



INTERNATIONAL  
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YOUTH**  
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OUR YEAR OUR VOICE

## *Dialogue and Mutual Understanding*

### Fact Sheet: Girls and Young Women

- There are 1.8 billion young people in the world. Approximately half of them – 900 million – are adolescent girls and young women.
- Girls' primary school completion rates are below 50 per cent in most poor countries.
- Pregnancy- and childbirth-related complications are the number-one killers of girls aged 15 to 19 worldwide.
- One in seven girls in developing countries is married before age 15, and 38 per cent are married before age 18.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, more women than men are living with HIV, and young women aged 15–24 years are as much as eight times more likely than men to be HIV positive.
- Women and girls make up 80 per cent of the estimated 800,000 people trafficked across national borders annually<sup>1</sup> with the majority (79 per cent) trafficked for sexual exploitation.

There are 1.8 billion young people in the world and the majority live in developing countries. They are the largest generation of youth in history. Approximately half of them – 900 million – are adolescent girls and young women.

These girls and young women possess huge untapped potential. When educated, healthy, and equipped with the right skills and opportunities, they hold the key to unlocking many of the world's most pressing problems: reducing poverty, advancing gender equality, catalyzing countries' social and economic development, halting the spread of HIV, reducing maternal mortality, and ending violence against women, among many others. As educated mothers, they will invest in the survival, education and success of the next generation. As leaders of today and tomorrow, they can be a force for social change

Yet despite their potential the most marginalized, vulnerable and hard-to-reach adolescent girls are often invisible. They are not prioritized in many development programmes. Many youth-serving programmes tend to benefit older, educated, urban, and largely male youth. Not only is investing in girls and young women a human rights imperative, but it is one of the smartest investments any country can make.





## Key Challenges:

Adolescent girls, many of the verge of adulthood, face many challenges. They are discriminated against as females, and consequently face diminished opportunities and choices. They are often poorly educated, subject to serious health risks, and threatened by violence. Their views and concerns are often unheard.

Girls' primary school completion rates are below 50 per cent in most poor countries.<sup>ii</sup> The current picture for secondary school completion is bleak: in 19 African countries, secondary school completion rate for adolescent girls is below 5 per cent.<sup>iii</sup> Even if girls are in school, they are the first to leave when needed for domestic chores or to be caregivers, and are often forced to leave due to child marriage or pregnancy.<sup>iv</sup>

Gender-based discrimination in the labour market, traditional practices, fewer opportunities and the lower value placed on women's economic contributions all leave young women with higher rates of unemployment or tied to traditionally unpaid, family-based work.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, youth unemployment rates have proven more sensitive to economic shocks than adult rates, and young women have more difficulty than young men in finding work. When young women do find work, it is often lower paid and in the informal economy, in unprotected, low-skilled jobs.<sup>vi</sup> Many countries that have improved education for girls and young women also need to focus on school-to-work transitions. While gender gaps in youth participation rates have narrowed over the past decade, they remain wide in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

Gender inequality and discrimination are key determinants of health status. Each year approximately 16 million adolescent girls give birth, the majority of which occur among married girls in developing countries. Pregnancy- and childbirth-related complications are the number-one killers of girls aged 15 to 19.<sup>vii</sup> Physically immature and often with few resources, the youngest, first-time mothers are most at risk. Obstetric fistula, a devastating childbirth injury, affects an estimated 2-4 million girls and women in the world, and about half of the cases are among first-time mothers.<sup>viii</sup> Moreover, babies born to adolescent mothers face greater risks than those with older mothers: stillbirth and death are 50 per cent more likely for babies with mothers under age 20 than those with mothers 20 to 29 years old.<sup>ix</sup>

Child marriage is a health issue as well as a human rights violation. Many young brides face poverty, ill health, abuse, unprotected sex carrying the risk of HIV, frequent pregnancies, an end to education and few positive life options.<sup>x</sup> The number of child brides in the world is significant: one in seven girls in developing countries is married before age 15, and 38 per cent are married before age 18. If present trends continue, 100 million girls will marry over the next decade, equaling 25,000 girls married every day for the next 10 years.<sup>xi</sup>





Slightly more than half of all people living with HIV are women and girls. In sub-Saharan Africa, more women than men are living with HIV, and young women aged 15–24 years are as much as eight times more likely than men to be HIV positive.<sup>xii</sup>

