

SOUTH ASIA GIRL CHILD SYMPOSIUM RAWALPINDI, PAKISTAN 23-26 JULY 2001

Realities of girls' lives in South Asia

Gender based discrimination against girls and women are rampant in South Asia, home to one-fifth of the world's population. Sex selection before birth and neglect after birth and during childhood result in men outnumbering women. Although precise information on the number of "missing" girls and women does not exist, according to an estimate, between 80 to 90 million South Asian girls and women are missing. Those who do survive suffer the effects of poor nutrition, illiteracy and social practices in a region he has called "the most gender-insensitive in the world."

In South Asia, being born a girl and poor means suffering harsher violations of basic human rights than does a boy. The region has more girls out of school than any other in the world; only 37% of women are literate as opposed to 67% of men. The proportion of married girls between 15 and 19 years of age is the highest in the world. Most girls play a subservient role in family and society. Many girls and women suffer battering, rape, incest and even murder at the hands of men or possibly their own family members, in the name of honour or dowry. Millions are sold into prostitution, marriage, entertainment, domestic work, factory labour, illegal adoption and begging. Almost half of the world's maternal deaths occur in South Asia. In the region's growing conflict areas, girls and women suffer violence, abuse and exploitation, while also bearing the major burden of family protection. A general lack of awareness among girls and women regarding their rights makes them vulnerable to sexual, emotional and physical exploitation. Throughout South Asia, the overall status of girls and women regardless of age, class, caste, location or religion, remains lower than that of boys and men.

Background

Following the United Nations' adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, world leaders and policy-makers met at the World Summit for Children (WSC) in 1990 to promise every child a better future. At the Summit, world leaders committed themselves to formulating and pursuing goals that would eliminate malnutrition, ensure basic education, water, sanitation, immunisation, and protect children against exploitation. All countries of South Asia have ratified the CRC, which emphasises the need to end all discrimination against girls and other disadvantaged children. All have as well signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), except Afghanistan, which has thus far only signed CEDAW.

The South Asian nations realised that special emphasis had to be given to girls in the region, if they were not to be left behind. Highlighting the need for special action to promote equal rights of girls, 1990 was declared 'Year of the Girl Child' and subsequently the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) announced that 1991-2000 would be the 'Decade of the Girl Child,' with an added commitment to addressing gender-based inequality.

Guiding principles of the Decade of the Girl Child were to:

- ensure equality of status of the girl child,
- formulate and pursue additional goals and strategies,
- change social attitudes and behavioural practices.

SAARC's additional gender-specific goals and priority areas were to:

- reduce the infant mortality rate and the under-five infant mortality rate disparities,
- reduce early marriage and early pregnancies,
- eliminate malnutrition disparities,
- reduce women's and girls' workload related to fetching water and providing sanitary means of excreta disposal,
- provide universal access to basic education for girls,
- reduce adult female illiteracy,
- protect girls from exploitation.

South Asia was also a leader in highlighting the need for a special focus on girls globally, raising the girl child issue during preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing during 1995. As a result, girl child issues were included in Beijing Platform for Action. Ten years after the WSC, the countries of the world agreed to review the progress achieved for girls and boys. All nations were asked to prepare End of Decade Review Reports. These reports will be presented at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session for Children to be held 8-10 May 2002 in New York.

Pakistan's commitment to equal rights for girls

As one of the six countries initiating the World Summit for Children, Pakistan demonstrated strong commitment to its children by ratifying the CRC and CEDAW. Pakistan's National Plan of Action (NPA) for women has a special chapter recommending actions for girls. Recognising the need for continued actions to ensure equal rights for girls, Pakistan initiated the idea of holding a meeting of South Asian countries to review the key issues still confronting girls in the region and to share experiences on good practices for promoting girls' rights.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been an active partner in the region and in Pakistan in advocating the fulfilment of equal rights for girls. UNICEF Pakistan and the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, Kathmandu, supported such a meeting as a unique opportunity to promote girls' rights. The South Asia Girl Child Symposium was held in Rawalpindi, Pakistan between 23-26 July 2001. The meeting was co-hosted by the Ministry of Women Development, Social Welfare & Special Education, Government of Pakistan, and the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia.

The Symposium brought together children, mostly girls, and their project managers from selected projects for girls in the region. Children outnumbered adults at the meeting, with 26 girls and 5 boys participating from six South Asian countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. These girls and boys gathered together to share their personal experiences of working against gender-based discrimination and how they are working with local projects and NGOs to learn about and protect children's rights. Most were young adolescent girls from rural areas who had never before left their home villages, let alone travel to foreign countries. Among them was a rich diversity of languages, cultures, religion and educational attainment.

