

Building Back Equal, With and For Adolescent Girls: A Programme Strategy for UNICEF 2022-2025





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Executive Summary

"I am glad to be a girl because when girls are given the chance, we will fight for our rights and pass on what we have learned to other girls who are facing the same situations."

*Zahara, 16 years old,
Uganda*



Adolescent girls around the world are speaking up and leading change toward a more gender equal world.¹ But while girls stand ready to help shape our collective future, a myriad of concurrent and interlinked crises and barriers stand in their way. As the global community looks to "build back equal," we have a unique opportunity to overcome these challenges, and to give adolescent girls the freedom and power they need to lead and thrive.

UNICEF made several ambitious commitments in 2021 that will, with appropriate follow-through, help the world act on what may otherwise be a fleeting opportunity to achieve these aims. By adopting its most progressive and forward-looking Strategic Plan, Gender Policy, and Gender Action Plan (GAP) to date, UNICEF is committed to advancing bold, transformative change for a more gender equal world.

These plans, which are grounded in numerous normative frameworks and intended to support the

¹ The UN defines adolescent girls as those aged 10-19. While girls in this age group are the primary focus of this strategy, some programmes may benefit from also targeting and/or including girls under age 10 or young women over age 19.

achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, recognise that, to achieve success, gender equality must be integrated into **all** of UNICEF's operations and programmatic work. At the same time, the plans commit the agency to undertaking transformative actions that place the rights, wellbeing, and leadership of adolescent girls at the very core of what we do. They call for specific and targeted actions that promote adolescent girls' health, nutrition, learning, and skills, as well as protection against violence, exploitation, abuse, and harmful practices.

This Programme Strategy outlines just how UNICEF will advance such programming. With an aim of supporting adolescent girls to achieve their full potential, it articulates a plan for accelerated programming - with and for adolescent girls - that leverages UNICEF's existing work and comparative advantage to promote more multisectoral, context-specific, girl-driven, rights-based support that meets adolescent girls' diverse and overlapping needs. It is intended to guide UNICEF's actions across the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus, reflecting the wide range of programmatic and technical work that UNICEF is engaged in with partners in more than 190 countries and territories.

The GAP (2022-2025) recognises that harmful social norms, including discriminatory norms related to age and gender, often stand in the way of adolescent girls' empowerment and wellbeing.² This strategy situates UNICEF's work with and for adolescent girls in this context, by addressing the critical importance of dismantling the very power structures, institutions, and dynamics that hold adolescent girls back.

To this end, in implementing this strategy, UNICEF will use its global reach and partnerships with governments, civil society, women- and girl-led organisations, the private sector, and more, to help create and strengthen opportunities for adolescent girls to participate in decisions and lead the changes and actions they seek, through a range of transformative approaches.

While UNICEF has long prioritised the needs of adolescent girls, these investments have been insufficient to effect the change we want to see. This strategy aims to propel us forward.

² For more on how UNICEF defines empowerment and other terms used in this strategy, see [UNICEF's Technical Note Adolescent Empowerment](#)

“UNICEF will promote girls' leadership, voice and agency... as a catalyst for their inclusion and participation across all sectors and contexts.” – UNICEF GAP, 2022-2025



Building on the GAP (2022-2025), this strategy presents the case for investing even more deeply in adolescent girls, with an eye toward financing, as well as to expanding political will and context-relevant approaches that harness the power of UNICEF's multi-sectoral and rights-based mandate. It looks at some of the many challenges adolescent girls face today, and explains why UNICEF, alongside its partners, is well-positioned to support adolescent girls

to overcome these barriers. It references the economic case for such investment; provides highlights of UNICEF's past and present work to advance the rights and wellbeing of adolescent girls; describes opportunities for more integrated programmatic action; and lays out a theory of change to guide our efforts. Drawing from the more expansive agenda described in the GAP, this strategy focuses on three intersecting areas:



1 Promoting adolescent girls' health and nutrition, including mental health; sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); prevention, care, and treatment of HIV and AIDS; and access to quality menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) information and services.

2 Advancing adolescent girls' right to quality education and to relevant learning and skills, including through skills building, mentoring, and coaching opportunities – in and out of schools - to help adolescent girls transition to a world of safe, satisfying, and equitable work.

3 Protecting every adolescent girl from violence, exploitation, and abuse – online and offline – and preventing harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage and early unions.

Across the world, UNICEF is actively promoting adolescent girls' wellbeing and leadership. With this strategy, and with greater intensity in target countries, UNICEF and partners will build on this momentum, heightening investments in adolescent girls to accelerate progress. This added leadership and resources, along with bolder targets, will result in more holistic, integrated programming, with and for adolescent girls.

Data and evidence will be critical in allowing us to document, measure, and share stories of success, as well as to assess impact. To this end, UNICEF will publish annually, for each of the target countries, a country-level *Adolescent Girl Scorecard* that provides a profile of adolescent girls and enables the tracking of changes across the programmatic pillars over time.

To implement this strategy successfully, UNICEF will require US\$50 million over a three-year period. With this funding, and together with partners, **by**

2025, 30 countries will support programming that directly impacts 20 million adolescent girls.

