

How to empower women and girls

The European Parliament commemorates International Day of the Girl Child

By Elisa Van Ruiten, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (12.10.2016) - Yesterday, 11 October was [International Day of the Girl Child](#). This day, established by the United Nations in 2011, is dedicated to underscoring the human rights of girls, the particular challenges faced by girls, including the ways their rights are violated. In addition, it is a day to remind us of the power of girls and women to affect positive change in the world, for everybody – including boys and men.

This week is also [European Week of Action for Girls](#) which “ensure(s) that girls’ empowerment is promoted and their rights are protected and fulfilled in the EU’s external action, through adequate policies, funding and programs.” One of the events of the week, held today, 12 October 2016, was the session hosted by MEP Ulrike Lunacek, [CARE](#), and [World Vision](#), “*Investing in and Empowering Women and Girls Affected by Crisis and Fragility*” *Challenges and Best Practices from Yemen, DRC and South Sudan*. It featured a group of experts from various international and civil society organizations, the European Parliament, and European Commission who discussed the situation of girls and women worldwide in who are affected by conflict and violence.

Some key takeaways

- 150 Million girls experience some form of sexual violence – per year. This means that in certain areas and especially those in conflict girls are afraid to leave the house or civilian camp due to fear of rape.
- Girl refugees are married by older men so that they are taken care of and, similarly, young girls (under the age of 10) become wives, which in turn leads to sexual violence.
- Girls are forced to become pregnant to give birth to future generations of child soldiers.
- The conference also highlighted the “forgotten conflict” in Yemen where civilians are hit the hardest and 82% of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance.
- There is no access to healthcare, therefore cancer patients live without treatment and half a million pregnant women have no chance of prenatal care. Estimates put the number of women in this group that will experience complicated deliveries at 80,000.
- Gender based violence (GBV) is prevalent and girls and women experience sexual harassment on the streets and at checkpoints, with 52,000 women at risk for sexual exploitation. Sadly, this is the case sometimes in exchange for humanitarian assistance, meaning that they will not be given help if they do not give of their bodies.
- 50% of women are married before the age of 18 and domestic violence is widespread.

The above examples show why it is so necessary that we highlight the rights of girls, not only so that they do not suffer in silence but so people can help to change these daily realities and the prevailing social norms so deeply ingrained in society that enables these violations to happen over and over again.

What can we do?

- Advance social norms that protect women and girls
- Work to change the attitudes so that those who have experience sexual or gender based violence are still accepted in their communities, and at the same time also change the norm itself and the use of rape as a weapon of war. Girls should become agents for change as they have the power to be strong advocates.
- Laws and policies that are already in place or written should be enacted and implemented.
- A complaint mechanism for child led complaints should be developed.
- It is also important that the EU ratify and implement the Istanbul convention.

Women also need to be involved in peace procedures for as Marnia Marchetti, from the European Commission, said, "Stopping women from political involvement is a form of violence."

Links to further reading on the subject of girl's and women's empowerment:

[A 10-year-old girl makes her pitch to Western powers for peace in Yemen](#)

[10 Simple Words Every Girl Should Learn](#)

[Educating girls in South Sudan](#)

[U.N. Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG's\): Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls](#)

[Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)