



5 GAME-CHANGING SOLUTIONS WITH AND FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS: A PARTNERSHIP BRIEF

The Future Depends on Adolescent Girls

Today, an unprecedented six hundred million adolescent girls (ages 10 to 19) are coming of age. These extraordinary girls demonstrate tremendous promise and potential. In some contexts, their options will be limitless. But in others, their prospects for the future will be severely limited simply by virtue of being born a girl. These girls will have to navigate the perils of pervasive gender inequalities that will put them at risk of life-threatening health emergencies, child marriage, early pregnancies, partner violence, and deprivation.

The future for these young girls is not yet written. **There is a critical window of time to act** – to change the trajectory of their lives and foster broader societal progress. The research is unequivocal: When girls are valued by society, they realize their full potential, their families grow stronger, communities thrive, and economies prosper.¹

There have been some modest gains for adolescent girls, but incremental progress is simply not enough – and in some issues and regions, like maternal mortality, we are losing ground.²³ The world must conspire to do more, do it faster, and do it in partnership to unleash the true power and potential of girls.

The Path to Opportunity for Adolescent Girls

UNICEF's commitment to improve the lives of adolescent girls is core to its mission. The Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy⁴ – developed with and for girls – is a blueprint that details how we will accelerate action against the vision outlined in UNICEF's Strategic Plan, Gender Policy, and Gender Action Plan – all of which are grounded in a commitment to a gender equal world.⁵ UNICEF seeks to build a **coalition of partners** committed to accelerating positive results for adolescent girls and safeguarding their futures. This pathway is described in 5 solutions that draw from the voices of adolescent girls the world over and provide a clear pathway to transforming the lives of girls rooted in partnerships – governments, civil society, the private sector, and the many girls' and women's organizations that have secured hard-fought gains for women and girls. They include programmes to promote adolescent girls' health, nutrition, learning, and skills-building and protect against violence and harmful practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).

1 UNICEF. (2024). [Adolescent girls: The investment case.](#)

2 WHO. (2023). [Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2020 from UNICEF, UNFPA, the World Bank Group, & UNDESA/ Population Division.](#)

3 Rumble, L., Petroni, S., Graham Goulder, R., Pandolfelli, L. (2024). [Adolescent girls and the SDGs: Acting at the midpoint milestone.](#) *Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, 8(3).

4 UNICEF. (2022). [Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy.](#)

5 UNICEF. (2021). [Gender Policy and Action Plan.](#)

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For Every Girl...health services that protect against cervical cancer, HIV, and maternal mortality

During girls' lifetimes, few, if any, in developing countries receive health services. The failure to meet their most basic health needs often results in life-threatening diseases and illnesses that could have been avoided. Research shows that investments in improving adolescents' physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health can yield economic and social returns of up to 10 times their cost – making them one of the best investments possible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.⁶

Together with partners, UNICEF aims to galvanise action on urgent interventions that can yield life-saving results for girls, including protection against cervical cancer through the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which reduces the risk of girls developing cervical cancer by almost 90%⁷; protection and treatment for HIV, which disproportionately affects young girls who make up 90% of new infections among adolescents protection and treatment for HIV⁸; and maternal mortality, which threatens the health and welfare of an estimated 21 million young girls (15-19) who become pregnant every year across low- and middle-income countries - at least half of those pregnancies are not intended.⁹



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Programme Investments:

- Increase the demand and uptake for HPV vaccination programmes through increased supply and links to girl-centred health services, with a focus on the most marginalized
- Prevent new HIV infections and improve access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including quality, respectful maternal newborn care for pregnant adolescent girls
- Expand access to reliable and age-appropriate information about girls' health, bodies, and well-being tailored to their specific needs

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For Every Girl... a life free from malnutrition and anaemia

The scale and consequences of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and anaemia in adolescent girls are being overlooked.¹⁰ Globally, 49 million adolescent girls aged 10-19 suffer from being underweight due to inadequate access to food and the nutrients that help them grow and thrive. Thirty percent of adolescent girls aged 15-19 – 100 million girls – suffer from anaemia, a form of malnutrition. Persistent malnutrition exacerbates gender inequalities and has profound consequences on health and education outcomes, as well as wage-earning potential. Eliminating anaemia, as well as addressing undernutrition and the growing challenges of girls' obesity, will save hundreds of thousands of lives and has the potential to increase economic productivity by up to 17 percent.¹¹

Programme Investments:

- Education and counselling for improved nutrition and dietary practices coupled with school food environments that promote good nutrition and discourage unhealthy foods
- Micronutrient supplementation with iron and folic acid or multiple micronutrients for the prevention of iron deficiency and anaemia
- Deworming treatments and malaria control measures for the prevention of worm infestation, malaria infection, and other contributors of anaemia

6 Sheenan, P., Sweeny, K., Rasmussen, B., Wils, A., et al. (2014). *Foundations for sustainable development: A case for global investment in the capabilities of adolescents*. *The Lancet*, 390 (1014)

7 UNICEF. (2023). *Closing the Gap: UNICEF Bolsters Country Efforts to increase HPV Vaccination*.

8 UNICEF. (2024). Available online at: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/hiv/aids/global-regional-trends/>

9 UNFPA. (2022). *Motherhood in Childhood: An untold story*.

10 UNICEF. (2023). *Undernourished and Overlooked: A global nutrition crisis in adolescent girls and women*

11 Larsen, B., Hoddinott, J., & Razvi, S. (2023). Investing in Nutrition: A Global Best Investment Case. *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*, 1-20.