The Symposium focused on building partnerships with girls and boys on decisions that affect them. This was formalised near the end of the meeting when the children fully participated in drafting a high level paper, the "Rawalpindi Call for Partnership and Action." The process itself was a major learning experience, based on enlisting children's views throughout the event. The meeting emphasised giving the participating children an opportunity to speak for themselves and their peers, and to judge the efforts being made to fulfil their rights. To that end the Symposium was designed with full awareness of the challenges of bringing about children's complete and equal participation. Children were encouraged to share, speak, raise issues and comment on each and every stage of the Symposium proceedings.

Many factors were kept in mind to create an enabling environment for children's participation in the Symposium. Special measures were also taken to sensitise adults to listen to children. The pace was slowed for reflection and generalisation and for waiting for verbatim translation. All this led to a highly charged and very energised event full of serious work and fun. On many occasions the children stopped to sing, dance and share their personal narratives along with the implications for other girls in the region. The children reiterated the need to work on the common thread of participation, rights and responsibility and establishing partnerships with adults and children.

Objectives of the Symposium

- To examine programmes and projects initiated at community and family levels in the region in order to identify good practices that as far as possible have demonstrated a rights based and gender sensitive approach for transforming the lives of girl children in South Asia,
- To identify gender-based trends in the achievements of World Summit goals,
- To make recommendations for future policies and actions.

Themes

After a thorough assessment of the girl child projects in the region, Symposium organisers decided to invite at least two projects from each South Asian country. Countries were requested to propose projects focusing on the following areas:

- Health and Nutrition
- Education and Literacy
- Marriage and Motherhood
- Exploitation and Abuse
- Building partnerships with men and boys to enhance the status of girls in families and communities
- Empowerment and Self-esteem

Special efforts were made to include projects with men and boys that promote equal rights of girls. One such example was a project with Pakistan Boy Scouts Association from the province of Balochistan where teenage boys promote education for girls in remote rural areas. Due to procedural delays, participants from the three selected Indian projects unfortunately could not participate in the meeting. Overall, participants from 12 projects attended the Symposium. (Refer to the List of Projects & participants in annexure-I.) The selected projects included initiatives for non-formal education, early childcare, prevention of trafficking, prevention of early marriage, reproductive health and empowerment. The participants included eleven children from Pakistan, six children from Bangladesh, four children each from Nepal and Sri Lanka, and two children each from Bhutan and the Maldives.

Pre-symposium Children's Workshop

A day-long children's workshop was conducted on Sunday, 22 July to familiarise the child participants with the Symposium's objectives, content and processes. Using creative methodologies, participants were given an opportunity to get acquainted with, have fun with each other and prepare for the Symposium.

The workshop, facilitated by Ravi Karkara from the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, used the principles of participatory facilitation methodology. This methodology enabled the girls and boys to share and contribute to the process by focusing on creating a positive learning environment. The methods used in the Children's Workshop included ice breaking games, role-plays, presentation, narratives, creative drawing, dance, singing and learning games, methods that the child participants then used very successfully during the Symposium itself. The children worked very hard in small groups to design their presentations and select their roles and to participate in the different Symposium sessions.

Inauguration

The three-day Symposium began on 23 July, 2001. (Refer to Agenda, Annexure-II.) Dr. Attiya Inayatullah, Minister for Women Development, Social Welfare & Special Education, opened the programme by noting that "the Decade of the Girl Child was one of challenge and change for SAARC countries. On one hand we brought to the forefront of consciousness the current status and reality of a girl's life and on the other, based on historical, anthropological analysis, why and how girls have come to occupy the position they do in South Asia".

Mr. Nigel Fisher, Regional Director of the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, stated: "We are here to review progress or lack of it in the situation of girls in South Asia during the last decade. We are here to listen to the messages of hope from around the region, to learn of initiatives that are making a positive and lasting difference in the lives of girls". He expressed the wish that success stories from participating projects would provide encouraging examples to help Symposium participants identify concrete recommendations and actions.

Welcoming the participants, Ms. Carroll C. Long, Country Representative of UNICEF Pakistan, stressed the importance of girls' participation in the meeting, saying that it would provide South Asian children an opportunity to share their experience and suggest solutions to various problems confronting them.

The realities of girls' lives - sharing of experiences

The session entitled 'Realities of girl's lives in South Asia' was a medley that presented trends and disparities faced by girls in South Asia interspersed with personal experiences shared by the children themselves. Facilitated by Ms. Kiran Bhatia, Advisor, Gender and Child Protection, Regional Office for South Asia, this session provided a unique opportunity for girls and boys to express their opinions in their own words. The children gave a message of hope with confidence and clarity as they shared information on actions they have taken to improve the condition and position of girls in their communities.

Examples of children's experiences and activities

Pabi Kumari Biswokarma from the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), Nepal, told participants of a tradition in her village that a young girl should be locked in a small dark room during her first menstruation to prevent her from having any contact with other family members. Girls from WOREC organised a rally of adolescent girls from many villages to protest this tradition; as a result, awareness about girls rights has increased considerably in the area.