In these countries, we will see adolescent girls have expanded access to the services and support they identify and need, in environments that support them. Adolescent girls will understand their rights; have the skills, power, voice, leadership, and agency to make informed decisions about their lives; and be able to participate more meaningfully in the world around them and achieve their potential.

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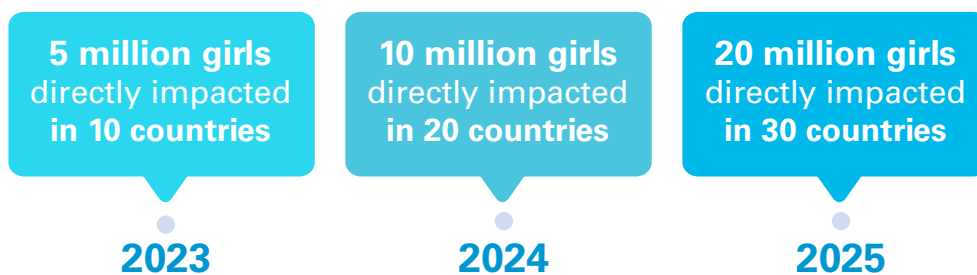


Figure 1. Building back equal: A vision for scaled-up, integrated programming with and for adolescent girls by 2025

Why Adolescent Girls? Why Now?

Adolescent girls around the world are demanding their voices be heard, their aspirations supported, and their rights met. Yet, as described in the box below, adolescent girls in almost every context face tremendous barriers to accessing the information, services, and support they need to achieve these aims.³ These constraints deny them the ability to make informed decisions and choices for themselves, to care for their health and bodily autonomy, and to be treated as equals. Adolescent girls continue to face greater risks of sexual violence and its wide-ranging consequences, and are significantly more likely to marry before the age of 18, than their male peers.⁴ Indeed, violence is a major threat for girls, cutting across all aspects of their lives. One in three adolescent girls is at risk of violence by a partner, and married girls are especially at risk. Such violence is pervasive and accepted, including by young people themselves, with a third of adolescents aged 15-19 worldwide believing domestic violence is justified.⁵

Adolescent girls' health remains a huge challenge. In the 35 HIV-priority countries where UNICEF works, adolescent girls account for four-fifths of all

new HIV infections among adolescents, highlighting the persistent power imbalances girls continue to confront. Adolescent pregnancy remains one of the leading causes of death and disability for adolescent girls, particularly those living in the least developed countries. UNICEF and others are increasingly aware of the significant burdens that poor mental health, including anxiety and depressive disorders, pose for adolescent girls worldwide. Almost half of adolescent girls in UNICEF programme countries are anaemic and cannot access the health and nutrition support they need should they become pregnant. Further, reproductive health and maternal care services are insufficiently adolescent-friendly, rarely providing comprehensive screenings or targeted support for pregnant adolescent girls and adolescent mothers, such as around mental health and the violence they may face.

While formidable gains have been made in primary education for girls, and while some countries have made tremendous strides toward improving gender parity in both secondary school enrolment and learning outcomes for adolescent girls, such parity is neither widespread nor does it reflect the fact that far too many adolescent girls *and* boys drop out by upper secondary levels.⁶ Adolescent girls continue to face a gender digital divide,⁷ and are also not learning the skills they need to transition to satisfying, well-paid work on an equal basis with boys.

3 While we present evidence here to illustrate just some of the inequalities faced by the world's 600 million adolescent girls, it is critical to understand that this is far from a homogenous group. There is a wide diversity within this cohort, with adolescent girls distinguished by age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, stage of development, ethnic and racial background, geographic location, migratory status, abilities and disabilities, socioeconomic status, and other life circumstances and factors.

4 UN Women, UNICEF, and Plan International. [A new era for girls? Taking stock of 25 years of progress for girls.](#) 2020.

5 UNICEF. [Attitudes and social norms on violence.](#) 2022.

6 Ciampi, L. & Ganguli, A. UNGEI. ["It's Not Girls Versus Boys, It's All Children Against Gender Inequality."](#) 2022.

7 UNICEF. [What we know about the gender digital divide for girls: A literature review.](#) 2021.

In addition, the gains that have been made to date – in education and other sectors - are in danger of being lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, adolescent girls' unique needs and priorities continue to be overlooked in public health and humanitarian crises – and the effects of climate change, the pandemic, and other crises may set girls even further off track, compromising efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, for example, an estimated 11 million girls may not go back to school, with adolescent girls at particular risk,⁸ and 10 million more girls may be forced into child marriage by the year 2030.⁹

8 UNESCO and the Global Education Coalition. [#LearningNeverStops](#). 2020.

9 UNICEF. [10 million additional girls at risk of child marriage due to COVID-19](#). 2021.

Underlying barriers confronting adolescent girls, such as those related to harmful norms, violence, poverty, long distances to school, and disability - already challenging before the pandemic - have been exacerbated during COVID-19 related school closures, social isolation, and economic upheaval. Overcoming these impediments will determine whether adolescent girls can embark on an upward trajectory of productive and fulfilled lives, or continue to be held back from fulfilling their potential.

