

Area L — The girl child: exposure to stereotypes and violence

Introduction

In recent years, the EU has made several commitments towards the realisation of children's rights. The European Pillar of Social Rights states that children have the right to protection from poverty, and the rights, equality and citizenship programme (2014 to 2020) aims to promote and finance activities that foster children's rights and protect them from harm and violence. While not consistently mainstreaming the girl child perspective, they do address areas of relevance to the human rights of girls.

Since 2013, the EU has developed several important policies with relevance to the health of girls. These relate to tackling obesity and promoting safe sexual relations. The EU action plan on childhood obesity (2014) highlighted gendered aspects of obesity and called for healthier environments and restrictions on marketing to children. The European Parliament's resolution on eliminating gender stereotypes (2013) called on the EU to develop awareness-raising measures to promote zero tolerance of degrading images of girls and women in the media. However, little action has been taken to promote positive body image among girls.

Some developments since 2013 have focused on violence against girls, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), trafficking and cyberviolence. To protect girls at risk of FGM, the European Commission adopted the action plan 'Towards the elimination of female genital mutilation' (2013). The upcoming ratification of the Istanbul Convention (see Area D) may also help to overcome the lack of specific protection measures against FGM in many Member States. The EU Anti-trafficking Directive (2011/36/EU) established additional protection measures (including for children of victims of trafficking), with deliverables implemented and funding allocated to projects addressing child trafficking. However, children of mothers who are victims of trafficking are often disregarded in terms of their special needs and identification as secondary victims. Cyberviolence is emerging as an important policy challenge — for example, the risks related to gender-based online violence, including cyberbullying and cyberharassment, were highlighted in the recent Austrian presidency's recent conclusions on gender equality.



Negative body image among girls has harmful consequences

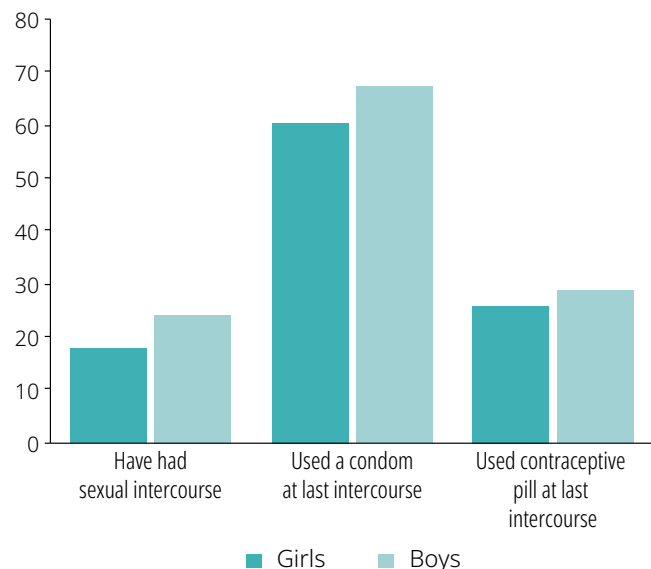
The Beijing + 25 review revealed serious challenges to girls' health and well-being in the EU, including negative body image, childhood obesity and high-risk sexual behaviour.

Being overweight and/or obese poses an important risk to children, not only to their physical health but also to their mental health, through poor body image and low self-esteem. Data for EU countries (Figure 1) suggest that childhood obesity affects at least 1 in 10 boys and girls. At least one in five children have a negative body image, with girls being especially affected. Although girls aged 15 were less likely to be overweight or obese than boys, nearly half of them thought they were too fat — almost twice the proportion of boys. This has been linked to childhood experiences of gendered discourses across various aspects of life (including at school, in the media and on social media platforms), which have important consequences for the perception of own body image, especially among girls. According to the World Health Organi-

zation (WHO), the higher rates of body dissatisfaction among girls correspond to higher levels of weight-reduction behaviours among girls than boys, especially for those aged 13 to 15. This can entail inappropriate and unsupervised weight-reduction behaviours, with serious negative consequences.

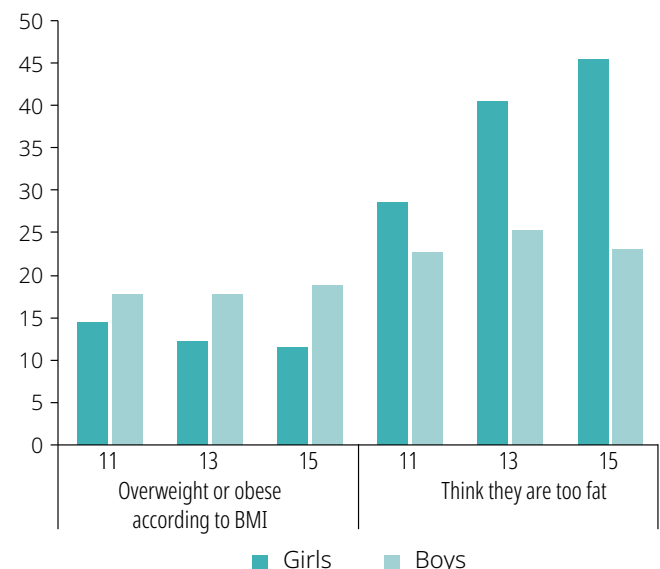
Another key challenge linked to gender stereotypes and their consequences for health is high-risk sexual behaviour. EU data (Figure 2) show that only two thirds of 15-year-old girls and boys who have had sexual intercourse did so in a safe way. Fewer girls and boys reported using a condom during their last sexual intercourse than in 2009/10. While it is possible that reduced use of condoms could be linked to increased — often free — availability of other forms of contraception, such as the contraceptive pill, it is equally likely that significant numbers of young people are putting themselves at risk of pregnancy and contracting sexually transmitted infections.

