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***Socio economic empowerment:  
A route towards equality of the girl child \****

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

## **Introduction**

### **Legal frameworks and traditional inequalities against the girl child**

As in many countries, the girl child in Egypt is still discriminated against from the moment of birth, through her childhood, adolescence and into her womanhood. In the 1990 Declaration of the World Summit for Children the girl child's survival, development and protection was given priority attention.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that "States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or status. (art.2, para.1).

Despite the existing international legal framework, girls continue to face de jure and de facto inequalities in virtually all societies. Unfortunately many signatory countries have saddening indicators showing that the girl child is discriminated against from the earliest stages of her life, from her conception to her birth and through her childhood and adolescence into her marriage, motherhood and old age. Her mere survival through her life cycle is often submerged as a result of harmful attitudes and practices, such as prenatal infanticide, son preference, even in breast feeding and basic attention for the newly born, female genital mutilation - early marriage, including child marriage, and forced marriage, violence against women, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, discrimination against girls in food allocation and other practices related to health and well-being. As a result, in some areas fewer girls than boys survive into adulthood. Some often maintain a lifelong downward spiral of deprivation and exclusion from the social mainstream, and others become part of the harmful cycle of self hurt and accept and become active members of the new household cycle of violence against their own girl child.

### **Social traditions and physical abuse against the girl child**

Physical abuse is quiet recurrent in the Egyptian homes, in addition to different forms of ill treatment and humiliation that affect children under the umbrella of parental methods of upbringing. Girls are more prone to such parental abuse and ill treatment than boys especially when they reach the age of puberty under the justification of protecting them and controlling their behaviour.

Girls are considered socially weaker in a prevalent culture that discriminates against them. The battering of some wives by their husbands left the female children of these families in full acceptance of such parental violence, as a usual part of their life cycle. Brothers and male cousins observe this violent behavior and then participate in this violence against the girls in the family to show their manhood to peers and family male members. Male children become more violent when they grow up. This causes many psychological problems to those children and creates most of the current broken families

and will create more of them in the future, unless some legal measures are taken to ensure the protection of the girl in the family.

### **Discrimination starts at home**

The law in Egypt considers violence in general as “a criminal act if it leads to a wound that requires treatment for a given period of time or if it results in a deformity”. It is vital to have a clearer definition of all violent practices and inhuman treatment, especially those within the household by parents and family members, aiming to penalize the girl child.

There is an urgent need to find a legal mechanism that would aid the victim of violence to sue the attacker and protect the victim. On many occasions when badly beaten or hurt girls were asked by an NGO to report such violence or to use a hotline, in almost all cases the girl was afraid of further torture or even of being killed by her father or another male member of her family.

The girl child has the right, as any other child, not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (CRC, article 37): A deficiency in the law allows current practices to go on thus violating this right. Girls’s rights and their specific needs must be made public knowledge and must be legally enforced.

The primary target group is the adult community, in general, and male members specifically. Household members and parents need to be made aware of their responsibilities towards the girl child and adolescent child within a legally acceptable framework.

Most of the physical abuse starts at home and unfortunately with parental consent. In some rural areas where we had projects, mothers who gave birth to girls were not allowed the same protein meals or sufficient home rest by their mothers-in-law in comparison to those women who had a boy child.

The rural hierarchy of serving food which keeps the meager leftovers for the girl child is managed by the adult females of the household. Men eat first, but if the grand mother wanted, she could pass food to her grand-daughter.

FGM is not initiated by the physicians in hospital, but by the mothers and grand-mothers, to control the girl’s sexuality, believing that it is a protective parental obligation.

The manual defloration (tearing the hymen ) at wedding parties in some Upper Egyptian villages is mostly conducted by the mother and mother-in-law, who arrive with their chastity flag to show the community that they managed to keep the girl “BRAND NEW”.

## **Existing laws and girls' rights**

In spite of the fact that progress has been made by many countries in the advancement of the girl child, in particular in the recognition of the human rights of the girl child through the adoption of appropriate legislation and in increasing access to some primary services especially education, the law alone does not ensure the realization of a right. The Egyptian constitution, for example, decrees the principle of equality and child legislation prohibits discrimination between Egyptian children. Notwithstanding, they could not “stop” our daily life reality. There are many forms of discrimination against children, especially the girl child, which do not merely derive from traditions; the discrimination is compounded by the image of the girl and the women as portrayed by the educational curricula-taboos and the media, particularly local television. Among the girl children as such there is also discrimination related to social status, which sometimes affects their access to most basic services. There is a distinct geographical discrimination between the rich and the poor girl, the urban and rural girls, those of the Delta and those in Upper Egypt.