Already, more than ever in history, adolescent girls are a leading voice of change and action. While the world grapples with COVID-19 and other concurrent

Key facts about adolescent girls⁴

- Globally, 15% of young women aged 20-24 became mothers before the age of 18.
- Almost double the number of adolescent girls 15 – 19 compared to boys are not in any form of education, employment, or training.
- Three-quarters of new HIV infections among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa occur among girls.
- In least developed countries, girls aged 10-14 are twice as likely as boys of the same age to spend 21 or more hours on household chores per week.
- An estimated 30% of adolescent girls are anaemic.
- Females represent less than 30% of the global Science, Technology, Education, Mathematics (STEM) workforce.
- Some 12 million girls each year become child brides, and an estimated 10 million additional girls are at risk of child marriage over the next ten years due to the impacts of COVID-19.
- Nearly 1 in 4 ever married/partnered adolescent girls aged 15-19 have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime.

The multiplier effect: the case for holistic investment in adolescent girls

crises such as climate change and humanitarian emergencies, girls around the world are speaking up for equality in their communities. They are drawing attention to ongoing systemic injustices and calling for institutions, including UNICEF, to embrace the opportunity to build back more equal. They are demanding collective action *against* sexual harassment and abuse, racial injustice, climate change, inequality, violence, stigma, and discrimination, and *for* a reimagined world, where every girl, boy, and child of diverse gender identity can fulfil their potential. They have been heard.

Adolescent girls' unrelenting determination and resilience must be matched by investments in

Equipped with the right resources and opportunities, the world's 600 million adolescent girls can become the largest generation of female leaders, entrepreneurs, and change-makers the world has ever seen.



integrated programmes that are truly transformative, and that promote both girls' wellbeing and leadership. Now is the time to accelerate actions to better support adolescent girls, wherever they are, with deliberate and integrated actions, and to include their voices in these efforts in safe and meaningful ways.

Lessons from UNICEF's work to date and other successful programmes show the potential to amplify adolescent girls' leadership through their meaningful engagement in programmes, whilst simultaneously improving health, nutrition, education, protection, and other outcomes.

These outcomes benefit girls and society in many ways. In addition to strengthening adolescent girls' agency, opportunity, resilience, and rights, investments in adolescent girls will reap economic and societal dividends for years to come.¹⁰ Indeed, the evidence is clear—investing in adolescent girls can yield high returns to girls, their families, and their communities and countries.¹¹

Research shows that every additional year of schooling for a girl increases her future earnings by

¹⁰ Citi Global Insights and Plan International. [The case for holistic investment in girls](#). 2020.

¹¹ See, for example, Sheehan et al: [The Economic Case for Investment in Adolescent Wellbeing](#). 2021.

A total investment of just US\$ 1.53 per day per girl in emerging economies would have a huge impact on countries' overall economic potential... For example, economies that achieve 100% secondary school completion rates for girls by 2030 could see their GDP being boosted by an average of 10%.



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Investing in adolescent girls produces long-term dividends for girls and their societies, such as:

- Delayed marriage and pregnancy
- Improved health, nutrition, and wellbeing for adolescent girls and their families
- Greater engagement of adolescent girls in decision-making at all levels
- Greater societal recognition of girls' rights
- More efficient health systems
- Decreased poverty
- Increased intergenerational prosperity
- Increased lifetime earnings
- Increased productivity
- Higher GDP
- More peaceful and equitable societies
- Equal access to services for all
- More lives saved

up to twenty per cent, for example.¹² On average, an educated girl will earn almost twice as much over her lifetime as a girl without schooling.¹³ She will have fewer children, and these children will be less likely to grow up stunted - physically or mentally. For these and other reasons, some studies have estimated that emerging economies could boost their GDP by an average of ten per cent by 2030 should they make secondary schooling universal for all girls.^{14,15}

Investments in sexual and reproductive health and rights, including for adolescent girls, can have tremendous economic and social returns too. Meeting the need for modern contraception and providing all pregnant girls, women, and newborns with quality care, for example, could reduce maternal deaths

¹² Wodon, Q., Montenegro, C., Nguyen, H., Onagoruwa, A. [Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls](#). World Bank, Washington, DC. 2018.

¹³ Deliver for Good Network: [The Investment Case for Girls & Women](#). No date.

¹⁴ Sheehan, P., Sweeny, K., Rasmussen, B., Wils, A., et al. [Building the foundations for sustainable development: A case for global investment in the capabilities of adolescents](#). *The Lancet*, 390 (1014).

¹⁵ Citi Global Insights and Plan International. 28 October 2020. [The case for holistic investment in girls](#).

by two-thirds, and newborn deaths by more than three-quarters.¹³

Advancing adolescent girls' nutrition pays off as well, with evidence indicating that eliminating anaemia, as well as addressing undernutrition and the growing challenges of obesity and overweight, could not only save hundreds of thousands of lives, it could also increase economic productivity by up to seventeen per cent.^{16,17}

Further, because health, nutrition, learning, and development during adolescence have implications that last throughout the life course, these returns can have widespread and lasting implications for individuals, families, communities, and economies for years to come.¹³

¹⁶ Shekar, M., Kakietek, J., Dayton Eberwein, J., Walters, D. [An Investment Framework for Nutrition: Reaching the Global Targets for Stunting, Anemia, Breastfeeding, and Wasting: Directions in Development--Human Development](#). Washington, DC: World Bank. 2017.

