

# SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES GENDER EQUALITY POLICY



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES  
INTERNATIONAL

October 2014

## SAME, BUT DIFFERENT

TRANSFORMING GENDER  
IMBALANCES IN CARE



## WORKING PAPER, ENDORSED BY THE INTERNATIONAL SENATE, 18TH OCTOBER 2014

This policy expresses the organisation's stand on how to best integrate a gender equality perspective into our work. It reflects the principles of gender equality enshrined in: the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979, (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995); and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000). It has followed a consultative development process with extensive participation and feedback from national associations and promoting and supporting associations. A thorough situational analysis including voices of children, young people and caregivers within our programmes has served as our baseline.



### 1. WHAT WE STAND FOR: POLICY STATEMENT

#### Commitment to gender equality

SOS Children's Villages is committed to a policy of gender equality amongst children and adults within our target groups, as well as within the organisation. Our special focus is on issues related to care such as the protection of children against violence and providing equal access for girls and boys to education and health care. In recognition of the disadvantages that females face in many parts of the world, we also believe in the empowerment of girls and women. We believe in the need to engage both males and females in finding solutions to gender inequality. We practise zero tolerance against gender-based discrimination of all children and adults participating in our programmes and all co-workers.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

### A. BACKGROUND TO LINKAGES BETWEEN GENDER, CHILDREN AND CARE

The notion of gender equality reflects a world where females and males enjoy equal opportunities to fulfil their rights and fully participate in all areas of life. Obstacles that both females and males face because of their gender must be identified and removed through careful gender analysis from which appropriate initiatives can be designed.

In many parts of the world, girls and women continue to be disadvantaged in essential areas of life. In relation to the work of SOS Children's Villages, this is particularly relevant in the areas of violence, education, sexual, reproductive and maternal health care, and economic empowerment. This is why our gender equality policy focuses on redressing inequalities that girls in particular, but also women, experience because of their gender. In some instances boys and men also experience inequalities on the basis of their gender, and where these have been identified, our gender equality policy also strives to address them.

#### Violence

Violence against women affects not only the woman herself but the family in which she resides, especially the children. Amongst children, girls are especially vulnerable to acts of violence, exploitation and abuse, and more so if they also experience other factors of inequality such as living in poverty, being without parental care, or being disabled. Over 60 million girls worldwide are child brides, and early marriage makes domestic or sexual violence more likely. It is estimated that 80% of victims of international trafficking are women and girls, and the majority are trafficked for sexual exploitation<sup>1</sup>. Sexual violence has profound effects on the sexual and reproductive health of adolescent girls, resulting in unwanted pregnancies, maternal mortality, unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. It also leaves deep psychological scars. As our emergency policy states, girls and women are particularly vulnerable to deprivation of fundamental rights in emergency situations. In such environments, boys are also vulnerable; they can be exposed to violence and, in some cases, they can be forced to become child soldiers.

Girls and women are especially vulnerable to acts of violence

#### Education

Causes of gender disparity in education are many. In some countries girls drop out after experiencing sexual harassment in schools, or on the walk to school, and may have no channels through which to seek help or protection. Poor water and sanitation facilities in schools may also lead to girls dropping out, especially when they reach puberty. A family with restricted resources may choose to educate boys before girls. Teenage girls who become pregnant may drop out of school and not return. Some societies consider education unnecessary for girls, believing their place is at home where they should carry out domestic duties, take care of the sick or the elderly or be forced into an early marriage. Children may drop out of school for economic reasons; according to a UNICEF report published in 2011<sup>2</sup>, 16% of all children in developing countries between the ages of 5 and 14 are involved in child labour. The different types of labour that girls and boys engage in expose them to different risks. Statistics suggest that more boys are involved in child labour than girls, but many of the types of work that girls are involved in, such as domestic labour, are invisible. This hidden nature of domestic work often leads to poor treatment and even physical abuse of girls<sup>3</sup>.