There is a great gap between the services provided for children in large cities in contrast to rural areas; there is a huge discrepancy in access and in quality of services between the Delta and Upper Egypt. The NGO coalition on child rights in Egypt reports on “Discrimination between children in difficult circumstances: disabled children, especially those with a mental disability, working children, street children, and delinquents..... A large percentage of them do not have basic rights such as education and health insurance (the latter only includes school children).”

## **Monitoring girl child rights from a holistic perspective: A proposed legal reform with tangible accountability**

To attempt to create an environment that has some future prospects for the appropriate protection for the girl child, we will require a broad range of actions.

The international legal framework needs to be much more effective and measurable.

A call for the decentralization of legal awareness on girls' rights coupled with strong legislation, and enforcement of such laws, is vital.

This may take the form of a new legal reform policy. Most institutions dealing with the girl child will also need to reassess their service capacities, their budgetary allocations and access to basic services in relation to the rights and needs of the girl child and adolescent.

The Egyptian Ministry of Justice has a very successful institutional accountability system which could be adopted as a best practice. “*Al Magless Al Hassby*”, or the accountability council, is an institution well decentralized to cover all rural and remote areas of Egypt as well as urban areas. The council deals with child inheritance rights after

the loss of one or both parents. The council is extremely effective in auditing every single expenditure detail of a child's financial rights in heritage.

However, we lack the presence of an institutionalized structure that deals comprehensively with the legal implementation of the human rights of the child in general, and with the girl child in particular, while both parents are alive. Incorporating child and girl rights into the agenda of the accountability council could help in developing a national system for monitoring girls' rights within a de facto legal system.

**The girl child's rights could be attained through simple system support**  
**A proposed solution: Girl child accountability council**

A committee with a special attorney for children or a representative for girl child protection could have assisted the *Magless Hassby* to become an auditing council on the family's legal responsibility towards the girl child. It is unfortunate that in being preoccupied with monitoring financial rights, we sidelined the monitoring of human rights, and neglected to attend to the psychological needs of the child. Thus an existing system was not utilized for furthering the important objective of defying domestic violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting which, I believe, are more humiliating in a girl's life than poverty alone.

A legal accountability council must hold parents and institutions accountable for the entire set of children's rights and not just the financial ones. A council of childhood and motherhood should be a practical mechanism to monitor and follow up with the Ministry of Justice to ensure girls rights are not neglected by the parent(s) or institutions.

Despite the existence of the principle of the best interests of the child in law, its implementation is weak - for example, the interests of the girl child were not duly taken into account in juvenile justice process and in policies of economic reform. Consequently, a revision of social and economic policies to ensure that basic needs are ensured in an organized sustainable manner; thus not only providing temporary palliative means and mechanisms to mend what we call the side effects of such policies.

There is an urgent need for a comprehensive perspective regarding the rights of the girl child. Institutions need to understand that, adopt appropriate measures and become accountable for the implementation of girls' rights. The current level of awareness of the rights of the girl child in Egyptian society as a whole is very low.

**An urgent need for public awareness and institutional clarity on girls' rights**

Institutions have an extremely vague understanding of their roles in ensuring girls' rights through their services and there is hardly any accountability in respect of their modest role in ensuring or implementing those rights.

There is a need for monitoring child rights from a holistic, comprehensive and preventive perspective. Indicators available are only the traditional/usual quantitative ones such as rates of enrolment in schools and the percentage of vaccination coverage, etc.

### **Family responsibility towards the rights of the girl child**

Legislation and current practices in Egypt acknowledge that the family is the principal unit of society and the natural environment for the upbringing of children.

However, the law does not clearly assert that “both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child.”

Many educational and cultural programs for parents exist but there is no clear strategy to utilize them. There is no scientific evaluation of their impact

Television and radio should be used for spreading awareness on the rights of the girl child to ensure parental and institutional awareness and legal abidance. Most of the main means of communication are owned by the government and satellite private channels that offer some awareness programs are not easily accessible to most of the poorer, rural and illiterate population that would be totally dependent on such media for its awareness raising.

Moreover, “one to one awareness contacts” should include both parents or one of them, according to their availability; these contacts could be made in the maternal – childhood health centers that have opened throughout Egypt with the help of well trained counselors that teach / coach parents on how to deal with girls of any age, of any level, and in any given situation.

Families could be held legally responsible and accountable for their children dropping out of school, for their girls’ genital mutilation, and for their children’s domestic or other labour and abuse within and outside the family home. A sufficient level of legal awareness will eventually “justify” appropriate penalties against parents, social and other institutions.

