

Girls' rights are human rights!

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ZERO

TOLERANCE

How girls can thrive with new children's rights work

SUMMARY | 2024



Introduction

As Scotland works on embedding human rights, we have an opportunity to make sure girls can play, learn, and are happy and healthy.

Human rights legislation sets the foundation for children to access what they need. However, current work on children's rights fails girls. Girls are falling between the cracks in policy and practice due to gender-neutral approaches to children's rights, and age-neutral approaches to women's rights.

By explicitly naming girls' specific requirements when putting human rights legislation into policy and practice, we can create a Scotland where girls thrive.



7 actions for girls to thrive!

As Scotland advances human rights legislation and implements the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), there is an opportunity to make sure girls' rights are met. Everyone working on children's rights in Scotland must consider girls at every stage of policy development and practice.

Zero Tolerance recommendations

1. Collect disaggregated data on our progress on children's rights, and look at the links between gender, age, and other protected characteristics to make sure all children's rights are being met.
2. Explicitly address girls and their needs in any policy, strategy, and guidelines which reference children's rights.
3. Involve gender experts in development of all aspects of children's rights policy.
4. Prioritise consulting and engaging with girls and consider what they need to meaningfully participate in decision making.
5. Support and fund organisations who work with girls, especially the most vulnerable groups of girls.
6. Put human rights treaties into practice in such a way that they enhance and complement each other, and have a focus on girls' rights across all human rights work.
7. Train and educate policymakers and practitioners to understand and consider the impact of gender when implementing children's rights, aka to have a gendered perspective.

In a Scotland where girls thrive...

Girls are safe

We want children to be happy and healthy. Scotland should be one of the best places in the world to grow up. Effective human rights practice can strengthen equality in Scotland.

Currently, we are failing to meet girls' right to safety. Girls are unsafe at home, online, and in the street due to high levels of harassment, online harm, sexual violence, and domestic abuse.

1 in 5

girls aged 14 to 21 experienced public sexual harassment

71%

of girls aged 7 to 21 experienced online harm in 2020

1 in 3

13 to 17-year-old girls reported experiencing some form of sexual violence

The evidence

- Despite reduced public exposure during lockdown, 1 in 5 girls aged 14 to 21 experienced public sexual harassment (*Plan International UK, 2020*).
- Older girls feel progressively less safe outside (*Girlguiding Scotland, 2020: 21*).
- In 2020, 71% of girls aged 7 to 21 experienced online harm, with higher rates for disabled girls, LGBT girls, and girls of colour (*Girlguiding UK, 2021: 5*).
- 1 in 3 13 to 17-year-old girls reported experiencing some form of sexual violence (*Scottish Government, 2018*).
- Violence is underreported because many girls do not think what has happened is serious enough to report or do not trust adults to help them (*LGBT Youth Scotland, 2020; Agenda Alliance, 2022; NHS Health Scotland, 2018*).

Good practice and a strong focus on human rights can help make substantial progress towards gender equality and ending men's violence against women and girls.

Girls learn

Children should have access to free education in an environment that supports their learning so that they can reach their full potential. Human rights work in education settings can create a learning environment where children are free to be themselves, treat each other with respect and dignity, and expect equality.

Currently, we're failing to fully fulfil girls' right to education. Gender inequality, perpetuated by school policies like differing uniforms for girls and boys, creates a conducive environment for violence against women and girls to thrive. Pressure to follow gendered expectations, sexism, violence from peers, and institutions' failure to help and advocate for survivors currently stops girls from achieving their full potential.

64%

of girls aged 13 to 21 experience sexual harassment at school

Experiencing violence against women and girls at school correlates with:

- lower academic achievement
- fear of attending school
- diminished concentration & confidence in class

The evidence

Violence in Schools

- 64% of girls aged 13 to 21 experience sexual harassment at school (*Girlguiding UK, 2021*).
- Experiencing violence against women and girls at school correlates with lower academic achievement, fear of attending school, and diminished concentration and confidence in class (*Plan International UK, 2016*).

