ADOLESCENT GIRLS:
THE TIME FOR ACTION IS NOW!

This issue of “What Young People Are Saying” highlights the thoughts and feelings of adolescent participants on Voices of Youth about a broad range of issues affecting adolescent girls. Though they have been the subject of growing country and global attention over recent years, new momentum is needed to transfer the attention into actions that will make a real difference in adolescent girls’ lives. In preparation for a review conference to be held in April or May with the intention of identifying best practices in strengthening protective mechanisms for adolescent girls as an effective way to reduce risk and vulnerability, Voices of Youth has compiled a series of messages from young people on the topic. These quotations are drawn from online discussions dating back to 2004.

OVERVIEW
From the time Voices of Youth was established in 1995, young people have been talking about problems affecting adolescent girls on a global level. It is impossible to measure the quantity of messages posted by young people on gender during the last ten years, but their posts easily number in the thousands and their concern is ongoing.

On issues ranging from education and HIV/AIDS to livelihoods and harmful practices, young people show a deep and often personal understanding of the problems adolescent girls face. They are especially worried about disparities in school enrolment and literacy skills, disproportionate vulnerability of adolescent girls to HIV/AIDS, the widespread acceptability in some countries of child labor and prevailing levels of violence against women and girls.

Rather than dwell on these problems, however, young people are ready to offer creative and often insightful solutions. They emphasize the importance of changing attitudes, fighting negative forces of acculturation, and providing alternative programs and life skills training, along with adequate psychosocial support, especially for socially isolated girls.

UNITED KINGDOM
We can show [everyone] what girls can achieve if they put their mind to it; we can, somehow, lift the notion that girls are a burden! We have to let the females of the … world have a voice! A voice that can be heard across the globe, a voice that will be listened to by those good people of our society, a voice that will bring change into their lives! girl, 15

The following is a summary of what young people are saying about issues affecting adolescent girls.

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Roughly 60% of Voices of Youth members are adolescent girls. You can find out more at www.unicef.org/voy. Join the discussions today!
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**SCHOOL ENROLMENT & LITERACY**

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**HEALTH & ENERGY**

The issue of HIV and AIDS is of great concern in most third world countries like Zimbabwe; almost everyone including the president has been affected by the pandemic. The economy has deteriorated as most people can no longer work. Teachers are dying, mine workers, MPs, headmasters and headmistresses.... What worries me most is that the worst affected are young girls.... Older men take advantage of their weak economic position. Older men should leave younger girls alone!! They are not virus dumps!! If they really want to help, they can pay school fees, buy clothing, buy food, etc., without asking for any sexual favours in return! girl, 20

**STIGMA & DISCRIMINATION**

Stigma and discrimination are keeping HIV infected people away. This should never happen in an educated society like ours. People may lose hope and commit suicide and also infect others knowingly. Discriminating can destroy a society. girl, 17

With numerous practical ideas about combating HIV/AIDS, young people consistently demonstrate resourcefulness and compassion. They urge their peers to stand up for themselves and always use condoms, and insist that adolescent girls in particular be provided with adequate information about HIV/AIDS.

**ACADEMICS & LEADERSHIP**

I urge all of my friends all over the world, especially the girls: Sometimes it is hard for girls to say something. However much you believe your boyfriend, however much you love him, please always remember to use a condom. And remember, when you are using a
We need to focus on life confidence. Life skills and social skills are an essential path to health, happiness and self-confidence. The number of women with alarmingly high percentages of AIDS around the globe is an indicator of the lack of this awareness.

"Knowledge alone does not change behavior," says one VOY participant about HIV/AIDS. Her sentiment echoes those of other young people, who believe that life skills and social skills are an essential path to health, happiness and self-confidence.

Information is a key element to fight the pandemic, but ... information alone is not enough. We need SKILLS to implement the information that is given to us/people in general. Information that one has is of no use if one can’t implement it.

We need to focus on life skills with the double aim of delaying first sexual intercourse and encouraging protected intercourse. We must stress that skills useful for self-protection from HIV also help build self-confidence and avoid unwanted pregnancy, sexual abuse, and the abuse of drugs (including tobacco and alcohol). It is in school where Thai girls are seduced by local Thai boys, who have sex with them, then get them pregnant. Once pregnant, the girl will be forced to drop out of school, and [no one does] anything.... The thousands of girls who get pregnant at such an early age ... will be stuck with a baby, no job, and no father to help out. So what will they do?

VOY participants are also concerned that programs aimed at protecting child workers are ineffective or discriminatory. There are lots of children working in unorganized industry sectors to earn only to eat a day’s meal. They do not know how to read and write. Providing midday meals, employment and free education to children is being discussed at a variety of levels. But for whom? For those boys who work as chaiwallas along roadsides, or those who work in the carpet industry? [And what about the] girls who work as maids in Indian households?