### **Poverty: A major threat to attaining girls’ rights**

Poverty threatens girls’ well-being and development and is one of the main obstacles to a family environment in which the girl is able to grow. The girl child is “sentenced” to early marriage often before puberty as a result of the inability of the family to fulfill its economic responsibility in raising her. Early child-bearing as a direct result of family poverty “continues to be an impediment to improvements in the educational economic and social status of women in all parts of the world. Overall, early marriage and early motherhood can severely curtail educational and employment opportunities and are likely to have a long-term adverse impact on their and their

children's quality of life.” (Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China - September 1995: Action for Equality, Development and Peace).

In most of the villages I worked, both in Egypt and Yemen, there was substantial discrimination against the girl child during meals, her access to the tray came after the adult men, the young boys and often even her mother. In poor communities the leftovers of the food tray have hardly protein left or a sufficient quantity of bread. Many girls and later mothers are victims of anemia and other deficiency disorders, which endanger their lives in pregnancy and in child birth. An estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are undersized as a result of childhood protein-energy malnutrition.

In July 2000, Egypt decided to raise the social security pensions of families in extreme poverty to 50 pounds per month. The pension targets about a million families. However, these families are not exempted from school fees or other health services fees. Moreover, the State does not pay unemployment pensions.

While this is helpful, 50 LE are not sufficient to handle the expenses of one child in school. Inability to meet basic needs is the main factor which drives families within the lower social classes to send their children to work at an early age under the hardest and often cruel circumstances, mostly unsupervised or un-monitored, with masters subjecting both their humanity and childhood to the extremes of humiliation and disdain.

### **Family poverty and girl child labour**

According to an Egyptian NGO for child rights the number of working children below 15 years of age is estimated to be 1,472,600 children although the “child law” states that the minimum age of employment is 15 years - after completion of basic education. The National Adolescent Survey (March 1999) points to the fact that “conditions of work for an economically active adolescent are not ideal. Half of adolescents work for seven or more hours per day, surpassing the maximum time of work as stipulated by law. A quarter of these work for nine or more hours per day, and around 40% of adolescents work 7 days a week without days off. It is also important to point out that nearly one fifth of adolescents work for long hours and do not receive any vacation. Moreover, more than one third mentioned that they are exposed to potential risks such as using sharp instruments or being exposed to fire or very high heat. If the work hazards and risks in activities related to agriculture are taken into account the percentage of children working in unsafe conditions will become much higher” .Helping these extremely poor families financially was the “essential factor” for child labour as the income that the child generates was found to constitute around 23-30% of the family income

A substantial number of girl children from such families are sent to live and work in big cities as domestic servants. These girls between the age of 10 and 14, usually unmarried girls, are treated as inferior and are “socialized” to put themselves last, thus undermining their pride and crushing their self esteem, let alone placing those girls in a state where they start comparing their own poor situation with the comfortable lives of their masters; of being locked up in the new home facing their fears on their own or being

with other male servants and drivers which by itself can start a chain of untoward consequences to being beaten, abused, molested, raped, to reaching the “finale” of committing suicide in the most dreadful / dramatic of means possible - setting themselves on fire!! ....All of those are inhumane experiences, that can totally damage the very well-being of the child at the time and her well-being as a woman in the future if she manages to survive the household abuse, or after her discharge, the actions of her paternal family members, who in defense of their “claimed” honor might kill her if she was proven or accused of losing her virginity in her money yielding city job.

A study entitled “Analysis of media discourse on house servants between the years 1993-1998” in one of the widely distributed national newspapers showed that the majority of servants who were killed by their masters or committed suicide were girl children. They are sometimes treated in an inhumane fashion such as physically being abused and beaten as well as not receiving enough food, clothing or cover (see Seham Abdel Salam, January 1999).

The minimum age for employment should be applied to domestic servants and the public at large should be obliged to inform on anybody who does not obey that law. Families that take in servants even from 15 years of age until the age of twenty one should be held legally responsible for the adolescent girls’ legal and human rights. In addition, for those who are older, their work should be initiated through registered contracts between employment institutions which are under the supervision of government and civil society and between the families that require these services.

**Socio-economic empowerment of mother and girl child will earn them self respect and substantial rights: Practical solutions and best practices between 1978 and 2006 showed that:**

To help combating the phenomenon of child labor, each adult must produce to feed at least two child mouths. Providing care is the responsibility of society as a whole, and accordingly the state in the first place as the one entrusted with the task of guaranteeing the implementation of general economic, social, education and health policies.