¹⁷ Horton, S., Ross, J., [The Economics of Iron Deficiency](#). *Food Policy*. 2003.

UNICEF's Current Work With and For Adolescent Girls

Adolescent girls are already a focus of UNICEF's mandate and programming. For just over a decade, UNICEF has explicitly emphasised the importance of advancing adolescent girls' rights in overarching policy frameworks and guidance, which has spurred programmatic action.

UNICEF's targeted priorities on adolescent girls' wellbeing and empowerment achieved notable results in the previous GAP (2018-2021), especially in the education and protection sectors. As of the end of 2021, UNICEF offices reported dedicated actions to support adolescent girls in 114 countries, totaling roughly US\$260 million. Girls' secondary education and skills (US\$54 million) and tackling gender-based violence (US\$50 million) were the most common areas for programmatic action.

In many contexts, UNICEF has been at the forefront of generating sex- and age-disaggregated data and evidence on adolescent girls, such as expanding the range of indicators collected through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). Further, the recently launched [UNICEF's Adolescent Data Portal](#), alongside UNICEF's [Gender Equality Data](#) hub, are powerful tools, featuring globally comparable indicators for adolescents across many of the same areas highlighted in this strategy. The utilisation



Highlighting Success

Between 2018-2021, UNICEF-supported programmes reached:

- 15 million girls with HIV testing
- 2.8 million girls with the final dose of the HPV vaccine
- Almost 60,000 schools with MHH services
- 23 million girls with skills training and development opportunities
- 7.6 million girls in 47 countries with interventions addressing child marriage
- 1.7 million girls with FGM prevention and care services

In 2021 alone:

- 40 million girls were reached with services to prevent anaemia and other forms of malnutrition
- 7.2 million girls across 125 countries participated in or led civic engagement activities through UNICEF-supported programmes

In addition:

- 18 countries introduced HPV into their national immunisation schedules
- 52 countries introduced gender-responsive teaching and learning systems
- 44 countries adopted national policies and action plans to end child marriage

of evidence produced from these resources can help UNICEF and others to overcome barriers to the development and implementation of quality, context-specific programming for adolescent girls.

In addition, several global and regional initiatives UNICEF has undertaken with other UN agencies, governments, and the private sector have led to the mobilisation of more coherent and concerted action to support adolescent girls. These include, for example, the [UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#), the [Skills4Girls Initiative](#), the multi-agency [Spotlight Initiative](#), and [Generation Unlimited](#).

Despite these efforts, however, most programmatic interventions have been limited to a single sector or thematic focus. As a result, they have failed to take advantage of UNICEF's vast reach and immense potential to provide adolescent girls with the multi-layered support they need to reflect their multi-faceted lives. The impacts of COVID-19 and other humanitarian crises around the world have also severely affected the delivery of the education, health, nutrition, and other information and services adolescent girls need to thrive.

Moreover, too few interventions tackle the underlying barriers that drive inequitable access to services for adolescent girls, and that perpetuate harmful and discriminatory norms that restrict adolescent girls from reaching their potential. Partnerships with girl- and women-led groups and networks must be a cornerstone of this work. Other strategies include social, behaviour, and norm change programming that directly engages men and boys as gender equality advocates and change agents, as well as supporting other efforts across the socio-ecological model, such as legislative and policy reforms and engagement with social and mass media platforms. At the heart of transformation must be centring girls' agency, voice, and leadership, including in programme design, delivery, and evaluation.

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The Case for Multisectoral Action

As adolescent girls' physical, mental, and social wellbeing are integrally interconnected and influenced by interrelated social, environmental, and economic factors, there is growing consensus on the need for programming that works across sectors to achieve broad and sustained outcomes. Evidence, as well as logic, suggests that approaches that engage different sectors and stakeholders collectively are likely better able to tackle the varied determinants of adolescent health and wellbeing through leveraging different expertise, knowledge, skills, and resources.¹⁸

Similarly, harmful social norms and prevailing cultural values, including discriminatory norms specific to age and gender, often impede adolescent girls' ability to act on their potential. Any commitment to support adolescent girls therefore requires efforts to transform the structures, institutions, and dynamics

that reinforce and perpetuate inequality, and that can support and accelerate positive outcomes.¹⁹