Lacking or deficient education is one main cause for gender disparity

Health status of women has major impact on children

### Sexual, reproductive and maternal health

In many societies girls and women are restricted in their choices around sexual and reproductive behaviour. This may be the result of sexual abuse or cultural traditions that give males the prerogative over choice. Male partners may prohibit family planning practices or limit access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, especially for adolescent girls. The inability of girls and women to negotiate safer sex in many countries results in higher HIV/AIDS prevalence rates for females than for males and in increased numbers of early and unwanted pregnancies, which in turn lead to more girls dropping out of school. Premature pregnancy and motherhood are inevitable consequences for girls who are married at a young age, and girls younger than 15 years old are five times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties<sup>4</sup>.

The health status of a woman strongly affects her environment, especially the children in her care, and this is particularly relevant with regards to maternal health care. Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of disability and death among women between the ages of 15-49, 90% of which occur in developing countries, leaving a higher number of children without adequate care.

unequal economic power structures put women and children at risk

### Economic empowerment of women and girls

In many parts of the world, men's employment opportunities and access to productive resources (such as credit or land) are greater than women's. Girls who have lost their parents find it harder than boys to claim their legal property rights. This unequal access makes it harder for women and girls to control household resources or participate in decision making at all levels. At the household level, it is widely recognised that increasing women's bargaining power contributes to improvements in the nutrition status, survival rates and literacy of children.

### Transforming gender imbalances within SOS Children's Villages

We have policies in place that protect the rights of all girls, boys, men and women in our programmes. Our child protection policy condemns all forms of child abuse and exploitation. Our code of conduct upholds the highest standards of ethical and professional conduct amongst all our co-workers. Our inclusion policy values the equal rights of disabled children. Our emergency policy outlines that we take action to bring children as quickly as possible away from the emergency situation to ensure their security and protection. Our HIV/AIDS policy aims to reduce the vulnerability of children and caregivers to HIV infection.

These and other policy documents and manuals provide an entry point for integrating a stronger gender equality perspective into our work. Yet, a more subtle understanding of gender equality is needed, one that examines the interplay between men's and women's roles and responsibilities in the field of care, and strives for a transformation of gender relations<sup>5</sup>.

## B. TARGET GROUPS

Listed below are our main target groups.

- **Children and young people participating in SOS Children's Villages programmes**  
In our programmes we recognize and address any inequalities that both girls and boys experience because of their gender.

- **Caregivers in SOS families, foster families and families of origin**  
SOS Children's Villages integrates a gender equality perspective in all its work with caregivers and eliminates discrimination against all caregivers on the basis of their gender. In particular, the organisation strives to boost the empowerment of SOS mothers, aunts and assistants.
- **All other co-workers**  
SOS Children's Villages is committed to non-discrimination against any co-worker on the basis of gender. This includes co-workers in all SOS Children's Villages programmes and in all our offices and boards.
- **SOS Children's Villages partners (formal and informal community-based organisations, other NGOs, government and other service providers)**  
SOS Children's Villages works with a variety of partners to address gender equality across its programmes.

## C. DEFINITIONS / TERMINOLOGY

**Discrimination.** The special treatment of individuals or groups that contravenes the justice principle that all people should be treated as equals.

**Empowerment.** The ability to acquire the power to think and act freely, exercise choice and fulfil one's potential as a full and equal member of society.

**Gender-based violence.** Violence against an individual on the basis of gender, taking into account the fact that unequal power relations between males and females in many societies are often the underlying cause of violence.

**Gender equality.** Equal rights and entitlements to human, social, economic and cultural development, and an equal voice in civil and political life, for women and men. This does not mean that everyone has to be the same; instead it underlines the rights of women and girls to define for themselves the objectives of development and seek outcomes which are not necessarily identical to those sought by men.

**Gender needs.** Because females and males have different roles and responsibilities based on their gender, they also have different gender needs. An examination of these gender needs should become part of a gender analysis undertaken to inform any development intervention.