**Village and home crafts: A tried solution to ensure the rights of the invisible girl**

There is data proving that families under severe poverty do not have to resort to child labour if basic indoor and in village crafts are introduced within the community. Under the UNICEF project in Sohag and Qena in 1989 and 1991; and in the 16 remote desert zones of Egypt, under a cooperative training project that targeted mother and girl, between 1991 and 1995, the Sahara program - involving all the NGO’s involved in both projects between 1995 and 1999 - by SEPCAD which covered all the desert zones of Egypt (Upper Egypt and the major parts of the Delta) tens of thousands of women and girls were trained to preserve the cultural heritage contributing at the same time to better social communication and recreation within the villages. This experiment became so popular and involved so many people that illiteracy courses for school drop outs also



became popular and that many children who had dropped out of school went back to the formal system within one year of participation of their mothers and themselves in the program.

The scheme was expanded from central villages to satellite ones and the trained communities became the trainers of other communities in remote areas making it possible for them to earn from home crafts sufficient capital to pay for school, basic health needs and even other less basic ones within three years of the beginning of each intervention. Most of the girl children were back in school - after school hours helping their mothers for a couple of hours. The UNICEF project did not only stop the “export” of girl children from Sohag to urban big cities but also many male mobile labor caravans that depended totally on such internal migration; male members of those communities have resorted to helping women in marketing their new crafts in the major cities of Egypt.

It took much more than teaching them a craft; it required raising awareness with mothers on the way their earnings should be spent - their initial income was 2 L.E /month from selling milk and eggs, and with the craft income it rose to an average of 200L.E/ month reaching 500 L.E/month per person - to keeping their children in school throughout the whole period of time, bearing in mind that they could support their own basic socio economic and health needs. For maintaining their membership in the income generating team certain prerequisites had to be complied with, such as not buying gold bracelets; or televisions, before all the family children were back in school. Families were not allowed to conduct FGM if they wanted to continue with the income generation project. And literacy courses were mandatory for all young girls that subsequently brought them back into formal education. Vaccination papers had to be presented by participants of vocational training courses. The received basic information on health, hygiene, prenatal care and child nutrition. Mothers and girls were encouraged to participate in and learn about the social, economic and political functioning of their society, with the result that they were offered a very good opportunity to take part in decision-making processes within their villages.

In 2006, many of those children who were out of school and suffering hardships in the late 80's and early 90's have graduated from universities and have their own craft production schemes. The expansion scheme for vocational training and the production of traditional crafts continued on its own, continuing the training of women and young girls to help keeping Sohag with many happy families and happy communities. (SEPCAD / UNICEF) .Many international organizations, international NGO's and donors have observed and appreciated the practice and have offered loans and assistance for social services and the development of markets for those crafts globally.

In the sixteen desert zones participants in the scheme managed to become members of the agricultural co-operative society by buying palm trees from their earnings so that they would participate in village decisions. The mothers and girls have gained self respect and self esteem in communities known for their male chauvinism. No one is interested in early marriages in those settings; on the contrary; some families are more interested in keeping the earning girls at home as assets. Men respect the women and girls

in their families for having become such good support to their economic needs without having to cause them the troubles implicit in outdoor labor.

Removing obstacles and strengthening the capacity of girls to build their self-esteem and take on leadership roles, through the use of their own skills and available resources, are central to their empowerment and to their safety net. These projects laid the ground work for other similar projects that emphasized the empowerment of women and girl children and it was the lessons learned from those projects that assisted me, from 1999 until 2004, in fostering the position of women and girls' empowerment in the Hudaidah / Yemen health system support that helped in raising the health status in the Tehama area. Many trainers came from those villages and distant areas trained by UNICEFF and ILO, and together with the Tehama people; we managed to make their dreams of a better life come true using the same recipe. A better health status was achieved by the people of Tehama - not by pills but by reaching and maintaining a more dignified life and livelihood in the remotest hamlets. Access to basic services became possible to all and safe motherhood comfort to all, child marriage came to a halt and birth spacing followed. (HPHSSP. RNE 1999 – 2004) (See film: The Beginning was Man, RNE Yemen 2006)

Some of the most persistent problems that face women and the girl child in development are often solved by resorting to very simple solutions which are "there in front of us, around us and within us". Success comes when those targeted are part and parcel of the solution mechanism because they are the ones who will work on it, make it grow and maintain it on their own. Only they can work towards those ends utilizing the knowledge, the resources and the capacities within them and around them without trying to implement unreachable advice.

Extreme poverty is a major factor that will impede the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child .The state of extreme poverty is so severe that it leaves its victims inert to awareness, legal punishment or even religious obligations. The economic empowerment of girls and mothers is critical to the achievement of equality.

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