Farjana Zaman Sumi, a girl participant from Children's Congress (CCACR), Bangladesh, spoke of sexual exploitation of children, saying that children, especially girls, are sexually abused within and outside their homes, usually by the very boys and men from whom they expect protection. Girls are raped and forced into prostitution, a horrifying experience that violates their human rights. Children's Congress is working to prevent such exploitation through a large community level network of children's clubs that, along with other activities, organises seminars and press conferences.

Sabina Yasmin of BRAC Adolescent Peer Organisation Network, Bangladesh, discussed early marriages and pregnancies, speaking personally of a friend whose parents had decided to arrange her marriage at the age of 15. Sabina and other Network members explained to the girl's parents the ill effects of early marriage and pregnancy. The parents called the marriage off and allowed their daughter to return to school. Sabina said that the group's persistent efforts succeeded in preventing her friend's early marriage.

Mr. Jehanzeb Khan, a young adolescent boy from the Pakistan Boy Scouts Association (PBSA) Balochistan, vividly presented his experiences with convincing fathers, male decision-makers and elders of his extremely conservative community to let girls attend schools for the first time.

Aishath Saadh and Mariyam Mirfath, two Girl Guides from the project on Early Childhood Care & Development, Maldives, told participants how their project works to bring about changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices within the home. All family members, especially fathers, are encouraged to care more for infants and small children, and to nurture girls and boys equally. The project promotes activities for girls in which they learn through games and sports. Both boys and girls participate in the most popular of these games, with the girls taking a leadership role.

Setting the stage

Dr. Elisabeth J. Croll, the lead resource person and Head of the Department of Development Studies at the University of London, made an opening presentation on how the Symposium can address some critical problems and trends in the lives of South Asian girls. She focused on the meeting's aims and a practical approach to improving the situation for girls and noted again the Symposium's three main goals:

- to exchange project experiences,
- to identify good practices,
- to contribute to global agendas.

Dr. Croll said that Symposium was an excellent and unique opportunity for the young participants to share their experiences and views on areas critical to their healthy growth and development. Dr. Croll explained that good practices in projects for girls should aim at improving girls' health and education skills, protect them from harm and exploitation, increase their participation, raise their confidence and self-esteem and change family and community attitudes towards girls.

She hoped that the Symposium would result in assigning girl's rights an important place on the new global agenda for children. She noted that children's voices must be included in deciding what should be done and in focusing on children's hopes for the future.

Presentation of projects

In the afternoon session of the Symposium's first day, project managers and children discussed their projects. Projects were grouped together in thematic clusters representing the following areas:

- Advocating Girls' Education in South Asia
- Empowering Girls: Girl Guide Initiatives in South Asia
- Gender Based Violence
- Health and Well-being of Girls in South Asia.

Children's participation was carefully planned and facilitated throughout the workshop. The project presentations were largely made by the child participants.

Cluster I: Advocating Girls' Education in South Asia. This session was chaired by Ms. Shahida Azfar, UNICEF Representative, Bangladesh, and included the following projects:

1. Non-Formal Education Project for Girls, Bhutan.

The project manager, Mr. Dorji Wangchuk, noted that this project provides non-formal education and skills to out-of-school youth and adults at three levels:

- a) Basic Education (12 months)
- b) Post literacy (9 months)
- c) Self-learning and need based skill development through community learning centres.

Using a role play of an interview, two girl participants, Sonam Pem and Sonam Choden, demonstrated how remoteness kept girls from attending school. The non-formal education project gave girls an opportunity to continue their studies, relate with their peer group and develop increased confidence, knowledge and skills.

2. BRAC Adolescent Peer Organisation Network (APON), Bangladesh.

Ms. Nashida Ahmed, the project manager, gave an overview of the APON project, which trains adolescents in peer education, leadership, skill building, access to savings and credit facilities, and awareness about the risks of early marriage as well as other gender issues.

This project enables children as a collective group to challenge family and community beliefs and traditions that lead to gender-based discrimination against girls and women. The main objectives are to raise awareness among adolescent girls regarding health, social and environmental issues, to develop adolescent girls as leaders in their communities and to empower them through livelihood training and job opportunities. Project achievements include helping girls overcome discriminatory traditions and superstitions, raising awareness regarding sexual abuse, providing livelihood training and promoting income generating activities for girls to prevent early marriage.

One girl participant, Sabina, explained that she was selected for training in journalism after receiving the initial adolescent training. Although her parents at first objected out of a stereotypical belief that such an occupation was unsuitable for a young girl, with the help of skills she acquired through APON she succeeded in convincing them to allow her to take part in the training. Her new-found career has now earned her status and respect within her family, and in addition she is earning her own money. In this way the project works to demonstrate girl's capacities in many areas.

Two girls from Bangladesh performed a moving and powerful role-play in which a young girl explains to her grandmother the negative aspects of early marriage, acid attacks and gender discrimination. The emotional performance brought home to the audience the realities facing girls and women in South Asia.

