

## WAGGGS POSITION STATEMENT

### Adolescent health

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) believes adolescent girls face a unique set of challenges affecting their health that requires a comprehensive and holistic approach. As the voice of girls and young women, WAGGGS has identified adolescent health as a priority issue on which to take a stand and speak out.

WAGGGS provides millions of girls and young women with non-formal education, giving them the opportunity to develop self-esteem, confidence and life skills. Working with Member Organizations in 144 countries, our vision is to be the voice of girls and young women to build a better world through advocacy and action. We aim not only to speak out on behalf of girls and young women everywhere, but also to empower young women to speak out for themselves.

#### Adolescent Health Globally

- Rapidly changing social and economic conditions around the world have a significant impact on the health of girls and young women. Today, girls face many risks from social, cultural, behaviour and environmental factors, as well as discrimination and a lack of access to health information, education and services.
- Every year, some 14 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 give birth<sup>1</sup>. More than 90 percent of these births occur in developing countries, with the highest rates in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia<sup>2</sup>. The result is that complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading causes of mortality among girls between the ages of 15 and 19<sup>3</sup>.
- Poverty is linked with increased rates of teenage pregnancy - Girls aged 15 to 19 from the poorest communities are three times more likely than their better-off peers to give birth in adolescence, and bear twice as many children.<sup>4</sup> Having a child at a young age severely limits a woman's education as many are obliged to abandon their schooling.
- More than half of the 60 million people infected by HIV are young people aged 15-24 years old; 6,000 more are infected daily – one every 15 seconds. There is a disproportionate impact of the AIDS epidemic on women and young girls, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where, on average, three women are HIV-infected for every two men. Among young people (15–24 years), that ratio widens to three young women for every young man<sup>5</sup>.
- Seven in every ten of the world's hungry are girls and women. Most poor people who battle hunger deal with chronic under-nourishment resulting in stunted growth, weakness and heightened susceptibility to illness.
- Around the world girls and young women today face a spectrum of nutritional health concerns ranging from dietary deficiencies, to obesity and eating disorders. Throughout adolescence girls undergo dramatic changes including physical, social and cognitive development and it is a time when nutrient requirements peak.

---

1 UNFPA 2004

2 UN Millennium Project 2005

3 Save the Children Fund 2004

4 World Bank 2004

5 UNAIDS/WHO AIDS Epidemic Update 2006

## WAGGGS POSITION STATEMENT

### Adolescent health

- Worldwide, one in five young people aged 13 to 15 smokes and more than 50 percent of young people who continue will die as a result of smoking. Girls are more likely to be smokers than boys - 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are regular smokers by the age of 15.<sup>6</sup>
- Drug abuse, including alcohol, is a global phenomenon with more people abusing drugs today than in any other time in history. Drug prevalence rates among young people in many countries can be up to three or four times higher than for those found among the general population.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Wired for Health

<sup>7</sup> Commission on Narcotic Drugs, 2001

## WAGGGS POSITION STATEMENT

### Adolescent health

WAGGGS calls on the international community and national governments to ensure that young women's health issues and concerns are addressed by:

- **Providing** girls and young women with appropriate education, information, skills and access to health services to enable informed and responsible health choices
- **Supporting** non-formal education youth organizations which provide programmes and support for the social, personal and sexual development of girls and young women
- **Involving** young people in all decision-making and policy processes that determine the nature of information and services provided for them
- **Challenging** the role of young men in society so they take responsibility for their own activities and develop equal relationships with young women
- **Alleviating** the constraints faced by women in accessing food and ensuring gender-responsive interventions to improve household food security and nutrition
- **Taking** steps through nutrition education, information and food labelling to promote balanced diets and healthy eating habits
- **Providing** access to youth-friendly health and counselling services that respond to the specific physical and psychosocial needs of girls and young women, with particular attention to the abuse of drugs and alcohol
- **Ensuring** appropriate tobacco control measures to protect present and future generations from the devastating health, social, environmental and economic consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke

WAGGGS urges Member Organizations to:

- **Raise** awareness about the range of issues affecting girls' and young women's health and increase support for youth organizations which provide non-formal education programmes
- **Utilise** the power of the Guiding movement to address these issues and work with other Member Organizations to bring about change
- **Enable** girls and young women to talk openly about health issues that are important to them among their peers and in a safe environment
- **Influence** decision-makers, community leaders, schools and parents to support and provide appropriate comprehensive information, education and services addressing adolescent health
- **Ensure** the voice of young women is heard regarding issues of adolescent health

## WAGGGS POSITION STATEMENT

### Adolescent health

#### How WAGGGS is addressing adolescent health:

- WAGGGS has always been involved in projects which involve improving the health of adolescents.
- WAGGGS has conducted its first ever global survey in 2005 on adolescent health. A questionnaire was distributed to all Member Organizations and 6,000 individuals in 100 countries responded. From the survey WAGGGS has selected seven key messages which communicate what girls worldwide say about health and young women today. These are WAGGGS' seven key advocacy messages:
  - girls worldwide say **"fight AIDS"**
  - girls worldwide say **"make healthy food choices"**
  - girls worldwide say **"prevent adolescent pregnancy"**
  - girls worldwide say **"it is important to talk about sex"**
  - girls worldwide say **"let's talk about the danger of drugs"**
  - girls worldwide say **"ban smoking in public places"**
  - girls worldwide say **"discover your potential"**
- WAGGGS has Position Statements which include more information on activities focused on adolescent health including:
  - Fighting HIV/AIDS
  - Making healthy food choices
  - The Right to Food
  - Adolescent pregnancy
  - Drugs
  - Smoking
  - Girls' self-esteem and empowerment

**“Adolescence is a critical time for the current and future health of women. In these formative years, access to health care, risky behaviours, experiences of violence or abuse and supportive relationships can either enhance or undermine teen health, as well as shape the quality of life in years to come.”**  
*The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls, 1997*