



**Intersex Children and Early Childhood Development**  
**Submission to UNICEF for the UN Secretary-General's Report on the Rights of the**  
**Child and Early Childhood Development**  
*March 24, 2025*

Introduction

Outright International works with partners around the globe to strengthen the capacity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) human rights movement, document and expose human rights violations against LGBTIQ people, and advocate for inclusion and equality. Founded in 1990, with staff in over a dozen countries, Outright works with the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies, and civil society partners. Outright holds consultative status at the United Nations, where it serves as the secretariat of the UN LGBTI Core Group.

This submission is a response to the call for input from UNICEF for the upcoming report of the Secretary-General on the rights of the child. This submission focuses on intersex children and early childhood development. Intersex children are born with innate physical variations of sex characteristics, such as genitals, internal reproductive organs, chromosomes, and/or hormones, that don't align with typical notions of either a female or male body. Intersex people are not that rare; up to 1.7 percent of the population are born with intersex traits.<sup>1</sup> Often discovered at birth or early in childhood, intersex traits are more common than identical twins<sup>2</sup> and equal to about 135 million people globally.

Intersex Genital Mutilation

Among the main human rights issues impacting many infants and young children born with intersex traits are the medically unnecessary and irreversible surgeries done without their consent to “normalize” their healthy bodies. Human rights defenders commonly refer to these harmful practices as intersex genital mutilation (IGM). IGM is wrongly perceived by some as medical, therapeutic, and in a child's best interest. However, like female genital mutilation (FGM), medical practitioners carry out these surgeries for biased cultural or sociological reasons. Parents and other caregivers often believe the intervention is in the best interest of the child for cultural

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<sup>1</sup> “Intersex People,” UN Free & Equal, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.unfe.org/know-the-facts/challenges-solutions/intersex>.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Martin et al., “Births: Final Data for 2016,” *US Center for Disease Control National Vital Statistics Reports* 67, no. 1 (2018): [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr67/nvsr67\\_01.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr67/nvsr67_01.pdf).



reasons, which include looking “normal,” having “proper sexuality,” and being a “proper woman” or a “proper man.” Rather than recognizing the wide variety of sex characteristics, the birth of an intersex child is viewed as a tragedy best responded to secretly and as a matter of urgency.<sup>3</sup>

Current research shows that, as with female genital mutilation, surgically modifying the bodies of intersex infants and children causes more harm than it overcomes. These procedures often include forced and excessive genital exams, medical displays, and genital photography. Even when experienced as an infant or toddler, there are serious harmful physical and emotional consequences impacting children through adulthood. These include loss or impairment of sexual sensation, poorer sexual function, painful scarring, painful intercourse, urinary incontinence and other problems with passing urine, increased sexual anxieties, problems with desire, less sexual activity, lifelong trauma, and mental suffering.<sup>4</sup>

### Impact on Families and Children

Parental stress and shame, rejection, and early medical experiences have long-lasting impacts on intersex children through adulthood. Studies have found that the life course of many intersex children is “paved with painful obstacles and social challenges that demand great strength to overcome.”<sup>5</sup>

Family duress around the birth and/or diagnosis of an intersex infant or young child is known to have negative impacts on the child at various stages of their life.<sup>6</sup> Family duress also often contributes to parents consenting to irreversible and medically unnecessary “normalization” surgeries on their children. From a psychological point of view, these medical interventions can be deemed a form of “shame management.”<sup>7</sup>

To improve the healthy development and well-being of intersex children, there is a need for more intentional support from their caregivers—especially during the early years. Having stigma and secrecy attached to oneself from an early age has been shown to predict lower self-confidence and even substance use disorders in later life. Internalized beliefs that one is different can lead to

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<sup>3</sup> Melinda Jones, “Intersex Genital Mutilation – A Western Version of FGM,” *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 25, no. 2 (2017): 396–411, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02502008>.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, *I Want to Be Like Nature Made Me*, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/25/i-want-be-nature-made-me/medically-unnecessary-surgeries-intersex-children-us>.

<sup>5</sup> Mir Abe Marinus and Marianne Cense, “A Life Course Perspective on the Sexual Development of Young Intersex People,” *Healthcare* 12, no. 2 (2024): 239, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12020239>.

<sup>6</sup> Boonie Hart and Jane Shakespeare-Finch, “Intersex lived experience: trauma and posttraumatic growth in narratives,” *Psychology & Sexuality* 13, no. 4 (2022): 912–930, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2021.1938189>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

mental health problems, which can themselves exacerbate feelings of alienation and exclusion.<sup>8</sup> Incorporating mental health counseling and caregiver peer support interventions into regular care for families of children with intersex traits could reduce negative psychological impacts for the child even into adulthood.<sup>9</sup>

For young children, access to information about diversity and acceptance of people of diverse bodies and gender expressions, as well as different ways of forming families, could go a long way toward mitigating harm and promoting a healthy sense of self and well-being for an intersex child.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, there is a lack of representation in most school curricula, and this invisibility often exacerbates a child's feelings of not belonging.<sup>11</sup>

Curricula tackling diversity of sex characteristics and gender expressions could also help mitigate the risk of intersex children being bullied by other students. There are also reports of adults, including teachers, bullying and abusing intersex children in school settings.<sup>12</sup> Locally informed, culturally competent sensitivity training for all adults and caregivers involved in the life of an intersex child could go a long way toward mitigating harm. In rural areas of certain countries, intersex children are considered to be demons bringing bad luck to the community. This sometimes leads to abandonment, genital mutilation, or even infanticide.<sup>13</sup>