3. Brothers Join Meena, Pakistan.

Starting with a geographic and demographic profile of Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province in terms of area, project manager, Mr. Nasir Baig, said that the project by the Pakistan Boy Scouts Association Balochistan involves Boy Scouts in promoting and protecting children's rights to health and sanitation, and girl's rights to education. The boys themselves motivate parents to educate their daughters.

The compelling role-play performed by this group showed a brother secretly teaching his sister how to read and write, despite strong opposition from his father. As the story progressed, the boy becomes seriously ill, and only his sister's ability to write saves him, convincing his father of his daughter's ability and of the need for girls to be educated. Thus the play not only demonstrated community elders' attitudes and their resistance to female education but also how the younger generation can challenge such attitudes. The Scouts' crucial achievement involves changing the thinking process of their families and communities.

Synthesis and concluding remarks

In her remarks the chairperson observed that children, especially boys, can effectively use advocacy to bring about changes in the thinking of those in authority. Change must come from within, and in this case the change-makers themselves are within the family and community. The efficacy of advocacy and awareness building depends upon persistence. Non-formal education provides access to basic education and creates opportunities for girls who have never been to school or who have had to drop out. She complimented the excellent work the projects have done.

Cluster II: Empowering Girls: Girl Guide Initiatives in South Asia. Chaired by Dr. Elisabeth Croll, Department of Development Studies, University of London, this session included the following projects:

1. Girl Guide Project on Early Childhood Care & Development, (ECCD) Maldives.

Ms. Niumath Shafeeq, ECCD's project manager, presented the two main project goals:

- To help meet the survival, development and protection needs of young children, especially girls
- To create a media culture where they can see themselves reflected in a variety of media and where they are encouraged to express themselves. ECCD objectives include building the capacity of adolescents and promoting changed attitudes among boys and girls, breaking gender stereotypes, and promoting the father's role in caring for children and helping them develop.

Through their role-play, the Girl Guides demonstrated some of the games and activities they are promoting to encourage boys to take up nurturing roles and girls to become more involved in physical activities. This project demonstrated the effective use of media communication in a fully literate society.

2. Girl Child Shield Project (Pakistan Girl Guide Association), Pakistan.

Project manager Ms. Tahira Ahmed said that the project provides girls the opportunity to learn self-reliance and foster their self-esteem, helping them think for themselves and become resourceful. Approximately 100,000 girls are enrolled as Girl Guides in Pakistan and 50% of them have benefited from the project thus far. The project's overall objective is to raise awareness on rights issues and to empower girls to improve their social status, to act as role models and change agents.

Girl Guides from the project demonstrated six 'badges' that they must earn as part of the project:

- i. Fact for Life Badge for health education
- ii. Inter-personal Communication Badge for improving communication skills
- iii. Child Rights Badge for introducing CRC and creating awareness on rights and responsibilities
- iv. Girl Child Badge for highlighting different types of discrimination faced by girls
- v. Education Badge for promoting girls' equal right to education
- vi. Team Building Badge for promoting skills for working together as a team.

The effectiveness of the project's methods and process was demonstrated by the confidence and clarity of the presentation by two young Girl Guides.

3. Girl Guide Project on Child Rights and Girls' Empowerment, Sri Lanka.

In her presentation, project manager, Ms. Priyanthi Rajapska, noted that violence and abuse against girls have been identified as major concerns in Sri Lanka. The project works in school environments in rural areas and its main objectives are:

- to create awareness among principals and teachers about the protection rights of girls,
- to empower girl children to remain in school without dropping out in order to fulfil their right to education,
- to provide counselling to girls who have been abused.

Girl participants from the project expressed their determination to move forward, realising that no one else will do it for them. They said that girls have a very important role to play, one no less crucial than that of boys. They emphasised that girls have the right to live lives free from physical and mental harassment.

Synthesis and concluding remarks

As chairperson, Dr. Croll observed commonalities between the projects in terms of building partnerships between the Girl Guides, UNICEF and the state governments. Pointing out that Girl Guide projects focus on capacity building and empowerment, she noted the capacity such projects have to reach far-flung areas and influence girls living there and said she felt such projects can be replicated in other countries.

Cluster III: Gender Based Violence. Chaired by Ms. Kiran Bhatia, Regional Advisor for Child Protection and Gender, this session included the following projects:

1. Community Surveillance System Against Trafficking (CSST), Nepal.

Project manager Ms. Geeta Pathak Sangroula said this project aims at preventing the trafficking of girls and women with community assistance. Its main objectives are:

- to prevent trafficking of girls and women for sexual exploitation,
- to develop a system of community surveillance against trafficking,
- to end the vulnerability of girls and women that leads to trafficking.

A group of lawyers and a large number of village based committees assist the project in its work.

Sharing their experiences, girl participants emphasised the serious nature of the problem of girl trafficking in their villages and said that their united efforts have resulted in the rescue of many girls. While at first the police were reluctant to assist in their work, they now fully support the project activities. An example was provided of a girl who was trafficked and forced to work as a prostitute until she contracted AIDS and was thrown out of the brothel. She now works on one of the project committees.