Across all economic strata, many adolescent girls and young women worldwide live under the constant threat of violence and abuse. Globally up to 50 per cent of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16.<sup>xiii</sup> Up to 1 in 5 girls under the age of 15 experience sexual abuse.<sup>xiv</sup> While 30 per cent of women report that their first sexual experience as being forced, the percentage is even higher among those who were under 15 at the time of sexual initiation.<sup>xv</sup>

Many young women are trapped in sexual slavery: women and girls make up 80 per cent of the estimated 800,000 people trafficked across national borders annually<sup>xvi</sup> with the majority (79 per cent) trafficked for sexual exploitation.<sup>xvii</sup>

Millions of girls are the victims of harmful practices that may deprive them of the right to education, the right to life and physical integrity and the right to the highest attainable standard of health. Approximately 100 to 140 million girls and women in the world have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting, with more than 3 million girls in Africa annually at risk of the practice.<sup>xviii</sup> The practice increases the risks of obstructed labour, childbirth complications, newborn deaths, postpartum bleeding, infections and maternal mortality.<sup>xix</sup>

### Key Opportunities

Despite the inequities girls and young women face, protecting and fulfilling their rights has a positive catalytic effect on societies as a whole, promotes gender equality, and contributes to poverty reduction. For example:

- When women and girls over 16 earn income, they reinvest 90 per cent of it in their families, as compared to men who invest only 30 to 40 per cent.<sup>xx</sup>
- Each year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 10 to 20 per cent. An extra year of secondary school: 15 to 25 per cent).<sup>xxi</sup>
- A World Bank study of 100 countries found that every 1 per cent increase in the proportion of women with secondary education boosts a country's annual per capita income growth rate by about 0.3 percentage points.<sup>xxii</sup>
- Young women who are educated are better able to delay childbearing and to ensure the health and education of their children.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- Each extra year of a mother's schooling cuts infant mortality by between 5 and 10 per cent.<sup>xxiv</sup>





- Educated women are more likely to resist abuses such as domestic violence, harmful practices such as female genital cutting, and discrimination at home, in society or the workplace.<sup>xxv</sup>

## The United Nations' System Approach

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) together provide a legal framework and a comprehensive set of measures for the promotion and protection of human rights throughout a woman's lifetime. In addition, the CRC and CEDAW are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

The international community has also adopted a number of agreements or declarations that refer to adolescent girls and that set forth strategic objectives and actions. The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 and the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 are international consensus agreements that strongly support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

In 1995, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), a blueprint for action that covers 10 priority areas, with five new priority areas added in 2007. *Girls and young women* is one of the original 10 areas of the Programme of Action. Investing in one area of the WPAY affects other areas of the Programme of Action, thereby creating a multiplier effect in the lives of young people and their communities. Many countries have established youth policies. Within this process, it is imperative to note that the WPAY mentions that governments and youth organizations should promote an “active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes.”

## Unleashing Girls' Power and Potential: The UN Adolescent Girls Task Force

Recognizing the particularly complex situation of adolescent girls, the UN Adolescent Girls Task Force (chaired by UNFPA and UNICEF, and includes ILO, UNESCO, UNHCR, UN Women and WHO) launched a joint initiative to advance the rights of adolescent girls, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized. It works with governments, civil society, and communities to deliver high-impact policies and programmes that:

1. **Educate adolescent girls:** Ensure that adolescent girls have access to quality education and complete schooling, focusing on their transition from primary to post-primary education and training, including secondary education, and pathways between formal and non-formal systems.





2. **Improve adolescent girls' health:** Ensure that adolescent girls have access to age-appropriate health and nutrition information and services, including life skills-based sexuality education, HIV prevention, and sexual and reproductive health.
3. **Keep adolescent girls free from violence:** Prevent and protect girls from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation, and ensure that girls who experience violence receive prompt services and access to justice. Specific attention will be paid to girls in displacement, as they are increasingly prone to abuse.
4. **Promote adolescent girl leaders:** Ensure that adolescent girls gain essential economic and social skills and are supported by mentors and resources to enable them to participate in community life.
5. **Count adolescent girls:** Work with partners to collect, analyze, and use data on adolescent girls to advocate for, develop and monitor evidence-based policies and programmes that advance their well-being and realize their human rights.