Despite their recognition of the many work-related challenges facing girls, young people point to examples of successful women and emphasize the importance of leadership as a way of encouraging others to reach their dreams.
Other common concerns include harmful practices like early marriage or female genital mutilation/cutting.

SRI LANKA
Every girl child in some corner cries in silence because of marriage in early ages. You may not be among those who cry for freedom, those who wish to study further but are forced to marry an old ugly man for money. But I have seen and faced forced marriage, and I understand how horrible it is. I escaped a forced marriage, because I always went against my parents and society. Sometimes you just need to stand on your own. girl, 20

FRANCE
Underage marriage is the suppression of a person's childhood. It takes a few years for a young woman to experience her growth and discover the transition between childhood and adulthood. It also means an unfinished education. Nowadays, without any education, you can't get far. Finally, it's a crime because this is forced upon young girls. When do they get a say? girl, 16

ETHIOPIA
In my country female circumcision is completely terrible. Especially where women [are] sewing the vagina. [Girls] suffer a lot. During menstruation period the pain is sorrowful. We have to fight together this shameful act. boy, 19

KENYA
I disagree with the female circumcision in our traditional society since it undermines the rights of the girl child and women in general. boy, 20

PHILIPPINES
Now, female genital mutilation is accepted [in many countries] ... and the term acculturation fits the setting.... It took thousands of years of silence before woman's suffrage finally came out in the limelight, but now that we know about the adverse effects of FGM, as concerned citizens of this global polity of mankind, would we remain dumb-witted forever? young person, 19

NIGERIA
Should we continue with a way of life because it has always been done like that, even when it's causing us HARM? Nothing in this world has remained static; things change, so why are we afraid of changing harmful cultures? Many people will believe it's best to give girls out in marriage at very early ages as they say it reduces immorality. But is it really in the girls' interest? Often, parents do this to get money or favour from the so-called husband. The girl has no right to decide her future. It's time for the whole world to know that the girl has as many RIGHTS as the boy: the right to education, the right to be heard and to be respected. girl, >21

Young people also stress the need for strong psychosocial support in dealing with violence, harmful practices and low self-esteem, especially for adolescent girls, who can be disproportionately isolated.

AUSTRALIA
I enjoyed the ... encouragement from everyone all over the world [about my situation with abuse as a child in China]. Lots of young Chinese girls suffer sexual, physical and emotional abuse from their biological parents, but they are taught to believe that it is actually their own fault and the parents have every right to do whatever they like to their flesh and blood.... We need to help each other to understand that it is not our fault. girl, >21, Australia

UNITED STATES
I have a history of abuse and I've been raped by someone who was dear to me. I didn't tell anyone until 6 months later. It is truly a blessing to be able to speak out, because you can healthily understand what has happened, and deal with it in a proper manner. girl, 18

ECUADOR
I used to harm myself, and it's something really ugly and not nice... I think I used to do that because I felt alone, and I was really depressed. If you know someone who is harming him/herself try to talk with them and make them realize they are not alone.... girl, 15

SOUTH AFRICA
As a previous 'cutter', I can understand why people do it. Many people feel that there's no one to talk to and no one cares. The solution is a tad bit difficult to accomplish but what a person who is cutting needs is a support system that places its foundation on love, reassurance and respect. boy, 17

CONCLUSION
Young people's voices are strong with outrage at the indignities suffered by adolescent girls and their will is united for a positive change toward a more protective environment and a climate of empowerment.

For more information, read past newsletters from Voices of Youth:
December 2005: The Excluded and Invisible
April 2005: “Young People Call For Equal Rights For All”

VOICES OF YOUTH
Since 1995, VOY has focused on exploring the educational and community building potential of the Internet, and facilitating the active and substantive participation of young people on child rights and development related issues. Through web boards, interactive quizzes, youth leadership profiles, live chats and more, Voices of Youth provides more than 20,000 young people from over 180 countries with an opportunity to self-inform, engage in lively debate, and partner—with their peers and decision makers—to create a world fit for children. http://www.unicef.org/voy/
Resources on programming for adolescent girls

**Reaching the Girls**
Study on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo
Save the Children UK & the NGO Group: CARE, IFESH and IRC

**The Uncharted Passage**
Girls’ adolescence in the developing world
Population Council

**Forgotten Casualties of War**
Girls in armed conflict
Save the Children

**A world apart**
The disadvantage and social isolation of married adolescent girls
Population Council

**Adolescent girls affected by violent conflict**
Fact sheet
Women’s Commission & WPWG/CPCC

**The Effects of Conflict on the Health and Well-being of Women and Girls in Darfur**
UNICEF & UNFPA

**Adolescent childbearing in sub-Saharan Africa**
Can increased schooling alone raise ages at first birth?
Demographic Research

**Seen but not heard**
Very young adolescents 10-14 years at risk
WHO, UNAIDS, UNFPA

**Work with Young Refugees to Ensure Their Reproductive Health and Well-being**
It’s Their Right and Our Duty
UNHCR