2. Children's Congress: Advocacy on Child Rights, Bangladesh.

Project manager, Mr. Mizanur Rahman, described the project's main objectives as:

- Creating an environment where children can speak for themselves,
- orienting children about the CRC with a special focus on participation and protection rights,
- developing a sense of cohesion for united action,
- raising voices for children's rights.

Project activities include capacity building of children to form children's congresses in 64 districts of Bangladesh, networking with children's organisations to facilitate national and community level activities, supporting gender and child rights training for children and promotion of children's drama groups to create awareness on rights, prevent dowry, trafficking and abuse, especially of girls.

Child participants from this project said that they have gained confidence by becoming members of the Children's Congress. They said they now undertake advocacy measures, operating like a pressure group to convince the government to take action against human trafficking and to mobilise the media through press conferences and newsletters.

3. Children Affected by Armed Conflict, Sri Lanka.

Project manager Sister Jeya Pius said this project's main objectives are to stimulate growth and draw out children's talent and leadership qualities, and to help women and children in refugee camps to cope better with their daily lives. She discussed the profound impact displacement has on children's lives and said that major changes have taken place in girl's lives after they joined the programme. Art, drama and poetry help children to express their inner feelings and also create awareness about their fundamental rights.

Child participants narrated their personal experiences of before and after joining the project. They emphasised the poor status of girls and how this leads to their abuse, giving examples of girls being raped in refugee camps, and of the unhealthy living conditions. They shared with participants how their lives improved after joining the project. Girls from the project presented a role play depicting a typical family environment where an alcoholic father commands his daughter, although she busy trying to study, to bring him a cup of tea, cook and clean the room.

Synthesis and concluding remarks

The chairperson reiterated that gender based violence was a major problem in South Asian countries. Girls are subjected to physical abuse and violence within and outside the family. While these projects have taken many initiatives to protect them against gender based discrimination and abuse, there is further need to develop a network that will highlight cases of violence against women and take unified action in collaboration with legislators and governments. Collective action is required because no single agency or organisation can make sufficient progress acting alone. Moreover, issues of abuse must be brought into the public domain as these cannot be considered merely as private matters. Equally significant is the need to address the root causes of gender inequality rather than focusing solely on the symptoms.

Cluster IV: Health and well-being of girls in South Asia.

Chaired by Dr. Shershah Syed, a renowned expert on women's health from Pakistan, this cluster included the following projects:

1. CMES Adolescent Girls Programme, Bangladesh.

This innovative project, Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES), was described by Ms. Monowara Begum, project manager. CMES aims to eliminate all discrimination against girls and its main objectives are:

- to empower adolescent girls in every way through development of their personalities,
- to project the girl child as an asset to the family rather than a burden,
- to prevent gender discrimination against adolescent girls,
- to educate girls and help them become economically independent.
- to prevent early marriages and enable girls to be aware of and have control over their own reproductive health,
- to bring boys into the adolescent empowerment programme and to motivate them towards gender equality.

Sharing her personal experience, one girl member who said she was from a poor family recounted receiving photography training under the CMES Adolescent Girls Programme (AGP). Now managing her own business, which is not typical for a woman, she is economically independent, well respected by her family and highly involved in decision-making. Another CMES participant spoke of receiving technical training under the AGP. She also has her own business and now works with the project in discouraging dowry.

2. Girl Child Project (Family Planning Association of Pakistan), Pakistan.

The Girl Child Project, as described by project manager Ms. Saman Asad, focuses on empowerment of girls to improve their status in families and communities. Specific project goals are:

- to raise awareness in 500 locations directly and 1500 indirectly on the situation of girls and young women and the implications of this situation on community well-being and development,
- to empower 25,000 girls/young women to participate in decision-making at family and community levels,

One girl from this project detailed for participants the great difficulty she encountered in completing her first ten years of education. The project provided her training in running a home school. Now operating a school with 25 children, the small fee she charges makes her economically independent.

3. Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), Adolescent Girls Reproductive Health Project, Nepal.

Project manager, Ms. Soni Pradhan, outlined WOREC's work to empower and strengthen adolescent girls' groups and to mobilise them to promote health rights and protection against violence. WOREC's main objectives are:

- to analyse the relationship between socio-economic and cultural traditions and the health problems of adolescent girls and to make practical recommendations for advocacy activities,
- at the grassroots level, to improve people's and teachers' understanding of adolescent health and human rights issues,
- to mobilise girls, particularly members of adolescent girls' groups, for advocacy activities.

Indira Danuwar, a child member of WOREC, spoke of her work on the Community Mediation Committee, consisting of men and women, and boys and girls from the local community. If she identifies a problem, she takes it to the Committee, which will handle it unless the problem is of a serious nature. The Committee turns serious problems such as rape over to the police.

The Nepalese girls from this project also presented a skit highlighting the adolescent girl's rights to health and participation at the family level.