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For Every Girl... a quality, education that provides learning, relevant skills, and agency to chart her own course

Despite major gains in girls' primary and secondary education over the last two decades, a learning crisis for girls still exists – particularly when girls reach secondary school age and pressures to earn an income, start a family, or work at home may take priority. Research estimates that investments of \$1.53 per day per girl to achieve universal secondary school completion can help developing economies expand their GDP by an average of 10 percent by the year 2030.¹² A quality education with access to relevant skills opens the doors for adolescent girls to exercise agency and be confident about their futures.

Programme Investments:

Promote adolescent girls' access to skills and learning opportunities through multiple pathways, including:

- Expand access to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), vocational and financial skills, green skills, mental health literacy, and socio-emotional skills;
- Promote access to services such as safe and dignified water, sanitation and hygiene, including menstrual health and hygiene services, to enable access, and content on gender equality in learning spaces
- Increase access to digital devices, literacy and skills to address the gender digital divide for girls

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For Every Girl... safety and freedom from violence and harmful practices

Gender-based violence and harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriages and unions disproportionately affect girls and women. Violence is pervasive across many societies and cuts across all aspects of girls' lives. Norms accepting violence are pervasive: more than a third of adolescents aged 15–19 years believe that intimate partner violence is acceptable.¹³ Evidence shows that well-designed parenting programmes can contribute to a range of positive outcomes, including the reduction of violence against girls, boys and women.¹⁴



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Programme Investments:

- Scale up the availability and quality of quality gender-based violence mitigation, prevention, and response services
- Support evidence-based parenting and caregiver programmes that promote gender equality and tackle violence against girls and women
- Promote community-based and peer education programmes that engage male champions and tackle discriminatory gender norms
- Expand programme and policy actions to prevent harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM

¹² Citi Global Insights & Plan International (2020). The case for holistic investment in girls.

¹³ Updated information about the situation of adolescent girls by region and country is available online at: <https://data.unicef.org/adp/>

¹⁴ UNICEF. (2024). [How parenting programs can reduce violence against children and women.](#)

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For Every Girl... economic support to expand opportunities and the power to determine her future

Removing barriers for adolescent girls – whether it is expanding access to health services and education or protecting them against violence – are critical precursors to creating long-term economic opportunities for them later in life. Research has shown that economic support - both financial resources and in-kind support - can reduce specific risks in adolescent girls. Social protection measures like cash transfers, maternity grants, and childcare designed with the unique needs of adolescent girls in mind, are an important element of achieving their health, education, and well-being.

Programme Investments:

- Promote cash transfers and financial support to remove barriers to education, such as transport, uniforms, learning materials
- Link girls to services, such as access to care and sexual and reproductive health services, including menstrual hygiene products
- Support communities to build climate resilience so that girls at home don't bear the brunt of weather-related crises
- Promote policies and interventions that support girls to access childcare, especially for adolescent mothers and caregivers
- Advance domestic financing and resourcing for adolescent girls
- Expand opportunities for girls to benefit from financial inclusion and skills-building

Across every area, partnerships with girls' and women's rights organizations centring girls' voice, agency, and leadership must be a central strategy

Essential services for girls and women have sometimes been seen as distinct issues separate from the important work of feminist movements. This is a mistake. From national policies on domestic violence, to provision of menstrual hygiene products in schools, to community groups challenging a planned child marriage, inter-generational feminist movements are a major driver of change. The roadmap to opportunity must be supported by smart investments in scalable programmes, girl-centred services, and funds for girl-led and girl-focused movements, networks, and organizations.

Powerful Girls Make Powerful Change

Girls around world aren't waiting for change – they are inspiring it. They are challenging injustices, defying cultural norms, demanding action, and giving voice to some of the greatest challenges of this generation. Time and time again they are demonstrating to all the world that girls are not the problem – they are the solution. The young girls leading calls for change cannot be the exception. If the world wants to see powerful change, it must invest in powerful girls.

2025 HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Scale up an ambitious multi-pronged agenda on girl-centred adolescent health to reach 98 million girls – with a special focus on HPV+, HIV services, maternal-newborn care, and access to information girls need
- ✓ Support at least 100 million adolescent girls with gender-responsive programmes for the prevention of anaemia and all forms of malnutrition
- ✓ Reach 26 million adolescent girls with an ambitious agenda to support girls' learning, skills-building, and voice
- ✓ Educate and inform 2 million parents and girls to help prevent gender-based violence among girls
- ✓ Scale up cash transfers and care programming and child marriage interventions for 137.4 million adolescent girls