

Half the world's poor are children — and more babies are being born into poverty now than ever before. Never in history have we seen such numbers.

Far less likely, the roll of the dice will bring the baby of the new millennium into a universe almost unimaginably rich in resources. Her horizons will stretch as wide as the world itself. At the flick of a switch, energy accumulated over eons in the earth's crust will provide the child with an extraordinary array of services and conveniences.

With the tap of a computer key, the accumulated knowledge of the world's libraries can be at her fingertips. At a very young age, she will be able to exchange messages, play games and make friends with children, thousands of miles away.

Meanwhile, advances in medical science are rapidly increasing the prospects for human longevity. If present trends continue, it is estimated that some 70,000 children who are born in the United States in the first year of the 21st century, will be around to see the dawning of the 22nd.

But along with technological advances and material prosperity, it is possible that social isolation and emotional insecurity may lie in her future. Divorce rates are increasing, overwork blights family life, human contact shrinks and the young, increasingly alienated, are treated more as consumers than as children.

The children born in the developing world, will probably not be isolated or lack human contact. In the village or shanty town most likely to be home, there will be plenty of children to play with, and plenty of relatives and neighbours to take an interest. The children will also, in most cases, be brought up in a religion that will provide spiritual strength.

With half the children of Africa already suffering from illness caused by unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation and a degraded environment, it is almost certain that constant bouts of preventable diseases

Children of a

will sap the child's overall health. His physical and mental developments are likely to be stunted by malnutrition — making it unlikely that the children of the new millennium will ever reach their full potential — in fact they may have a shorter lifespan ahead than 1999 global standards suggest.

A baby born in Malawi or Uganda, for example, is likely to live only half as long as the one born in Singapore or Sweden. And reaching her fifth birthday is far from a certainty: One child in three born in countries such as Niger or Sierra Leone, for example, perishes before that milestone.

The children of the new millennium will also find themselves in a world where the gap between rich and poor has never been so wide. The richest one fifth of humanity has 82 times the income of the poorest fifth — and consumes 86 per cent of the world's resources.

Material gaps do not just exist among nations — but also within them: The disparities cleave countries, even cities. A child born in an urban shanty town in Bangladesh is twice as likely to die before his first birthday as is an infant born elsewhere in the city. In many developing countries, the children of the relatively well-off benefit from publicly supported secondary and university education, while the poor lack even primary schools.

And huge disparities exist within industrialized countries as well. In Australia and the United Kingdom, for example, the richest one fifth have 10 times the wealth of the poorest.

Despite such inequities, if the children were assured of attaining their rights, they might be ready to take their chances, regardless of where they were born. Unfortunately, there is no such guarantee, especially for most poor children. The vital statistics of the destitution they face, are no

less appalling for all their familiarity.

Every year, nearly 12 million children under the age of five die needlessly — mainly from a handful of easily preventable childhood diseases.

More than half of all South Asian children of this age are severely or moderately under weight, while nearly half of all under-ones in sub-Saharan Africa are not immunized against common killer diseases.

Worldwide, 130 million children of primary school age — mostly girls — are not in the classroom, and thus denied the chance of a better future, while millions attend schools where little learning actually

takes place.

One quarter of children in developing countries who school cannot stay long enough to ensure lasting literacy. 250 million are being robbed of their childhood because they are trapped in child labour.

The children of tomorrow will be particularly disadvantaged if they are into a minority ethnic group, a category that includes thirds of the poorest children in the United States. Indigenous people are on average almost three times more likely to be extremely poor than non-indigenous people.

If the baby is a girl, she



Lesser god



brother of being taken out — either to save her family the cost of schooling or because she is needed to work at home.

Like 2 million other girls each year, the girl children may suffer the pain and humiliation of genital mutilation. Or, as in some cultures, they will be brought up to believe that they do not belong at home but to the family of some as yet unknown husband. Married off in their early teens, they will probably be pregnant before their bodies are fully ready to carry a child — becoming a mother before they are women.

The results can be devastating. More than half of all women in Africa and about a third in Latin America, give birth in their teens, and they are twice as likely as adults to die in childbirth — and their children are more likely to be born underweight.

Low birthweight is a clear example — a sensitive indicator of the health of both mother and baby, and one of the prime signs of a troubled life ahead for a child.

About one in every five babies in developing countries, starts life at less than 2.5 kg, mainly because of the mother's poor nutritional status. A low-birthweight baby is more likely to die in infancy or early childhood. If the infant survives, he is likely to suffer more illnesses, to be malnourished, to fail to reach his physical and intellectual potential and to have long-term disabilities. Increasing evidence shows that a low-birthweight child will be prone to diabetes, hypertension and heart disease in adulthood.

Nearly 4 in every 10 children under the age of five in developing countries are stunted, their stature a symbol of their diminished potential. Because their capacity for learning is also reduced, they do less well at school, and later in life their productivity and earnings are generally lower than those of their better-nourished peers. And, like all malnourished children, they are more susceptible to disease.

Malnutrition makes children more likely to fall ill, and illness deepens their malnutrition; hunger and

disease feed off each other in a constant downward spiral. The wreckage of ruined lives and wasted bodies represents a denial of human rights as abhorrent as torture — and a devastating handicap for a country's economic development.

Every minute, a woman somewhere dies from pregnancy-related causes or in childbirth — almost 600,000 a year. Nearly all of these deaths occur in developing countries. More than 1 million children are orphaned in this way each year, and they are more likely to die within a few years than those whose mothers survive.

Much will depend on whether the child is breast-fed, because exclusive breast-feeding for the first six months greatly enhances a child's prospects of surviving and thriving, and speeds cognitive development.

The new millennium children's future will also much brighter if their mothers have received some education. The children will be less likely to die in infancy, will grow up healthier and better fed and will be more likely to start and to stay in school.

Indeed, increased schooling for girls sends benefits cascading through societies and economies. As more girls are educated, and for longer periods, their confidence and empowerment will rise, and infant mortality and population growth will fall — all of this a boon to life expectancy and overall economic growth.

Child rights are better recognized today than ever before — as evidenced by the nearly universal embrace of the convention on the Rights of the child, which has been ratified by every country in the world. And, child rights and concerns are now higher on many public agendas than ever before.

By acting now, as a matter of urgency, to secure these rights, we can all help improve the odds for the babies of this new century — and all the rest of the world's children.

But the clock is ticking. Before we know it, some 12 years from now, the dice will roll again for the 7 billionth baby.

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be worse off than a boy almost anywhere. She may receive less than her mother when food is

scarce, and she will be less likely to start school. If she is sent to the school, she will have a greater chance than her