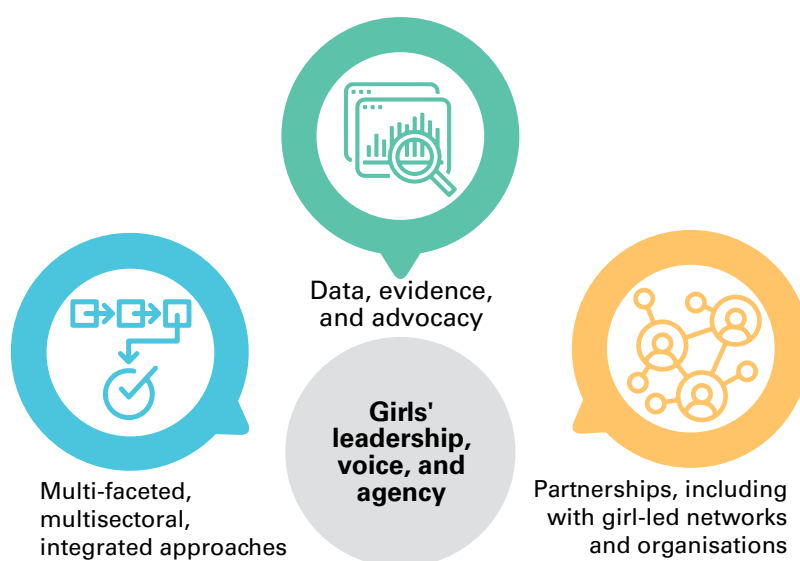
Yet, as noted above, narrowly focused mandates, inflexible funding, and an overall paucity of multisectoral programming expertise continue to beleague well-intentioned programme design for adolescent girls. Only a handful of funders have made adolescent girls a priority, limiting the reach of scalable and sustainable programmes. Despite demonstrating positive results, most adolescent girl-focused programmes have not reached national scale. Few programmes are generating multiple outcomes for adolescent girls that are transformative, such as improved self-efficacy, employability, voice, leadership, and agency. Where some investments have been made, accompanying research and rigorous evaluations are only just emerging. UNICEF, too, has not always been able to prioritise comprehensive and holistic programmes with and for adolescent girls.

This strategy aims to break down sectoral barriers and silos to effect the changes that adolescent girls need.

¹⁸ Efevbera, Y., Haj-Ahmed, J., Lai, J., Hainsworth, G., et al. [Multi-sectoral Programming for Adolescent Health and Well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa-Insights From a Symposium Hosted by UNICEF and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#). 2020.

¹⁹ UNICEF. [Technical Note Adolescent Empowerment](#). No date.

UNICEF Must Act Now to Support Integrated Programming With and For Adolescent Girls



UNICEF is a leading force for adolescent girls in the multilateral system. Working across diverse contexts, UNICEF has the potential to leverage change at scale in different types of settings and communities across the globe. It is time for UNICEF to step up - to act more boldly and comprehensively than ever before to achieve the many commitments it has made to protect and advance the rights and wellbeing of adolescent girls.

That is the aim of this strategy. It sets forth a framework for ambitious action that leverages UNICEF's experience, partnerships, advocacy, and global reach, along with dedicated resourcing and renewed commitment, to advance truly transformative, multisectoral, integrated, and adolescent girl-focused programming.

With adolescent girls' rights, leadership, voice, and agency at the core, UNICEF will employ the following inter-connected and integrated approaches to advance its work with and for adolescent girls:

1 Centring adolescent girls' voice, agency, and leadership in effectuating change

UNICEF is committed to promoting every adolescent girl's right to envision and pursue their own goals and to have the opportunity to impact positively on their lives and their communities. In practice, this means enabling adolescent girls to acquire skills such as critical awareness, problem solving, employability, and decision-making to help navigate the world around them, build self-efficacy, and improve their knowledge and capacity to make informed decisions about their lives. It also means engaging adolescent girls meaningfully and safely in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programmes and policies.

In addition to stand-alone activities to promote adolescent girls' leadership and agency as ends in their own right, this strategy calls for incorporating this important work throughout and within all activities as a means to achieve broader results.

2 Promoting multi-faceted, multisectoral, integrated approaches

Programmatically, UNICEF leadership at all levels – global, regional, and country – will work to promote and accelerate results for adolescent girls across three key pillars: i) *Health and nutrition*, including SRHR, adolescent pregnancy support and care, MHH, anaemia prevention, mental health, and HIV prevention, care, and treatment; ii) *Adolescent girls' access to quality education and skills*; and iii) *Protection* from violence, abuse, and exploitation, as well as harmful practices, such as child marriage and FGM.

With this commitment, UNICEF is shifting away from programmatic silos and sector-specific projects, metrics, and budgets, and towards interconnected, multisectoral, multi-faceted, context-specific support for adolescent girls. This commitment is made with a conscious recognition of the many challenges that such approaches may face.²⁰ It is also made with a promise to explore innovative financing and monitoring mechanisms, to ensure that integrated and multisectoral action that is effective for adolescent girls in diverse contexts actually takes place. Finally, it recognises the critical roles of innovation, social and behaviour change programming, and other accelerators in supporting the systemic and structural changes needed to ensure success.

3 Generating quality data and evidence as a global public good

Recognizing the role that UNICEF can play as a global resource and norm-setter, this strategy prioritises research on the processes and impacts of, as well as the lessons learned from, integrated, multisectoral, girl-focused, and girl-driven programming. UNICEF will support research on which service packages may work best for different populations of adolescent girls in different contexts, and will further invest in generating new data sources and evidence, such as independent evaluations and girl-led surveys and studies. Finally, it will support more research on girl-focused programming from the perspective of adolescent girls themselves, recognizing the significant evidence gaps in this area.²¹

20 Efevbera, Y., Haj-Ahmed, J., Lai, J., Hainsworth, G., et al.. [Multi-sectoral Programming for Adolescent Health and Well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa-Insights From a Symposium Hosted by UNICEF and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#). 2020.

