



Just ACT

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“Little Girl, Arise!”: Promoting the Dignity of the Girl-Child

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EXPERIENCE

When Greta Thunberg (16) began striking from school to demand government action to address climate change, she could not have predicted that within a year millions of children around the world would be joining her. Greta’s courage and persistence in the face of injustice has put her in a class with other well-known young women of recent history: Ruby Bridges, who braved riots and protests in the 1960s to become the first black student to attend William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans; Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist promoting education for girls, who was the victim of an assassination attempt at age 15 and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize at 17; and Karla Jacinto, who survived a four-year trafficking ordeal as a teenager and is now a global anti-trafficking advocate (to name a few).



Less recognized, perhaps, are all the resilient girls around the globe, who make history every day by caring for their families and communities and pursuing their path to flourishing. Girls such as Isabel, who was thirteen when she was separated from her parents as they fled death threats in El Salvador, and who now lives with her aunt, applying herself resolutely to her studies so that she “can achieve [her] goal of becoming a doctor and learning English;”¹ Gionna Martin (17), who works as the sole provider for herself and her 11-month old daughter, but who refuses to be one of the 62% of teen moms in the U.S. who drop out of high school;² or Julesa (9), who is learning to counter stereotypes in Haiti and recognizes that “they used to say ‘boys are better at math and girls are better at French,’ but now we know we are all good at everything!”³

These girls and the many millions of their peers demonstrate daily their strength and ingenuity in the face of personal and systemic adversity. We have a duty to ensure that they are able to thrive.

ANALYSIS

Despite advances – particularly in developed nations – toward gender equality in the past century, too many girls still are limited by pervasive and disproportionate obstacles to flourishing, such as gender bias and violence, which perpetuate inequalities in all areas of life. For example, there is a significant gender gap in educational achievement. Globally, “girls’ average

educational attainment remains lower than boys' and adult women are less literate than men. Women are less likely than men to join the labor force and to work for pay. When they do, they are more likely to work part-time, in the informal sector, or in occupations that have lower pay. These disadvantages translate into substantial gender gaps in earnings, which in turn decrease women's bargaining power and voice,"⁴ and substantially limit a nation's economic growth.⁵ Further, young girls still tend to associate intelligence with men and domestic responsibilities with women, and they are often conditioned to explain work and income inequality by reasoning that women are lazier, more irresponsible, less intelligent, or less suited for work outside the home.⁶

As the "bargaining power and voice" of girls and women decreases, the likelihood of their victimization and oppression increases. Sadly, women and girls around the world are highly vulnerable to gender-based violence at home, at work, and in public spaces, including schools and public transportation.⁷ According to UN Women, at least 35% of women worldwide have been subjected to intimate partner abuse or sexual violence by a non-partner,⁸ and at least 15 million adolescent girls have been raped.⁹ The consequences of this include a range of physical injuries, pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, sexually-transmitted infections, and psychological trauma, to name a few. These repercussions, in turn, impede a girl's ability to perform well in educational and occupational endeavors, and the credible fear of experiencing such violence might limit, for example, her attendance at school in places where authorities hesitate to believe victims, or it might impede her access to jobs or schools that require using public transportation, thus continuing the cycle.

Around the world, gender violence and gender bias endanger the lives of girls and inhibit their potential. It is important not only to examine these injustices in their own right, but also to consider them in conjunction with other pressing issues, such as the current migration crisis.



Gender Violence and Migration

There has been a recent surge in migration from Central American countries – particularly from the Northern Triangle (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) – that is different from previous surges because the migrants are overwhelmingly (70%) families with children.¹⁰ These families – many mothers with young children – risk "a journey through hell," during which they pay "exorbitant fees to unscrupulous 'coyotes,' are beaten, raped, and too often killed along the way,"¹¹ and perhaps are separated from their children or kept in unsanitary conditions upon their arrival to a so-called safe haven. While these conditions are appalling, the data indicates that conditions in their home communities are often worse, especially for women and girls.

Beyond the gang violence that terrorizes many communities in Latin America, preventing children from going to school and parents from working, violence against women is widespread and systemic.¹² Domestic violence in the Northern Triangle is commonplace,¹³ and according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, "El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras rank first, third, and seventh, respectively [for female homicides]. ... In large parts of the territory, the violence has surpassed governments' abilities to protect victims and provide redress. Certain parts of Mexico face similar challenges."¹⁴ In a survey of women who were detained in the U.S. after passing a credible fear test, the respondents "repeatedly emphasized that the

police could not protect them from harm.”¹⁵ Even after trying to seek safety in other regions of their country, the women were found and continued to experience similar levels of violence. Young girls are often subjected to this violence, and too many are raped and impregnated before they have matured past adolescence.¹⁶



Because women and girls receive little or no protection from this targeted gender-based violence that is ubiquitous in the region, they often make the decision to seek refuge in the United States – “the nearest country that actually enforces its laws [protecting women],”¹⁷ as one detained Salvadoran woman explains. On the journey, as many as 60% of women and girls are raped, and they are highly susceptible to human trafficking.

