Do you ever think about the lives of girls your age in poorer countries around the world? In many ways they are the same: these girls enjoy family, try to find time for hanging out with friends, and think about what the future holds. But in some ways the problems and challenges facing them are very different.

Twenty-five percent of adolescent girls in “developing” or low-income countries live in extreme poverty. “Extreme poverty” means that people don’t have all the basics needed for survival, like food, water, housing, clothing, sanitation, health care, and education.

In many countries, girls are valued far less than boys; they don’t have the chance to go to school, to dream of a future career, or have time for fun. What imagine your life would be like if your parents thought it didn’t make sense for girls to go to school, get medical attention, or even get as much food as boys.

**Education:** In many countries, when girls near puberty, their parents may discourage them from continuing in school or even pressure them to drop out, in order to preserve their reputation and marriage prospects. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 17 percent of girls are enrolled in secondary (high) school.

**Education = Power:** Every year of schooling increases a girl’s earning power by 10 to 20 percent, while the return on secondary education is even higher. What’s more, improved education for girls is linked to lower HIV infection rates, reduced infant mortality, and an increase in a country’s overall per capita income.

**Work Opportunities:** Young women have a harder time finding work than young men and generally are considered only for a limited range of “suitable” occupations like sewing, housekeeping, or factory work. These jobs pay much less than the boys’ occupations. Young women are often exploited by their bosses because they have limited power, protection, and rights.

**Early Marriage, Young Motherhood, Unwanted Pregnancy, and Disease:** One in seven girls in developing countries gets married before age 15, and nearly half are married by age 20; often, the girls are not given a choice in the matter. Once married, girls go from being under the control of fathers and brothers to being under the control of their husbands.

Not only do one-third of women in developing countries give birth before age 20, they are far more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than women over 20. Their children are also at higher risk of illness and death.

A large proportion of these pregnancies are unwanted, since many of these young women lack access to proper healthcare and birth control. Each year, between 2 and 4 million young girls resort to unsafe, sometimes fatal, abortion procedures.

Teenage girls also become infected with HIV at twice the rate of boys. In many cases, they are coerced into having sex, or they are unable to convince their partner to use a condom. Young women and girls make up over two-thirds of those under age 25 currently living with HIV/AIDS.

---

**For More Information**

If you need more information, check out these great sites:

- UN Foundation: [http://unfoundation.org](http://unfoundation.org/programs/women_pop/index.asp)
- UN Population Fund: [www.unfpa.org/adolescents/index.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/adolescents/index.htm)
- Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS: [www.youthaidscoalition.org/](http://www.youthaidscoalition.org/)
- International Women’s Health Coalition “Young Visionaries”: [www.iwhc.org/younvgvision/home.htm](http://www.iwhc.org/younvgvision/home.htm)
- International Women’s Health Coalition “Young Adolescents”: [www.iwhc.org/resources/youngadolescents](http://www.iwhc.org/resources/youngadolescents)
- NOW on PBS Child Brides: [www.pbs.org/now/shows/341/facts.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/341/facts.html)
- UN Development Fund for Women: [www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org/)
- UNICEF: [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

**Report Locally**

Here are some ideas to get you started thinking about the local angle to the topic of adolescent girls:

- Do you think that girls in the U.S. face different challenges and expectations than boys? Do you feel that girls and boys have the same choices and opportunities available to them?
- What parallels can you draw between you and your friends in the U.S. and girls in developing countries?
- Studies have shown that whole communities in developing countries actually benefit when girls are educated and healthy, have possibilities for equal-paying work outside the home, and delay marriage. Do you think this is true in your community? Why do you think this is?
- How is your life different because you have access to choices, good healthcare, and education than, for example, the lives of girls in developing countries?
- What can you do to make other students in your school and people that you know more aware of the challenges facing young women and girls in the world?

**Questions?**

Check out our website: [www.thepeoplespeak.org/contests/reportlocally.html](http://www.thepeoplespeak.org/contests/reportlocally.html)