Figure 1. Children who are overweight or obese and who think they are too fat by age and gender (%), EU, 2013/14



Source: WHO (2016), Growing up unequal: HBSC 2016 study (2013/14 survey)
Note: Data shown are averages of published data for all EU Member States except Cyprus.

Figure 2. Children aged 15 who have had sexual intercourse and who used contraception at last intercourse (%), EU, 2013/14



Source: WHO (2016), Growing up unequal: HBSC 2016 study (2013/14 survey)
Note: Data shown are averages of published data for all EU Member States except Cyprus.

Higher risk of violence against girls in the context of digitalisation and migration

Gender-based violence affects children and adolescents in a range of situations, to the detriment of their physical and psychological well-being. Girls usually suffer far greater exposure to such violence than boys. This includes intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, FGM and some forms of trafficking in human beings.

Of particular concern is the substantial potential for technology to be used to perpetrate gender-based violence against girls through cyberstalking, cyberbullying, sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse. In 2013/14, the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey found that 3-4 % of both girls and boys aged 11-15 had been affected by cyberbullying, while the Net Children Go Mobile project (2014) found that 15 % of girls aged 9-16 had been bullied online, compared with 8 % of boys.

Migrant girls are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. For instance, one 2017 national study found that recently arrived, unaccompanied and separated girls registered a widespread occurrence of gender-based violence throughout their entire journey. The study also revealed that these girls seem to be aware of the

high risk of sexual assault and of exploitation, and resort to preventative measures such as birth control pills to avoid getting pregnant from rape. Similar concerns were identified in several other national studies.

Although substantial efforts were made to improve data collection on trafficking in human beings, this may still significantly underestimate the number of victims. The data clearly show several persistent trafficking patterns: children are trafficked between different EU Member States, within their own Member States and also into the EU from third countries. Girls account for around 80 % of registered victims and are mainly trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The number of registered child victims from the EU is about twice as many as those from outside the EU.

FGM is a violation of girls' and women's human rights, and is almost always inflicted on minors. EIGE's recent research estimated that in 2016 a considerable number of girls originally from countries where FGM is practised were at risk of the practice in the countries covered: Belgium (16-27 %), Greece (25-42 %), France (12-21 %), Italy (15-24 %), Cyprus (12-17 %) and Malta (39-57 %).

Recommendations for action

Mainstreaming a girl child perspective into EU commitments towards the realisation of children's rights would help to highlight and address key challenges relevant to the human rights of girls. Targeted EU action to address several pressing problems girls are facing would also help to improve their lives: for example campaigns to promote more positive body image among girls, or further regulation of cyberviolence, potentially through a new EU-level instrument.

At national level, robust mainstreaming of a girl child perspective into policies targeting gender-based violence, health, poverty, education, social inclusion and migration would help highlight and address the challenges girls are facing. Girls facing such challenges would also benefit from increased access to child-friendly procedures, monitoring and complaint mechanisms.

It is crucial that girls and boys have access to age-appropriate, human rights-based sexuality and relationship education in all Member States. Although such education is compulsory in most Member States, its implementation varies consider-

ably, sometimes because of the influence of conservative religious and cultural movements. More generally, the role of education in challenging gender stereotypes and inequalities needs recognition (see also Area B policy brief).

Member States are recommended to develop strategies to address girls' health and well-being, empower girls to navigate the digital world and improve their ability to protect themselves from new risks emerging in the context of digitalisation. The enhanced vulnerability of migrant girls needs to be taken into account to address some particular forms of gender-based violence, such as FGM.

Finally, improving the collection of harmonised data, disaggregated by age and sex of children, would help assess the current situation and trends for many gender-related challenges affecting girls. Many of the available data focusing on children (specifically girls) are collected infrequently (or as a one-off exercise) and cover only a limited number of EU Member States.

Further information

The Beijing + 25 review has revealed other challenges for girls in the EU. These include the important role gender stereotypes play in distribution of household activities and in educational and occupational choices. Exposure to sexual content online has grown among girls, raising concerns about earlier sexualisation and associated risks. There is also clear evidence of growing child poverty in some Member States.

Further information on EU policy developments and trends relating to the situation of girls can be found in EIGE's Beijing + 25 report. Some other policy briefs based on this report also present challenges that are closely related to those presented in this brief (such as Area A, Women and poverty, Area C, Women and health, Area D, Violence against women, and Area J, Women and the media).

EIGE regularly produces reports reviewing different areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) or other EU policy priorities, as requested by the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. This factsheet is based on the report *Beijing + 25: The fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States*, prepared at the request of Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Other publications include:

- [Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Not without a better work-life balance](#) (2019)
- [Gender Equality and Youth: Opportunities and risks of digitalisation](#) (2019)
- [Women and Men in ICT: A chance for better work-life balance](#) (2018)
- [Study and Work in the EU: Set apart by gender](#) (2018)

You can explore all of EIGE's previous BPfA reports and publications at <https://eige.europa.eu/beijing-platform-for-action>

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