Synthesis and concluding remarks

In his remarks the session chair, Dr. Shershah Syed, said the project presentations highlighted the sufferings of the girl child on various aspects of health and reproductive rights, and also offered guidance on methods for improving the situation.

Analysis and summing up of good practices for girl child projects in South Asia by Dr. Elisabeth Croll

Dr. Croll analysed the components of girl child projects by looking at project outcomes and the effectiveness of processes. She observed that most projects aim to improve and protect girls' lives as well as to reduce gender discrimination and exploitation, and she noted the common emphasis on girls' participation, empowerment and skill building. Most projects combined raising awareness about girls' rights with elevating their status and respect in the society through family support. Dr. Croll also discussed the projects in terms of the replicability and sustainability of their practices.

Recommendations for respecting, promoting, fulfilling and protecting equal rights of girls

Dr. Croll also facilitated group work designed to elicit the participants' and observers' ideas on how to improve the status of girls. Following are the key suggestions that emerged from this session:

Recommendations for respecting, promoting, fulfilling and protecting equal rights of girls

1. Ways to communicate girls' rights

- Workshops, conventions, gender sessions, exhibitions and cultural functions and media
- Ensure girls' participation in discussions and meetings
- Include relevant material in curricula

- Communicate and mobilise family and community heads
 - Provide children opportunities to speak for themselves
2. Ways to increase protection
 - Community mobilisation and formation of committees
 - Raise awareness at individual and family levels
 - Boys and girls work together and help each other
 - Legal backing, enforcement, involvement and alliance building with police, government, and district authorities
 3. Ways to increase girls' participation
 - Change in attitude of men and boy family members
 - Ensure girls' participation through encouraging and motivating them as well as their parents
 - Appreciate and encourage girls in whatever they do well in order to build their confidence.
 - Train girl children to organise and express themselves
 4. Ways to change family attitudes
 - Help parents to understand the pains and sorrows of their children
 - Talk to parents and elders in an effective manner while according them due respect
 - Change family attitudes by giving examples of good practices
 5. Ways to change gender stereotypes
 - Challenge gender stereotypes by ensuring that boys also become involved in projects and by portraying girls who stand out as heroines
 - Provide skill training for girls
 - Seek to remove religious misconceptions
 - Educate parents on gender equality
 - Encourage media to end gender stereotyping
 6. Ways to increase community respect for girls
 - Enable girls to become earning members of the family
 - Promote self-reliance for girls to raise their status in the community
 - Emphasise the status given to women in all religions
 - Apprise community leaders and elders of what girls can achieve
 - Involve girls in community development tasks to enhance community respect for them
 7. Ways to increase girls' self-esteem and confidence
 - Establish forums for girls to meet and discuss common issues
 - Give girls the right to freedom of expression
 - Put girls in leadership roles
 - Economic self-reliance will give girls confidence and self esteem
 - Encourage girls to participate in household as well as community decision-making
 8. Ways to share empowerment processes
 - Share information on best practices
 - Empowered girls should take the message of empowerment to other girls
 - Influence community decision makers in favour of girls' empowerment
 - Highlight girls' issues through print and electronic media and detail their contributions to society
 9. How to encourage replicability
 - Promote an exchange programmes of children from similar projects within each country and the region
 - Support networks and coalitions working on child protection issues
 - Start 'service' charges from day one to eliminate dependency on donors alone
 - Spread information on successful projects
 10. How to encourage sustainability

- Design projects so that the target group owns them and focus on self-help
- Develop a high level of commitment
- Propagate successful projects to interest international communities
- Promote community involvement and let communities own the project
- Engage in capacity building of stakeholders

Thematic group discussions

In the afternoon session of the second day, participants, resource persons and facilitators were divided into different thematic groups to discuss issues and make recommendations for action at global, regional and country levels.

• Health and Nutrition

Facilitated by Dr. Elisabeth Croll, participants in this group began with a brainstorming session on issues and concerns regarding health and nutrition in South Asian countries. Discriminatory eating patterns in some countries lead to girls and women eating only leftover food. In addition, various harmful food taboos rooted in traditional practices and superstitious beliefs prohibit girls and women from eating certain foods during specific periods in their lives such as puberty, menstruation and following childbirth. The group agreed that the definition of health should include all physical, mental and psychological aspects of health and well-being. Participants, however, criticised the lack of adequate health facilities and shortage of relevant health staff in most countries. The group made the following recommendations:

- change eating traditions that discriminate against girls,
- challenge harmful traditional food practices imposed on girls and women,
- promote nutritional education for girls to improve their diet,
- draw attention to harmful practices and behaviour that damage girls' physical and mental health such as early marriage, teenage pregnancies, lack of rest, heavy domestic work and unhealthy living conditions,
- provide equal health care in the family and improved access to quality health services,
- provide more opportunities for health education including classes on health, hygiene and reproductive health rights.

