communal, national, regional and global. Violence against women and children occurs at all these levels. In 1993, there were 52 major conflicts in 42 countries, mainly in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Africa, involving large numbers of civilians and high levels of brutality and collective violence.

In order to make a fundamental difference to the lives of women and girls, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has launched a Women's Development Agenda for the 21st century that seeks to ensure the realization of the economic and political empowerment of women and girls. This innovative agenda looks forward to the creation of new institutions, new social values and new community structures. This agenda proposes the following policy recommendations for achieving this goal:

- ◆ Finding new pathways of development that will eliminate the feminisation of poverty, provide equitable benefits for all and cease

to generate new patterns of poverty in the wake of economic restructuring and globalisation. This requires a fundamental shift in development thinking, planning and practice that would incorporate the perspectives, needs and rights of women and girls.

- ◆ Creating new modes of sustainable livelihoods based on ecological, economic and social sustainability, that would take into account the everyday process whereby people produce, consume, survive and reproduce in specific social contexts—the livelihood needs, rights and realities of women and girls must be the primary basis of resource use and allocation.

- ◆ Rebuilding stable lives for women and girls affected by war, ecological destruction, economic and social disintegration.

- ◆ Promoting development ethics and good governance based on equity, sustainability and social justice. Policies derived from good governance would be responsive to the livelihood needs and realities of women and communities. Eliminating the remaining gender gaps in basic needs, over the next decade, especially in education and health, through accelerated investments in a human development agenda at the country level

implementing a world wide campaign for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls.

- ◆ Ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to provide the global legal framework for equality and social justice.

- ◆ Providing resources, mechanisms and processes for the implementation of the Platform for Action.

The Women's Development Agenda is an agenda not just for women but, more significantly, by women for the transformation of global development process. Sustainable development can be truly sustainable, only when the lives and livelihoods of the world's women and girls can be sustained with equity and social justice.

*Noleen Heyzer is Director of UNIFEM. She is also a board member of Isis International-Manila. Reprinted from Development, Journal of the Society for International Development, March 1996.*