Globally, an estimated 40.3 million people are victims of trafficking, 75% of whom are women and girls.¹⁸ Once a person becomes a victim of trafficking, the average life expectancy is about seven years.¹⁹ Circumstances such as lack of education, poverty, and lack of safe and legal migration avenues are all multipliers of vulnerability to trafficking. When girls are forced to use irregular migration systems, their vulnerability to trafficking – already elevated due to their gender – increases significantly. In light of this, the UNHCR calls on host nations to “provide safe and legal avenues to asylum” so that those fleeing violence have a pathway to safety.²⁰

Looking at the migration crisis through the lens of gender violence illuminates a perspective that is often ignored. Unless we implement policies that mitigate the vulnerabilities of women and girls – and their families – who are escaping violence, we compound their victimization. At the very least, those of us lucky enough to live in places that (at least theoretically) enforce protections for women and girls should be moved to respond more graciously and effectively to the plight of migrant families fleeing brutality and oppression.

By adopting a perspective that puts the experience of girls at the forefront of our concern, we can begin to counter systemic gender-based violence and oppression, rather than perpetuating it.

A Way Forward: Haiti Development Project as a Model

It is clear that many girls today are embracing the empowerment women have earned in recent years, and we all should be grateful for their strength, resilience, and ingenuity. Yet, it should be equally evident that there is still a long way to go to ensure that *every* girl – regardless of her race, class, religion, or country of origin – has the opportunity to thrive. It is not enough to say that the experience of girls has improved; we have a duty to respond to their continued needs and vulnerabilities in practical ways.

The partnership of the Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame and Beyond Borders – an NGO in Haiti – offers a model response to these vulnerabilities. The goals of the NGO include ending child slavery (1 in 8 Haitian children – mostly girls – are trapped in domestic servitude); ensuring universal quality education (only 20% of girls will enroll in high school); preventing violence against women and girls (33% of Haitian women and girls have been victims of domestic or sexual violence²¹); and supporting sustainable livelihoods.²² In light of these goals, there are three primary projects with which AMSSND is directly involved: Child Protection Brigades, the Teacher Training Project, and the Water Initiative.

In Haiti, many rural parents live in poverty and make the heart-rending decision to send their children (most often, their girls) away to live with wealthier families, whom they hope will be able to meet the needs of their children, such as nutrition and education. Sadly, this is often an ill-founded hope, and the children – known as “restavèks” – are forced into domestic servitude, where they are subjected to all kinds of abuse and denied those necessities of child development.

To protect the rights of these children, the AMSSND/Beyond Borders partnership helps to develop Child Protection Brigades, which work to keep children out of domestic servitude. These brigades are comprised of local community members who are trained to “intervene in cases of child slavery, abuse, and neglect, and work to raise awareness about the rights of children in their communities and the dangers of sending children away to the city to live with others.”²³ Over 270 child rights activists were trained by the partnership in 2017-2018.

Ensuring that children are safe is the first step to promoting the flourishing of girls, but protecting the rights of children also involves guaranteeing their access to quality education. Education is known to be one of the most important tools for removing gender inequality, since education unlocks the potential of girls, giving them the skillset needed to contribute their gifts to the world. Education also leads the way out of poverty and prepares girls to be responsible adults.

The Teacher Training Project of AMSSND/Beyond Borders helps to realize this right. The project consists of a multi-year program of professional education for Haitian teachers, focusing especially on enabling them to recognize and address students’ learning difficulties. Through the project, Beyond Borders and AMSSND “provide training and materials to teachers to improve their performance and make schools more vibrant and liberating using non-violent, participatory teaching methods. ... [They] are also working to provide more tools and educational methods that teachers can use to

prepare their students to face Haiti’s challenges outside the classroom and build a brighter future.”²⁴



Finally, the Water Initiative helps to mitigate struggles such as poverty, water-scarcity, and gender stereotypes (e.g. those that see boys as more suited to education and girls as more suited for domestic responsibilities), so that girls are able to take advantage of these academic resources. Through the initiative, community members are provided with water catchment systems and taught to use them as a sustainable water supply for cooking, drinking, and sanitation, as well as for agricultural needs.

Globally, women and girls bear the responsibility for water collection in 80% of households with water off-site,²⁵ so women and girls are required to spend time each day collecting water and looking for a safe place to relieve themselves.²⁶ As the Water Project notes, “With so much time spent for water collection, many girls are unable to attend school, and they are at risk for increased violence as they travel rural areas in search of water.”²⁷ This is evident in Haiti, as well. Ensuring that all people have access to safe and reliable water sources cuts down on the time women and girls spend obtaining these necessities, and increases their ability to attend school and participate in the economy.