Response to Peer Violence

- There is evidence that girl survivors have their rights deprioritised, with institutions focusing on the educational rights of boys who caused harm (*The Young Women's Movement, 2018a*).
- Testimonies reveal that incidents of violence are often brushed aside, and survivors' rights are not adequately protected (*Everyone's Invited, Scotland, 2023; Children's Parliament, 2022*).
- As a result, survivors report removing themselves from education to escape perpetrators (*Everyone's Invited, Scotland, 2023*).

Girls learn (cont'd)

Sexism, Misogyny, and Gender Stereotypes

- Sexist language is prevalent in schools, creating a hostile environment for girls (*EVAW, 2010; UK Feminista, 2017; NUT, 2007: 4–10; WEI, 2021*).
- Gendered expectations about who can do what subjects and careers limit girls' choices (*Girlguiding UK, 2021; Girlguiding UK, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022; Girlguiding Scotland, 2020: 22*).

We must consider girls' specific needs and experiences in our practice at schools in Scotland. Creating gender equal cultures will help keep girls safe at school and allow all children to reach their full potential.



Girls Play

All children should have the freedom to play. Play improves relationships, wellbeing and is an opportunity to learn and exercise – and it is fun!

A strong, gender-sensitive focus on children's rights can help ensure we embed girls' needs into the design of play spaces. Effective implementation will see practitioners encouraging children to play together and follow their own interests. Currently, harmful gender stereotypes, sexism in design, and violence against girls all limit girls' access and choice of play.

21%

of girls aged 11 to 21 say certain sports are only available for boys

43%

of girls don't feel safe alone outside, impacting their access to public play areas

27%

of young women say their enjoyment of nature has been affected by sexual harassment

The evidence

Gender Stereotypes in Play

- 21% of girls aged 11 to 21 say certain sports are only available for boys (*Girlguiding UK, 2022*).
- Girls feel constrained from a very young age by stereotypical toys, play equipment, clothing, and adults' attitudes (*Girlguiding Scotland, 2020; Zero Tolerance, 2021*).
- Girls have less time to play as they are expected to do more domestic tasks than boys (*Button, 2014: 15*).

Spaces Designed for Boys

- Only 20% of girls feel 'very comfortable' in parks, evidencing the need for gender-sensitive park design (*Walker and Clark, 2023*).
- 27% of young women say their enjoyment of nature has been affected by sexual harassment (*Walker and Clark, 2023*).

Risk and Safety

- 43% of girls don't feel safe alone outside, impacting their access to public play areas (*Girlguiding UK, 2022*).
- Girls' outdoor play is limited due to concerns about assault, harassment, and safety (*Button, 2014*).

Girls Play (cont'd)

Sport and Gender Stereotypes

- 43% of teenage girls disengage from sports after primary school due to fear of judgement, lack of confidence, and safety concerns (*Women in Sport*, 2022).
- 56% of young women feel discouraged from sports due to a lack of body confidence (*YWM*, 2019).

Gaming

- 30% of girls over 16 face sexist comments while gaming online, and 29% are told they can't play certain games due to their gender (Girlguiding Scotland, 2020).
- 44% of girls aged 7 to 10 receive unwanted messages or friend requests when gaming online (Girlguiding Scotland, 2020).

Scottish human rights legislation enshrines children's right to play. Effective gender sensitive implementation and practice will ensure that all children can access this right equally, leading to a happier Scotland.



Girls are Healthy

All children in Scotland should have access to healthcare, including reproductive healthcare. Human rights legislation sets the expectation for all children to have regular access to good quality physical and mental healthcare. Our practice must do more to realise this right.

Currently, we fail to provide relevant sex and relationships education, which can help create better health outcomes as girls grow up. When girls do need healthcare, they do not have adequate access to physical, mental, or reproductive services, and medical professionals often dismiss their concerns.