• Education and literacy

After an in-depth discussion facilitated by Ms. Shahida Azfar, the group resolved to highlight actions that can make a difference in education and literacy levels for girls in the region. Girls' rights should be emphasised in curricula from early stages to prevent children from developing gender biases, negative attitudes and practices. Parents and community elders should be made to realise the importance of girls' education and the difference educated women can make to the society as well as to the next generations. The group recommended that:

- all countries of South Asia should provide free education for boys and girls for the first ten years,
- schools should be located within easy access of all communities
- girls should be provided with sufficient opportunities for vocational training,
- teachers should be well trained,
- all institutions should have in-built systems to provide for the educational needs of special children.

• Child participation and partnership

Facilitated by Mr. Ravi Karkara, this group pointed out the need to obtain children's views in planning, implementing and assessment of activities. The group recommended:

- equal opportunity and respect for children's opinion in processes and decision-making on issues that affect them,
- equal opportunity for development of children's talents
- freedom of expression,
- elimination of all forms of discrimination between boys and girls.

- **Violence and Abuse**

Recommendations made by this group, facilitated by Ms. Kiran Bhatia, were that:

- child rights should be considered as human rights,
- violence against girls should be punished by law and considered a threat to all development,
- equal treatment should be accorded boys and girls within and outside families,
- recognition should be given to the fact that girls work harder than boys,
- children's voices must be heard and given due importance,
- children should be protected against abuse in educational and religious institutions,
- girls engaged in domestic child labour must be protected against abuse.

The next session gave the groups the opportunity to present to each other the recommendations on their respective themes. Mr. Nigel Fisher facilitated the process of summarising the recommendations and evolving a synthesis to which the children gave their resounding approval. The recommendations were incorporated in what was called 'the Rawalpindi Call for Partnership and Action'.

RAWALPINDI CALL FOR PARTNERSHIP AND ACTION

We, the signatories of this Call for Partnership and Action, are girls from of South Asia, and boys from Pakistan, who have participated in the South Asia Girl Child Symposium, held in Rawalpindi 23-25 July 2001 at the invitation of the Government of Pakistan, and co-hosted by the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia. We came together to be part of the Global Movement for Children in South Asia.

We came together, in partnership with supportive adults, to exchange experiences on how good programmes and practices at family and community levels can protect and promote our rights, and transform our lives.

We also wanted to demonstrate that we young people can play an active and responsible role in this transformation.

We ask adults to listen to our voices and to our hopes for the future.

Above all, we would like the support of adults and of boys, to end all forms of discrimination against girls and to:

- Involve girls as equal partners, respect them and provide them with equal opportunities in processes and decisions that affect them.
- Create and ensure an enabling environment in which girls and boys have equal opportunities to grow and develop to their full potential.

Children's rights are human rights. Girls and boys must be treated equally as individuals and must have the same rights and opportunities.

There must be appropriate laws to stop violence and abuse against girls, and such laws must be effectively enforced.

Boys and men should be proactive in changing attitudes in families and communities to ensure girls' rights.

We would like to have equal health care in the family and improved access to quality health services.

We would like to have more opportunities for comprehensive health education, including reproductive health and rights, and hygiene for ourselves, as well as for men and boys in our communities.

We would like to draw attention to harmful practices which damage the physical and psychological health of girls. Such practices include violence, early marriage, early and too frequent pregnancies, lack of rest, heavy domestic work load and unhealthy living and working conditions.

We would like to change eating traditions which discriminate against girls.

We wish to end food practices which disadvantage girls during menstruation, pregnancy and after child birth.

We would like to have more nutrition education for all, and to improve the diets of girls.

All girls and boys have the right to a good quality education, including minorities, children with special needs and all other disadvantaged children.

We request that activities be launched in our communities, among boys and parents and among religious and local leaders, to make them aware of the value of every girl child and to promote girls' education.

We call for compulsory and free education for girls and boys up to secondary level. Girls in socially and economically disadvantaged families need financial and other support to enable them to complete secondary school.

We call for improvements in the quality of the school curriculum so that it is gender sensitive and emphasises child rights. The school environment should be safe, hygienic and encourage creative learning for both girls and boys.

Finally, we request that promises made to girls - to all children - be kept, and that commitments be fulfilled.

We want our voices to be heard in all South Asian countries, at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children, taking place 19-21 September 2001, and at future Summits of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and at other regional and international meetings.

We believe in a future fit for all girls and boys. We can help to change the world for the better. We can all be Change Makers.

Say Yes for Girls!
Say Yes for Children!

Concluding session

The concluding session of the South Asia Girl Child Symposium was well attended by a large and distinguished audience, including senior government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, NGO representatives, members of the media and a variety of legal and human rights experts. The first lady of Pakistan, Begum Sehba Pervez Musharraf, was the chief guest.

Welcoming these guests, Dr. Attiya Inayatullah, Minister for Women Development, Social Welfare and Special Education, said, "The idea to hold the South Asia Girl Child Symposium came from Pakistan and the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia quickly accepted the idea".