21 Arutynova, A., Babchek, A., Battistini, E., Johnson, R., Modungwa, B. [Resourcing Adolescent Girls to Thrive: A report exploring where is the money for adolescent girls' rights using an ecosystem approach](#). Advance Review Copy. 2022.

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The broad dissemination of findings and insights from this work will aim to enhance the work of UNICEF and other organisations to inform advocacy, policies, and programme efforts globally.

4 Strengthening partnerships, including with girl-led networks and organisations

Recognizing that UNICEF cannot solve the challenges facing adolescent girls alone, it will join with and support adolescent girls in calling for the realisation of the hundreds of commitments made at the Generation Equality Forum in 2021 that focused on or included adolescent girls, as well as more girl-focused investments and more innovative financing mechanisms to support such investments. Not only should UN agencies lead, but so too should the private sector, philanthropic donors, financial institutions, such as the World Bank, and, importantly, governments themselves, step up to effect girl-centred change.

Indeed, a diverse range of actors working at all levels, including families, communities, governments, the private sector, and civil society, must be involved to effectively tackle the many interconnected barriers facing adolescent girls, and to help break away from the siloed and projectised approaches of the past. UNICEF's deep experience in partnering with such actors will be critical to the success of this strategy, as will its commitment to expanding meaningful collaboration with more partners, including adolescent girls themselves.

Partnerships with adolescent girl-led organisations and networks will be central to grounding programmatic action in girls' realities. To date, such partnerships have been limited in reach,²² and efforts will need to be significantly scaled-up, in line

22 As of May 2022, only 3.5% of partnerships supported by UNICEF are women and girl-led.

with the GAP (2022-2025), which explicitly commits UNICEF to expanding such partnerships, including in humanitarian contexts. Recent crises, such as in Ukraine and Afghanistan, have highlighted how women- and girl-led organisations are frequently at the frontlines of humanitarian action, but continue to be inadequately resourced and/or connected to larger humanitarian efforts. UNICEF can play an important convening role, bringing these actors closer to decision-makers and funding streams, and supporting adolescent girls to have a direct influence on humanitarian action and beyond.

Good practice is to engage representatives from girl-led networks and feminist organisations to provide real-time inputs into and feedback on programming efforts, and to involve them in policy and system reform efforts. Already, several UNICEF country offices have initiated working groups with and for girls, whether around thematic priorities like girls' education, or more broadly. UNICEF has also supported governments to establish girl-led reference groups and advisory mechanisms in policy making. Much more is required, however,

to systematically include adolescent girls' voices in programme design and implementation, and to create opportunities for these groups to be included in policy and system reform efforts. This includes UNICEF working with governments to create and strengthen context-relevant platforms that enable structured and meaningful participation of girls and girl-led networks in decision-making.

Resourcing options must also be made more flexible and accessible for grassroots organisations and girl-led networks; partnerships with international networks that can quickly and easily disburse resources to established local networks is one example. To this end, UNICEF will explore options for ensuring that the voices and experiences of adolescent girls are heard in ways that influence programming. Mechanisms to do this could include, for example, the establishment of an Adolescent Girls Advisory Council linked to UNICEF's Executive Board, and instituting means to ensure the ideas and solutions proposed by the existing UNICEF Global Youth Advocates programme are heard.

Strategic Priorities and Illustrative Actions

This strategy's priorities address some of the most urgent challenges adolescent girls face across three main areas of focus: health and nutrition; education and learning; and protection. These priorities will necessarily be customised to local context as the strategy is rolled out. Drawing on existing sectoral strategies, as well as the priorities established in the GAP (2022-2025), this section provides additional background on why these strategic areas have been identified as priorities. It also includes illustrative programmatic actions that UNICEF could undertake to accelerate integrated, multisectoral approaches to programming, with and for adolescent girls. Taken together, these approaches will directly impact adolescent girls and the environments in which they live, so that they are able to access and take up quality services, when and where they need them. They will also help adolescent girls to have increased voice and agency to effect decisions over their lives, including to lead the changes they wish to see in their communities.

Health and Nutrition

Since 2018, UNICEF has broadened its health and nutrition programming for adolescent girls, particularly

in pregnancy and maternal care, human papillomavirus (HPV) prevention, SRHR, and anaemia prevention. In collaboration with governments and suppliers, the number of adolescent girls receiving a final HPV vaccination dose in UNICEF-supported countries reached 2.8 million, for example, and 18 countries have introduced the vaccine into their routine immunisation schedules. Iron folate distribution to prevent anaemia has increased tremendously, but COVID-19 related school closures have severely interrupted school-based delivery and progress is stagnating. Further, adolescent pregnancy has been reported to be on the rise, but few services are available for pregnant adolescents. There is a need to expand antenatal care, as well as parenting and caregiver support, including mental health, where programming is still nascent.

Overall, progress continues to lag behind SDG targets and those set by the former GAP (2018-2021) for UNICEF.