**Maternal mortality.** The death of a woman during pregnancy, delivery or six weeks following the birth of the baby.

**Reproductive health.** A responsible and safe sex life with the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. This includes access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of contraception.

**Sexual health.** Respect, protection and fulfilment of an individual's sexual rights, free from coercion, discrimination, violence or the risk of infection from sexually transmitted diseases.

### 3. PRINCIPLES

#### 1. We aim to prevent all forms of violence against children and women.

We sensitise children and adults on how different forms of violence and abuse vary according to the victim's gender, and on how, despite the majority of victims of violence being female, males can also be victims. We recognise that promotion of non-violence requires the engagement of males as well as females.

#### 2. We place an emphasis on equal opportunities for girls and boys to access all levels of formal and non-formal quality education.

We promote access to quality education for girls and boys and to provide children in our care with capacity building, training, life skills and productive resources (such as credit) based on their gender needs in order to become self-supporting adults.

#### 3. We sensitise children and caregivers around sexual and reproductive health issues, and promote maternal health care for women and girls.

We encourage greater choice for girls and women around sexual and reproductive behaviour. The organisation creates and maintains a supportive environment that reduces the vulnerability of children and their care-givers to HIV infection. We also aim to promote access to maternal health care for all mothers.

#### 4. We are committed to addressing gender-based barriers to economic empowerment of families of origin.

We promote economic empowerment and raise the confidence of vulnerable caregivers, who are often female heads of households, and who lack access to productive resources necessary to feed and care for their families.

#### 5. We transform gender imbalances and build capacity for promoting gender equality within the organisation.

We aim to eliminate gender imbalances amongst all co-workers in the organisation, and to enhance the organisation's capacity to put into practice gender equality principles. Promoting gender equality depends on the commitment of all co-workers, with particular emphasis on senior managers.

## 4. IMPLICATIONS

The principles described above have specific implications which are outlined in this section as the basic minimum standards for implementation of this policy. We also recognise that other gender-related issues of inequality may inspire or require action in specific contexts.

### 1. We aim to prevent all forms of violence against children and women.

- We apply a gender equality perspective to our child protection systems, including the code of conduct.
- We promote open discussions with girls and boys on the gender dimensions of violence and work with them to identify protection measures.
- We train SOS parents/mothers/aunts and all other caregivers on gender dimensions to violence and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in order to understand the implications for girls, boys, women and men in the community.
- Together with other NGOs, we raise awareness amongst teachers, health care providers and community leaders around prevention and response of gender-based violence.
- We take a stand against early marriages and female genital mutilation. We strive to change community attitudes and norms through community participation processes and identification of opinion leaders and decision makers.

Protection against  
gender-based violence



### Equal access to quality education

## 2. We place an emphasis across our programmes on equal opportunities for girls and boys to access all levels of formal and non-formal quality education.

- In SOS Children's Villages, SOS mothers/parents and aunts are responsible for ensuring that girls and boys receive the same level and quality of education.
- We identify the different needs of girls and boys when we support them in finding employment as they are about to become independent, for example through securing internships with private sector partners.
- Through family strengthening work, we engage with communities and families to encourage them to send both girls and boys to school.
- We support the reintegration of young mothers into school.
- We collaborate with schools in the provision of a safe environment for girls through sensitisation around gender issues such as prevention of sexual harassment.
- Where relevant, we provide water and sanitation infrastructure in schools to discourage girls from dropping out.



### Sensitization on sexual, reproductive and maternal health

## 3. We sensitise children and caregivers around sexual and reproductive health issues and promote maternal health care for women and girls.

- We provide sexual education to girls and boys in our programmes. This includes information on the importance of choice for adolescent girls with regards to sexual relations and family planning, and the particular vulnerability of girls and women to HIV infection.
- In our medical centres we provide expertise and delivery of family planning services, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases especially HIV/AIDS, and basic information about reproductive health for males and females.
- In our medical centres, we offer information on prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission, HIV counselling and anti-retroviral therapy for males and females.
- Through our medical clinics, we identify and target mothers, including adolescent girls, for ante-natal and post-natal health care, safe childbirth by well-trained birth attendants, and education on peri-natal health.