She continued, "Education of girls is no longer a matter of debate; pervasive malnutrition is being addressed on a war footing; the marriage age of girls is rising; traditional gender roles are being reviewed; girls are being helped to enrol and stay in school; programmes aimed at improving the skills, self confidence, and opportunities for girls are addressing the strong son preference of South Asia, a preference that militates against girls."

Mr. Nigel Fisher, Director of the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, reviewed the trends and realities of girls' lives in South Asia and highlighted some of the main issues raised during the symposium by participating children. He spelled out the key proposals and recommendations made by the children for the future action. Mr. Fisher noted that he was quite impressed by the children's collective efforts to prepare the Rawalpindi Call for Partnership and Action.

Following Mr. Fisher's address came a children's presentation, which began with welcomes in each of their countries' languages. Some of the participating children then shared examples of their experiences in confronting and addressing various gender-based inequalities in their communities. Their frank statements were deeply appreciated by the audience. The youngest participant, 11-year-old Susikala from Sri Lanka, presented the Rawalpindi Call for Partnership and Action to the first lady. The children also presented her with a mural.

Address by the Chief Guest

Addressing the Symposium participants and guests, the first lady of Pakistan, Begum Sehba Pervez Musharraf said: "I have today heard, loudly and clearly, the messages of the children. I have also received their creative work. Let me assure you that today you have found a new spokesperson. The theme of the Symposium is very close to my heart. Indeed the girl child is close to the heart of every Pakistani. The peculiar situation in which the South Asian girl child finds herself today has been explained so vividly by the experts and poignantly by the children themselves".

Referring to Pakistan's leadership role in the World Summit for Children, the first lady noted, "The Symposium is a continuation of our efforts to carry forward the work started more than ten years ago". She said that the Symposium also renews "our pledges and reaffirms our commitment to the cause of child welfare, the promotion and fulfilment of children's rights in general and the improvement of the life of the girl child of South Asia in particular".

Appreciating UNICEF's role, Mrs. Pervez Musharraf said UNICEF has provided consistent support to the Pakistan Government's efforts to further the cause of the girl child in South Asia. She thanked the child participants, calling them the future leaders of their respective communities and role models for their peers. Thanking all those involved in organising the Symposium, she said it was a major international event on a serious theme, central to the development of South Asia.

In her vote of thanks, Mrs. Parveen Qadir Agah said the first lady's presence demonstrated her commitment and that of Pakistan's President to provide children a happy future. She thanked the participants, organisers, observers and facilitators, officials of the National Commission for Child Welfare & Development (NCCWD) and the hotel management for making the event a great success.

Project market stalls

Later, Mrs. Pervez Musharraf visited the colourful market stalls which displayed key aspects of the projects' activities. The children and project managers had painstakingly decorated their stalls with a multitude of posters, photographs, handicrafts and other products their projects made. The stall for the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia displayed publications on education, health and gender issues in the region. Mrs. Musharraf enjoyed visiting every stall and chatting with the children.

Receptions

During the Symposium three different receptions were held. On the meeting's first day, the Commissioner of Rawalpindi hosted a reception at the Pearl Continental hotel. Over 40 children from Rawalpindi were also invited, giving Symposium participants, particularly the children from other South Asian countries, an opportunity to meet Pakistani children. Skits, dances and role-plays were organised and all the participants had a wonderful time. This reception ensured that the Symposium opened on an upbeat, positive note.

On the second day, Ms. Carroll Long, Representative of UNICEF Pakistan hosted a dinner at Holiday Inn Islamabad, giving participants the opportunity to see Pakistan's capital city. Following dinner, the evening's entertainment included child participants singing and dancing to their traditional folk tunes, an event that everyone enjoyed thoroughly. Along with a large number of guests, Dr. Attiya Inayatullah, Minister for Women Development, Social Welfare & Special Education, attended the reception and fully participated in all the children's activities.

On the last day of the workshop Mrs. Parveen Qadir Agha, Secretary Ministry of Women Development, Social Welfare & Special Education, invited the participants to the Lok Virsa Museum in Islamabad for a dinner. Once again, the children were exuberant to meet local dignitaries and shared

their enthusiasm on having attended an extremely useful and successful Symposium. Souvenirs were presented to participating children and project managers.

Field visits

On the fourth day, participants could choose to participate in a field visit to various girl child projects at different rural and semi-rural locations. They were escorted to the projects of the Family Planning Association of Pakistan (FPAP) and the Pakistan Girl Guide Association (PGGA) in Islamabad, Ghora Gali, Haripur and Chakwal. Participants were keenly interested in the projects' activities and discussed their own experiences with members and project managers.

There were tearful goodbyes as the girls parted from their new found friends. The week -long intense interactions and deep collective reflections had filled them with a new surge of energy, motivation and determination. They now belonged to a growing family of young activists who had vision, commitment and confidence to work for the rights and protection of the girls of South Asia.