#### For further information:

- [www.un.org/youth](http://www.un.org/youth)
- <http://www.ungei.org>
- <http://www.unfpa.org/adolescents/>
- UN Joint Statement on Adolescent Girls
- [http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/news/2010/joint\\_statement\\_adolescentgirls.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/news/2010/joint_statement_adolescentgirls.pdf)
- UN Adolescent Girls Task Force (2009) Girl Power and Potential: A joint programming framework for fulfilling the rights of the marginalized adolescent girls.
- <http://www.unicef.org/adolescence/files/FINAL-UNJointFramewokrpdf.pdf>
- Population Council and UNFPA. The Adolescent Experience In-Depth: Using Data to Identify and Reach the Most Vulnerable Young People  
[http://www.unfpa.org/youth/dhs\\_adolescent\\_guides.html](http://www.unfpa.org/youth/dhs_adolescent_guides.html)
- UNICEF Report Beijing+15: Bringing Girls into Focus, March 2010
- [http://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Beijing\\_plus\\_15\\_Bringing\\_Girls\\_Into\\_Focus\\_2010.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Beijing_plus_15_Bringing_Girls_Into_Focus_2010.pdf)
- <http://www.endvawnow.org>





- <sup>i</sup> U.S. Department of State. 2008. [Trafficking in Persons Report June 2008](#): 7. Office of Undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs and Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>ii</sup> Lloyd, Cynthia, Population Council (2009). *New Lessons: The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls*.
- <sup>iii</sup> Lloyd, Cynthia (2009).
- <sup>iv</sup> UNESCO, (2004): “Who are Excluded and Why?”
- <sup>v</sup> ILO Brief: *Youth Employment: Breaking Gender Barriers for Young Women and Men*.
- <sup>vi</sup> ILO (2010): *Global Employment Trends for Youth* [http://www.ilo.org/empelm/what/lang--en/WCMS\\_114243/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/empelm/what/lang--en/WCMS_114243/index.htm)
- <sup>vii</sup> Temin, Miriam and Levine, R. (2010). *Start with a Girl: a New Agenda for Global Health*. UNFPA (2007). *Giving Girls Today and Tomorrow: Breaking the Cycle of Adolescent Pregnancy*. New York.
- <sup>viii</sup> [www.endfistula.org](http://www.endfistula.org)
- <sup>ix</sup> Temin, Miriam and Levine, Ruth (2010).
- <sup>x</sup> UNFPA (2007).
- <sup>xi</sup> <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>
- <sup>xii</sup> UNAIDS (2010). Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic.
- <sup>xiii</sup> [http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/FactsheetAdolescent\\_Aug2010\\_en.pdf.pdf](http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/FactsheetAdolescent_Aug2010_en.pdf.pdf).
- <sup>xiv</sup> WHO.(2005): *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes and Women’s Responses* (p. 49)
- <sup>xv</sup> WHO. 2005. *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women*. WHO, Geneva (p.52).
- <sup>xvi</sup> U.S. Department of State. 2008. [Trafficking in Persons Report June 2008](#): 7. Office of Undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs and Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>xvii</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). 2009. [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#). UNODC, Vienna (p.11).U.S. Department of State. 2008. [Trafficking in Persons Report June 2008](#): 7. Office of Undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs and Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>xviii</sup> UNFPA (2007). Global Consultation on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Technical Report. UNFPA: NY.
- <sup>xix</sup> WHO Study Group on Female Genital Mutilation and Obstetric Outcome. 2006. “Female Genital Mutilation and Obstetric Outcome: WHO Collaborative Prospective Study in Six African Countries”. *The Lancet*, Vol 367: Issue 9525, 1835-1841; and WHO. May 2008. *Female Genital Mutilation-Fact Sheet No. 241*. WHO, Geneva.
- <sup>xx</sup> Nike Foundation (2009) *The Girl Effect: Not Just about Girls: Engaging Men and Boys is Key to Girls’ Ability to Achieve their Full Potential*.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Psacharopoulos, G. et al. “Returns to Investment in Education: A further Update. Policy Research Working Paper 2881 (Washington, DC: World Bank 2002).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Herz, B. And Sperling G. (2004). *What Works in Girls’ Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World*. Council on Foreign Relations: New York
- <sup>xxiii</sup> UNFPA (2007).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Herz, B. And Sperling G. (2004)..
- <sup>xxv</sup> UNICEF (2007). *Women and Children: the Double Dividend of Gender Equality*. The State of the World’s Children.

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