Through this Programme Strategy, UNICEF's Health, WASH, and Nutrition teams, including cross-cutting teams like Early Childhood Development, Climate

Action, and HIV and AIDS, are committing to more discrete, deliberate, and integrated actions to tackle the underlying barriers that limit progress in these areas, such as addressing harmful gender norms at the community and structural levels. Additionally, they will design programmes more intentionally to combine services for greater impact for adolescent girls. Programmatic actions could include, for example:

- Layering mental health support for all adolescents, including pregnant and parenting adolescents, onto existing health services. This could include, for example, screening for depression and violence, provision of appropriate mental health and psychosocial support, and access to social protection schemes that support adolescents' continued learning. It could also include expanding access to interventions such as the [Care for Child Development](#) and [Caring for the Caregiver](#) frameworks for adolescent caregivers, and adapting them in ways that better involve male caregivers in caring tasks.
- Ensuring that HIV testing and counselling initiatives, provision of iron folate, and other specific interventions are not stand-alone but also help adolescent girls to access broader prevention, treatment, and care, including for the prevention of and response to other sexually transmitted infections, such as HPV, as well as to pregnancy and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response, amongst others.²³
- Promoting the inclusion of HPV vaccination in routine immunisation schedules and combining large-scale roll-out in school and community-based platforms with other adolescent girls' health screening and services, such as iron folate distribution and MHH supplies. These efforts should be accompanied by social and behaviour change communications programming for families and communities to create more enabling environments for adolescent girls' health and wellbeing.

Education and Skills

The importance of education for adolescent girls, and for the societies in which they live, cannot be overstated. The expansion of secondary education for girls in many countries over the past decade has offered remarkable opportunities for improvements in their health, wellbeing, and futures. Schools also

²³ [Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents \(AA-HA!\): guidance to support country implementation](#). 2017. Geneva: World Health Organization.

*"I believe in the huge potential of adolescent girls. I hope governments and stakeholders do too, because the time to invest in our projects, skills, ideas, and voices is **now**. Given the right opportunities, girls will flourish and so will their communities."*

Louise, 16 years old, Brazil, co-designer of a UNICEF-supported programme on combatting gender stereotypes



provide a critical platform for other services, such as health promotion, comprehensive sexuality education, and MHH, amongst others, and act as a protective measure against child marriage and early unions.

UNICEF advocated for the re-opening of schools in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and continues to advocate on the need for re-opening schools "better and more equal" offering adolescent girls a multitude of services they need to return to and remain in school.

This strategy emphasises the importance of school-based interventions, but it is not limited to such opportunities. Programming in hard-to-reach communities that benefits out-of-school adolescents should also be considered, noting that rural girls face particular risks and challenges. In addition, prompted by the pandemic, adolescent girls are increasingly making use of multiple pathways for learning, such as online opportunities. Moving forward, UNICEF will maximise these opportunities, online and offline, to support adolescent girls.

Programmatic actions in this area may include:

- Incorporating the provision (including financing) of school-based MHH services and WASH facilities with comprehensive sexuality education and access to the HPV vaccine during routine immunisation schedules.
- Integrating school-based non-violence interventions for all children and adolescents, such as peer-to-peer education on consent,

with broader learnings on adolescent health and nutrition.

- Promoting girl-led skills building programmes that link adolescent girls - in and out of schools - with adolescent girl and women mentors networks, as well as job training and work opportunities for enhanced employability, whilst engaging parents and caregivers in programmes that support girls' decision-making and confidence.
- Expanding innovations for adolescent girls' learning, such as [UPSHIFT](#), with participatory feedback tools such as [U-Report](#) and the [Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation](#) to ensure real-time feedback on skills curricula and training opportunities.
- Supporting the development and implementation of gender-transformative teacher training and curricula to promote gender equitable norms and attitudes.
- Promoting opportunities to institutionalise adolescent-led structures, such as student councils and adolescent participation bodies in local governance, with representation from adolescent girls, in and out of schools.

Protection

For the first time in UNICEF's history, addressing GBV is an organisation-wide priority.²⁴ Already, UNICEF shares leadership with UNFPA for GBV in emergency preparedness and response actions through the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee](#). This has resulted in concrete and specific actions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to GBV in UNICEF's humanitarian response. UNICEF is also an active participant in the Spotlight Initiative in 21 countries across five regions. Similarly, the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage and UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on FGM have reached numerous countries and

²⁴ [UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#).

"Sometimes people don't realise how powerful our voices are"

Edriiaa, 16, Malaysia



girls with integrated, girl-focused information and services. In countries where these programmes are active, UNICEF will continue to expand coverage and linkages with other services for maximum impact.

