

# WAGGGS POSITION STATEMENT

## Girls and young women addressing adolescent health

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) believes that girls and young women must be at the centre of all policy and programme developments that aim to address adolescent health. Adolescent girls face a unique set of challenges affecting their health that requires a comprehensive and holistic approach. Healthy adolescent girls become healthy mothers, giving birth to healthier babies. The present and the future of humankind are in the hands of our young and future generations and in particular in the hands of girls and young women. As the voice of girls and young women, WAGGGS has identified the UN Millennium Development Goal 4 on reducing child mortality and Goal 5 on improving maternal health as a priority issue on which to take a stand and speak out, with special focus on ensuring adolescent health.

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 145 countries, our vision is to build a better world through advocacy, education and action. We aim to speak out on behalf of girls and young women everywhere, as well as empower young women to speak out for themselves and for other girls. Our global action theme 'together we can change our world' encourages WAGGGS members to take actions to help achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals.

**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

### 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.

**“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*

### 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 16 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 give birth<sup>1</sup>. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) this is about 11 percent of all births worldwide. Ninety-five per cent of these births occur in low- and middle-income countries. In addition, half of all adolescent births take place in just seven countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria and the United States. The result is that pregnancy-related complications are a leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19 years in developing countries; especially related to unsafe abortion –provided by unskilled persons in unhygienic conditions<sup>2</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>3</sup>. Having a child at a young age severely limits a woman's education, as well as chances in adulthood to participate in the national economy, as many are obliged to abandon their schooling at an early age.
- According to UNAIDS, young people remain disproportionately affected by HIV, accounting for 41% of all new infections among 15-49 year-olds. Young women between the ages of 15-19 are particularly vulnerable to HIV: with slightly more than half of all people living with HIV (an estimated 15 million in low to middle income countries in total) being women and girls. This is because of gender inequalities, sexual violence, early marriage, intergenerational relationships and often limited access to education. In sub-Saharan Africa, young women aged 15–24 years are as much as eight times more likely than men to be HIV positive<sup>4</sup>.
- According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food assistance given to safeguard mothers' and young children's nutrition, is a powerful basis for longer-term development. Even a few months of inadequate nutrition in young children can have irreversible, life-long negative effects on health, education and productivity. 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.
- 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>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (2011). *World Health Statistics*. Geneva. For more information: [http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world\\_health\\_statistics/EN\\_WHS2011\\_Full.pdf](http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world_health_statistics/EN_WHS2011_Full.pdf) or [http://www.who.int/making\\_pregnancy\\_safer/topics/adolescent\\_pregnancy/en/](http://www.who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/topics/adolescent_pregnancy/en/)

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (2009). *Women's Health Fact sheet No. 334*. Geneva. For more information: Fact sheet N°334 November 2009

<sup>3</sup> Population Council (2005). *Growing Up Global*. Washington. For more information: <http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/GUGBrief.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> UNAIDS (2010). *Global Aids Epidemic Report*. New York. For further information: [http://www.unaids.org/globalreport/documents/20101123\\_GlobalReport\\_full\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/globalreport/documents/20101123_GlobalReport_full_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (UNODC), 2001.