89%
of girls aged
7-21 express
generalised worry
or anxiety

Young women are
3 times
more likely than
young men to face
mental health
challenges

The evidence

Mental Health

- 89% of girls aged 7-21 express generalised worry or anxiety (*Girlguiding UK, 2023*).
- Girls in Scotland, particularly aged 7-10, have experienced a decline in happiness over the last decade (*Girlguiding UK, 2021: 6*).
- Young women are three times more likely than young men to face mental health challenges (*Mental Health Foundation, 2017: 3*).

Stigmatisation in Mental Healthcare

- Girls seeking mental health support face stereotypes, with 33% being asked if they are "overthinking" and 22% fearing being labelled as "attention-seeking" (*Hussen, 2023; CALM 2023*).
- Tragically, 79% of women under 25 who died by suicide were previously assessed as low risk, highlighting the potential consequences of dismissing their mental health concerns (*CALM, 2023*).

Girls are Healthy (cont'd)

Physical Healthcare

- Only 40% of young women rate their healthcare access as “okay,” with disparities for trans women, 57% of whom rate it negatively (YWM, 2023: 3).
- Issues include dismissive attitudes, inaccessibility, and referral challenges, causing girls to feel discriminated against due to both their age and gender (YWM, 2023).

Reproductive Rights

- Around half of young women aged 16-24 in Scotland had never tried to get an appointment for STI testing at a GP surgery or sexual health clinic (Lewis et al, 2021: 39), and girls in rural areas report difficulties in accessing free condoms (MacGilleEathain et al, 2023).
- Lack of information hinders reproductive rights, especially for marginalised groups like disabled girls, young mothers, and LGBT young women (Maslowski et al, 2023; HSBC, 2022; LGBT Youth Scotland, 2020b; Engender, 2018; WEI, 2021; Scottish Government, 2014).

Effective practice focussed on girls' specific needs presents an opportunity to build a Scotland that cares and is committed to all children living the healthiest life they can.



Girls engage in community and decision making

To create a Scotland where everyone thrives and its citizens are engaged in our community, we should encourage children's participation. We should teach children from an early age that they matter by listening to their views and incorporating them into political decision making.

Currently, we often fail to involve girls in policy development and do not uphold girls' rights to participate and be heard. By focusing on women's and children's participation separately, girls are ignored.

53%

of 11 to 21-year-old girls feel older people don't listen to or respect their opinions

1/2

of girls experience being patronised or made to feel stupid

The evidence

Girls Do Not Feel Listened To

- 53% of 11 to 21-year-old girls feel older people don't listen to or respect their opinions (*Girlguiding Scotland, 2020*).
- Half of girls experience being patronised or made to feel stupid (*Girlguiding UK, 2023*).

Barriers to Participation

- Despite 73% of girls desiring more political opportunities, almost 45% believe politicians fail to understand their views (*Girlguiding UK, 2020: 15; Plan International, 2022: 29*).
- Guidance for carrying out participation work often overlooks girls' specific needs, hindering their inclusion.

Political Representation

- Only 25% of public board chairs, 35% of MSPs, and 29% of councillors in Scotland are women (*Women 50:50, 2023*).
- Girls, though actively engaged in politics, feel frustrated with the limited diversity in women's representation, impacting their sense of being heard (*Girlguiding UK, 2023; The Young Women's Movement b, 2018: 66*).