#### 4. We are committed to addressing gender-based barriers to economic empowerment of families of origin.

- In all our programmes, caregivers promote equal participation of girls and boys in decision making platforms in order to build their confidence.
- In collaboration with community based organisations, we aim to provide families of origin (especially female heads of households) in our family strengthening programmes with resources for economic self-sufficiency.
- We strive to foster participation of caregivers in community level organisations, such as community support groups and child protection committees.
- In child protection committees, we encourage equal participation of men and women, an environment that fosters women's active participation and a platform where women's voices can be heard.

Economic empowerment  
of women and girls



Transform gender imbalances within SOS

## 5. We transform gender imbalances and build capacity for gender equality within the organisation.

### Protection of children and young people

- We ensure the continued protection of girls who become pregnant whilst living in an SOS Children's Village. This protection will continue whether or not the girl chooses to live inside or outside the SOS Children's Village.
- No boy will be forced to leave his SOS family for reasons of adolescence at a young age.
- We respect the individual sexual orientation and/or gender identity of each child/young person and strive to ensure that no child/young person is discriminated against.

### SOS caregivers

- We recognise that each caregiver, regardless of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, has the same right to care for and guide the development of his/her children.
- We ensure the continued employment for SOS mothers/aunts who become pregnant and wish to continue in their profession.
- We aim to prevent the separation of biological children from SOS mothers/parents and aunts, and strive for solutions that ensure the well-being of biological children and their parents.

### All co-workers

- We promote non-discrimination of all co-workers based on gender throughout all steps of the recruitment process, so that women and men have equal opportunities for employment.
- We strive to ensure equal pay and equal conditions based on gender-related needs (for example flexible working conditions for mothers).
- We strive to ensure equal representation of men and women in governance and management positions and boards.
- We practise zero tolerance against all forms of abuse based on gender within the organisation, including violence and sexual harassment, and for this we have clear reporting and responding procedures.

### Organisational capacity building in gender equality

- We educate caregivers to recognise gender discriminative attitudes and practices. We provide capacity building for all co-workers to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of gender relations and how these relate to care.
- We integrate a gender equality perspective into the design of all our new programmes, and we pilot innovative programmes aimed specifically at gender equality.
- We integrate gender equality principles into new policy documents and manuals.
- We ensure that our gender equality policy is monitored. This includes quantitative gender disaggregated data and qualitative studies that provide gender analyses to track the organisation's progress.



<sup>1</sup> UNIFEM: Violence Against Women & Millennium Development Goals, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF: State of the World's Children, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Give girls a chance. Tackling child labour, a key to the future / International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> The State of the World's Children 2007: Women and Children – The double dividend of gender equality, UNICEF, New York, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> SOS Gender Core Policy Group: Gender in SOS Children's Villages, A Situational Analysis, 2013 (prepared by Christine Wiik).

## IMPRINT

**PUBLISHER AND EDITORIAL OFFICE** SOS-Kinderdorf International,  
Hermann-Gmeiner-Str. 51, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria

**EDITORIAL TEAM** Federation Policy Team

**PHOTOS** Cover: Jens Honoré, Bjørn-Owe Holmberg, Benno Neeleman;

p. 2: Seger Erken; p. 7: Gunter Bieringer; p. 8: Benno Neeleman; p. 9: SOS Archives, Benno Neeleman

**TRANSLATION** SOS-Kinderdorf International, Language Services

**GRAPHIC** Manuela Tippel

**SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES ON THE INTERNET** [www.sos-childrensvillages.org](http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org)

# A LOVING HOME FOR EVERY CHILD



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES  
INTERNATIONAL

[www.sos-childrensvillages.org](http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org)

