



'My Voice, Our Equal Future'

International Day of the Girl – 2020

An Op-ed by Charles Abani, UN Resident Coordinator, Ghana

Peace is 16 years old. She wakes up twice at dawn to breastfeed her 6-month-old baby. As one of the brightest students in Katejeli Junior High School, Peace has won the admiration of her peers, teachers and her headmaster. "I am very intelligent and do well in class, so the teachers like me a lot. My favourite subjects are mathematics and social studies" she says.

Peace almost gave up the idea of returning to school after delivering her baby. Through relentless encouragement of her teachers and sister in law, she re-enrolled and is back in the classroom. She drops off her baby with her brother's wife before she gets to school at 6:30 am. During the 9:30 am and 12:30 pm breaks, she dashes off to breastfeed her baby. "I dream of becoming a midwife" she states, adding that she wants "to be there for the young mothers and their babies during childbirth. I feel they need someone at that point in their lives to assure them that pregnancy is not the end of life. When I got pregnant, I thought my education was over. Now I have a second chance."



Peace, 16.

International Day of the Girl Child, (IDGC), has been observed annually since 2012. The Day draws attention to the triumphs and challenges of girls like Peace. It is both a celebration of the lives of girls and a call for action to address the critical issues that affect them, recognise their right to full participation in society and put their interests at the heart of development.

The Ghana Statistical Service projects that there are currently over 3 million adolescent girls in Ghana – the largest number of adolescent girls in the country's history. This is a huge resource for Ghana. Their empowerment presents Ghana with great potential for female leaders, entrepreneurs and change-makers.

Progress for adolescent girls over the last decade is creating a momentum to invest in adolescent girls and achieve positive impact on their lives and it is worth noting that there has been gains towards realising gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Ghana. The availability of policies, laws and frameworks to promote gender

equality, prevent Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), and accelerate actions to reduce adolescent pregnancies and end harmful practices have made positive impacts. This notwithstanding, many challenges remain. A joint UNICEF, Plan International and UN Women report reveals that progress for adolescent girls has not kept pace with the realities they face today. The 'A New Era for Girls: Taking stock of 25 years of progress' reviews progress for girls, and lack of, over the last 25 years. Sociocultural barriers, including SGBV, persist in some parts of the country.

A 2016 Domestic Violence Survey conducted by the Ghana Statistical Service and the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, suggests that over 38 per cent of girls in the country aged 15–19 years, reported having experienced at least one act of sexual violence. At the same time, about 32% of women and girls, aged 15-24, think that wife-beating can be justified due to socio-cultural norms and stereotypes (Ghana Demographic and Health Survey, 2014). In a recent UNICEF Country Profile of adolescent girls, 1 in 5 girls are at risk of marriage by age 18, compared to 2 per cent of boys and 14 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years have begun childbearing. At the same time, 1 in 10 women aged 15-24 years name pregnancy and family or marriage as reasons to stop school and 1 in 5 adolescent girls feel excluded from education, and social activities and work whilst menstruating. While gender parity in education has been achieved at primary and lower secondary levels, gross enrolment is only 50 per cent in senior high schools. Ghana Demographic Health Survey indicates that gender differences tend to become more significant at the secondary level. Even in the wealthiest households, more boys attend secondary school than girls. Girls are generally outperformed by boys in learning outcomes and girls' performance in mathematics and science is low across Ghana's 10 regions. Only 4 out of 10 JHS girls pass the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and proceed to Senior High School (SHS) to study mathematics and science. Girls with disabilities remain particularly excluded, face discrimination at all levels and are frequently rendered invisible.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused considerable hardship in Ghana, affecting all aspects of life; health, education, food security, employment and livelihoods. Threats have included the loss of household income, school closures and interrupted education, increased domestic tasks/care burden, limited access to services such as health, sanitation, education and social welfare and a higher risk of family distress and intimate partners' violence (IPV) and SGBV.¹ Online exploitation and abuse are exponentially on the rise in Ghana and more time spent at home has also put girls at increased risk.

All of these are exacerbating existing gender inequalities thereby highlighting the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls including those marginalized such as adolescent mothers, girls with disabilities, refugee girls and migrants and the 'Kayayei'.

Nevertheless, these challenges present opportunities for change. In Ghana, there has never been a more critical time to push for the empowerment of adolescent girls and invest in their future. As these girls finally return to school, it is vital to remember the extra hardships they may have faced and respond accordingly. It is also important to respond to the vulnerability of marginalised girls in an integrated manner in order not to jeopardise progress towards the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of girls.

Building back better and sustaining the gains made will require commitment from multi -sectoral state agencies (at the national and decentralized levels) and the will of communities to improve girls' access to education and skills, health, hygiene and nutrition while addressing the issue of violence (particularly sexual violence), and teenage pregnancy. It will necessitate challenging the power imbalances that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. It will necessitate enabling young mothers to return to school, girls being provided affordable menstrual hygiene products and an end to child

¹ UNICEF Ghana. 2020. Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on Adolescent girls in Ghana.

marriage and harmful practices. It will necessitate supporting girls to achieve their potential in science, maths and technology. It will necessitate the inclusion of the most marginalised and ensure safe spaces for girls from all backgrounds to flourish as activists, imagining and advocating for their own equal future.

Coordinated and combined, these efforts will increase girl's life opportunities, enabling them to better access the labour market and accelerate human development. These efforts must also acknowledge girls as the force that they are and recognise their pivotal role in our future as doctors, mothers, mathematicians, market vendors, businesswomen, peace makers, policy makers, teachers, artists and pilots.

To this end, International Day of the Girl Child is a rallying call for Government, the private sector, development partners and civil society to not only pull together for girls but ensure that their full participation is central to discussion going forwards.

Let's make their voices count for an equal future.