These projects aim to break the cycle of poverty that has trapped too many Haitian families. By ensuring that children have community members looking out for their wellbeing, that schools and teachers are

equipped to meet the needs of their students, and that families have access to sustainable water sources, these projects are opening up opportunities for Haiti's girls. As Beyond Borders notes, "An extra year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 20%, making economies more fair and prosperous for all; educated women have less risk of dying in childbirth and their children have a better chance of surviving past age 5; and girls who complete secondary school more often decide as mothers to send their children to school."²⁸ Through these initiatives, Beyond Borders, in partnership with AMSSND, is working to ensure that every girl is safe, free, and able to reach her potential. Their approach reflects one that makes the wellbeing of girls paramount – an operative lens that should be applied throughout the world.



REFLECTION

"Little girl, I say to you, arise!"²⁹ These words of Jesus breathed life into a young girl, and they still offer hope and strength to girls today – calling forth their dignity and obliging each of us to facilitate their empowerment as we imitate Christ. When Jesus touched the little girl, he shattered cultural barriers for the sake of enlivening her. Today, we, too, should reach across those gender-based divides to pull all girls toward life. The little girl whom Jesus healed was "not dead but asleep."³⁰ The sleeping girls of our day are the girls who are trapped in poverty, abused, forced to carry a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibility, presumed less intelligent than their male counterparts, and/or otherwise denied participation in social and political life to the full extent of their dignity – the potential of those girls is dormant. It is not, however, dead. By countering violence, stereotypes, and gender-unfair policies and practices, we can help to reanimate those girls who have been stifled, and can lead them toward fullness of life. In this way, we can partner with Christ to ensure "that they may have life and have it to the full!"³¹

*"I raise up my voice – not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard. ...
We cannot succeed when half of us are held back."
– Malala Yousafzai*

ACTION

Please join the School Sisters of Notre Dame by participating in some of the following actions, as we “educate, advocate, and act, in collaboration with others, for the dignity of life and the care of all creation.”³²

1. [Pray for equality for girls and women](#), and be an advocate for victims of violence or bias.
2. [Commit to learning more](#) about the political, social, familial, and intellectual contributions of girls, as well as their needs and vulnerabilities. Begin to look at political and social endeavors through the lens of the wellbeing of girls.
3. Make a conscious effort to respect and value girls, and to dismantle gender stereotypes and biases that you encounter.
4. Urge your representatives to protect Latin American women and girls by engaging in community-oriented development projects and opening safe and legal pathways for migration.
5. Urge your communities and representatives to promote practices and policies that alleviate the burdens placed on teen and/or working mothers. Participate in such practices as you are able.
6. Support AMSSND/Beyond Borders – [Water Initiative](#), [Teacher Training](#), [Girl Power Haiti](#).

¹ Unicef, “[Uprooted in Central America and Mexico](#).”

² The 74, “[Most Pregnant and Parenting Students Don’t Graduate](#).”

³ Beyond Borders, “[Julesa Has Learned an Empowering Lesson](#).”

⁴ The World Bank, “[Unrealized Potential: The High Cost of Gender Inequality in Earnings](#).”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Boston Globe, “[Study Shows Gender Bias at an Early Age](#),” Fast Company, “[Around the World, A New Survey Finds that Sexism Starts Early](#),” [Bian et al., Science 355, 389–391 \(2017\)](#); Jimmy Kimmel, “[Kids Explain Why Women Are Paid Less Than Men](#).”

⁷ The World Bank, “[Unrealized Potential: The High Cost of Gender Inequality in Earnings](#).”

⁸ UN Women, “[Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women](#).”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ [U.S. Customs and Border Protection – Southwest Border Migration FY 2019](#)

¹¹ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “[Women on the Run](#).”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jill Filipovic, *Politico*, “[‘I Can No Longer Continue to Live Here’: What’s driving so many Honduran women to the U.S. border? The reality is worse than you’ve heard](#),” (2019).

¹⁷ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “[Women on the Run](#).”

¹⁸ UN Women, “[Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women](#).”

¹⁹ [Ark of Hope for Children](#)

²⁰ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “[Women on the Run](#).”

²¹ Beyond Borders, “[Ending Violence against Women and Girls](#).”

²² Beyond Borders, [Girl Power Haiti](#).

²³ [Model Community Initiative: School Sisters of Notre Dame Partnership with Ti Palmis and Nan Mango, La Gonâve, Haiti: Project Description July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018, 1.](#)

²⁴ Beyond Borders, "[Ending Child Slavery](#)."

²⁵ UN Water, "[Water and Gender](#)."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The Water Project, "[Water and Women's Inequality](#)" (by Lori Lewis)

²⁸ Beyond Borders, [Girl Power Haiti](#).

²⁹ Mark 5:41

³⁰ Mark 5:39

³¹ John 10:10

³² [School Sisters of Notre Dame, 24th Directional Statement](#)