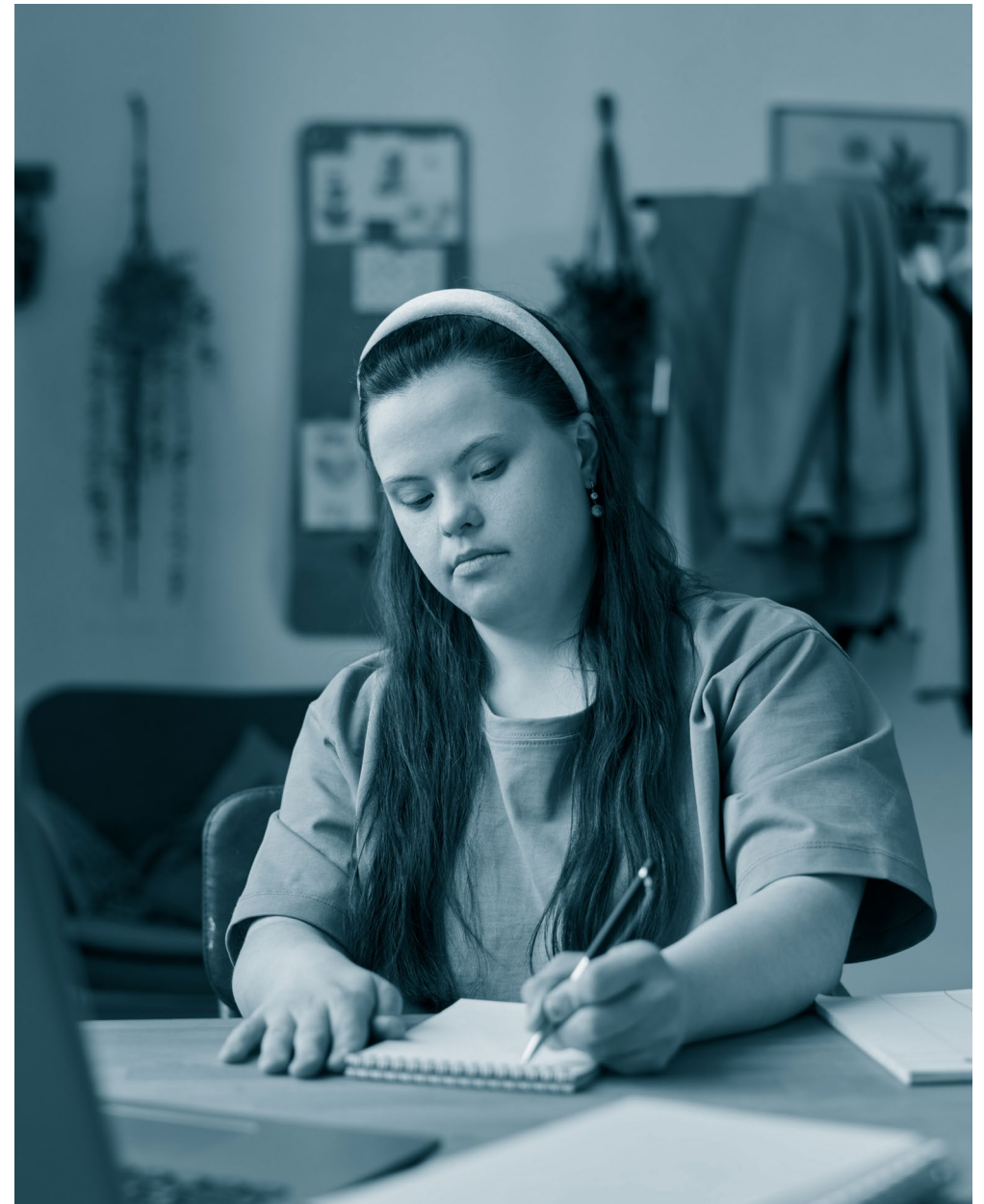
We have the opportunity to empower citizens to take part in the local community and Scottish policymaking, and we must ensure that all children access this right equally.

Conclusion

Scotland should be one of the best places in the world to grow up. But currently girls are suffering because their rights have fallen through the cracks in legislation. By explicitly naming girls' specific requirements when doing human rights work, we can create a Scotland where girls thrive.

About the author: Zero Tolerance is Scotland's expert organisation on preventing and eradicating men's violence against women and girls. We tackle the root cause: gender inequality.

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