### Increasing Support from UN Bodies and Human Rights Mechanisms

The rights of intersex people to live free from discrimination and violence, including in medical settings, have been affirmed by multiple United Nations bodies, as well as regional human rights mechanisms.<sup>14</sup> In a 2013 report, the World Health Organization opposed early sterilizing

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<sup>8</sup> Adeline Whitney Berry, "The Experiences and Needs of Older European Intersex People," PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, England, 2024, [https://pure.hud.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/90772307/Final\\_thesis\\_Berry.pdf](https://pure.hud.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/90772307/Final_thesis_Berry.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Kristina Suorsa et al., "Characterizing Early Psychosocial Functioning of Parents of Children with Moderate to Severe Genital Ambiguity due to Disorders of Sex Development," *Journal of Urology* 194, no. 6 (2015): 1737-42, <https://www.auajournals.org/doi/10.1016/j.juro.2015.06.104>.

<sup>10</sup> College of the Canyons, *Role Of Equity And Diversity In Early Childhood Education*, 2020, [https://www.childdevelopment.org/docs/default-source/pdfs/role-equity-and-diversityenglish-2-8-20.pdf?sfvrsn=3bf4a9a6\\_2](https://www.childdevelopment.org/docs/default-source/pdfs/role-equity-and-diversityenglish-2-8-20.pdf?sfvrsn=3bf4a9a6_2).

<sup>11</sup> Emily Graybill and Sherrie Proctor, "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: Limited representation in school support personnel journals," *Journal of School Psychology* 54 (2016): 9-16, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2015.11.001>.

<sup>12</sup> Outright International, *"I Am" Intersex: Global Voices for Intersex Justice*, 2024, <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/IAmIntersex%20%281%29.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Behrens, "A principled ethical approach to intersex paediatric surgeries," *BMC Medical Ethics* 21, no. 10 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-020-00550-x>.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Technical Note on the Human Rights of Intersex People: Human Rights Standards and Good Practices*, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/ohchr-technical-note-human-rights-intersex-people-human-rights>.

surgeries on intersex children.<sup>15</sup> The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has called on states to ensure that no child is subjected to unnecessary medical or surgical treatment during infancy or childhood and to guarantee every child's bodily integrity, autonomy, and self-determination.<sup>16</sup> In 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed the first-ever resolution on intersex people's human rights, calling on member states to enhance efforts to combat discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against intersex people, including harmful surgeries on infants and children.<sup>17</sup> According to that resolution, a comprehensive report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is expected in September 2025.

While these have been promising steps toward an acknowledgment of the human rights violations and harms suffered by children born with intersex traits, there is an urgent need for concrete action and intentional inclusion in all relevant UNICEF and other UN initiatives.

### Recommendations

Outright International recommends that UNICEF undertake the following initiatives:

- Establish a program for the elimination of intersex genital mutilation in collaboration with other relevant UN agencies. This program should draw on the successes of the *Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation*, through which 162,044 girls aged 0 to 14 years were protected from undergoing FGM between 2009 and 2023.<sup>18</sup>
- Issue a guidance note and other published resources on the urgent need to eliminate intersex genital mutilation
- Issue a guidance note on affirmative health care for intersex children
- Establish a program to provide education and support for the parents and caregivers of intersex children around the world
- Issue guidance on school policies that can protect intersex children from bullying, discrimination, and violence, including in single-sex and boarding school settings in which intersex children may face intensified scrutiny and discrimination
- Issue guidance on the inclusion of intersex representation in school curricula

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<sup>15</sup> WHO, UN OHCHR, UN Women, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO, "Eliminating forced, coercive and otherwise involuntary sterilization: an interagency statement," joint statement, May 3, 2014, [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241507325#:~:text=Download%20\(785.2%20kB\)-,Overview.making%20of%20the%20person%20concerned](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241507325#:~:text=Download%20(785.2%20kB)-,Overview.making%20of%20the%20person%20concerned).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> H.R.C. Res. 55/14 (combating discrimination, violence and harmful practices against intersex persons), A/HRC/55/14 (April 4, 2024), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4045699?v=pdf&ln=en>, [persons](#), adopted April 5, 2024

<sup>18</sup> "UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation," UNICEF, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.unicef.org/protection/unfpa-unicef-joint-programme-eliminating-fgm>.



- Work with ministries of education and other education authorities to develop and roll out intersex-inclusive curricula, along with curricula that address natural human diversity, family diversity, acceptance of all types of bodies, and diverse gender identities and expressions
- Provide knowledge leadership on intersex children's lives by funding, implementing, and disseminating research on intersex children's health, human rights, and well-being

Protecting children born with intersex traits from harmful practices is a children's rights issue that urgently needs support from the United Nations. It was encouraging to hear Secretary-General Antonio Guterres respond so empathetically to an intervention describing harmful practices on intersex women and children delivered by a Polish activist during the 69th Commission on the Status of Women Town Hall in New York, promising "total support for whatever initiatives you might consider that the UN or UN Women can take."<sup>19</sup> There are many steps the UN, and specifically UNICEF, can take to help mitigate the harm suffered by intersex children in early childhood and protect the human rights of all people born with variations of sex anatomy.

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<sup>19</sup> "Magda Rakita at CSW 69," intervention by Polish intersex activist Magda Rakita and response from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the CSW69 Town Hall on March 12, 2025, posted March 18, 2025, by Outright International, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzQYOfpE0oo>.