Importantly, adolescent girls' agency, voice, and protection are mutually reinforcing: fostering a protective environment facilitates the development of agency by opening up opportunities for decision making that adolescent girls may not otherwise have; at the same time, gaining agency can help ensure protection. Externally imposed protective measures, such as legislation and codes of conduct, are not sufficient to keep adolescent girls safe if they themselves are not able to recognise potentially dangerous or abusive situations and/or be their own change-agents to take action to minimise risks. Integrating efforts to support increased agency of adolescent girls, including promoting their meaningful and safe engagement in protection initiatives and building their skills, will underlie all efforts. At the same time, actions to advance more equitable gender norms, such as through supporting social movements and engaging communities and both male and female leaders, will help to build an enabling environment for adolescent girls to succeed. Programmatic actions in this area may include:

- Combining work with governments on policy reform to end child marriage with the provision of interconnected services to adolescent girls, such as SRHR, GBV prevention and response, skills, and education.
- Incorporating into online education discussion of risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, and where and how adolescent girls can access support.
- Linking services for child brides across sectors (i.e., health, including mental health and SRHR, nutrition, GBV, and education) through a case management approach, with appropriate protection and care, and reviewing opportunities for economic support, including unconditional child benefits.
- Creating safe spaces for adolescent girls, including in humanitarian contexts, that offer opportunities for peer connection, skills building, career counselling, and basic services, as well as referrals to other services (such as counselling, legal support, GBV response, and SRHR).²⁵

²⁵ Additional guidance on UNICEF's role in GBV prevention, mitigation, and response in emergencies can be found [here](#).

Theory Of Change

IMPACT

Adolescent girls have the freedom, power and wellbeing to make decisions about their lives and attain their full potential, supported by equitable and supportive households, communities, societies and systems.

OUTCOME AREAS

1

Adolescent girls' live in communities with gender equitable norms, enabling girls to have opportunities to share their voice and influence decisions that affect lives.

2

Adolescent girls enjoy physical and mental **health & nutrition, including sexual and reproductive health rights & stigma-free menstrual health & hygiene.**

3

Adolescent girls are equipped with the **skills and education** they need to participate meaningfully in their social and economic futures.

4

Adolescent girls enjoy freedom from **violence, exploitation, and abuse** – online and offline - and from **harmful practices** such as Female Genital Mutilation, child marriage and early union.

5

Adolescent girls have the **economic security** to meet their current needs and have greater choices over their future social and economic pathways.

Individual, Household & Community

OUTPUT AREAS

1

Girls have access to safe spaces, platforms, mentoring, and/or training that aims to empower them, whilst communities engage in community dialogues* to end harmful gender norms.

2

Adolescent girls have increased knowledge about their health, nutrition needs & menstrual health and hygiene, & have access to quality adolescent-friendly health & nutrition services.

3

Adolescent girls' have access to quality secondary level education and skills building opportunities, including in STEM.

4

Adolescent girls have increased access to survivor-centered services and violence & harmful practices prevention programmes.

5

Adolescent girls have increased economic capabilities and access to social protection and care support.

Cross-cutting Outcomes

Cross-cutting Outputs

Society & Systems

6

Increased uptake and demand of comprehensive and integrated girl-friendly services.

7

Improved health, education, protection, empowerment and economic security outcomes for adolescent girls as evidenced by measurable improvement in national indicators.

6

Increased availability of girl-friendly services at all levels.

7

Increased public and private investment in adolescent girls.

CORE STRATEGIES

8

Strengthening partnerships with girl-led networks and organizations.

9

Promoting multisectoral approaches.

10

Generating and using evidence (data, research, and evaluation).

*This is based on promising evidence on shifting harmful gender norms primarily amongst adults – whilst more research is needed, evidence indicates the importance of these community dialogues being focused on shifting social expectations (not just individual attitudes), confronting power imbalances with critical reflection beyond one-off campaigns or ad hoc outreach, and creating new shared positive beliefs with the group.

Measuring change

While UNICEF is committed to increasing attention to and programming with and for adolescent girls across all of its offices and work, this Programme Strategy will drive even greater attention to and funding for adolescent girls in a minimum of **30 countries by 2025, directly impacting at least 20 million girls**. These adolescent girls will benefit from the integrated services and information they need to improve their wellbeing, and to help them make informed decisions about their bodily autonomy and their futures. They, and the communities in which they live, will also benefit from programmes that create more age-responsive and gender-equitable social norms and structures.

To do this successfully, UNICEF will work in close partnership with governments and other partners, such as civil society and adolescent girls themselves, in ten target countries per year to catalyse more integrated programmatic interventions and mobilise increased investments in adolescent girls in each country and globally. UNICEF will increase the allocation of its resources for adolescent girls from four to at least ten per cent by 2025, role modeling intentional and directed investments.

As the integrated approach proposed in this strategy seeks to impact multiple spheres of adolescent girls' lives, improvements in their nutrition, health, learning, civic participation, protection, and awareness of rights will all be important measures

of success. To best capture the full range of impacts anticipated to occur through the multisectoral, integrated approaches described here, UNICEF will develop an Adolescent Girl Scorecard. This Scorecard will synthesise data on a range of relevant outcomes for adolescent girls, bringing together a specific set of metrics from those already being collected in response to the UNICEF Strategic Plan and GAP Indicator Frameworks.

The Adolescent Girl Scorecard (draft indicators for which are included at Annex 2), which will be developed and published annually for the target countries, will provide a profile of adolescent girls in each of the target countries. It will enable UNICEF, governments, and others to track changes across the programmatic pillars over time, serving as a tool to monitor progress and inform programmatic, resource, and policy decisions. The Scorecard can also be used to celebrate countries that have made progress, and to encourage those that have not, to do better. In coordination with UNICEF's advocacy and communications teams, it can draw the attention of governments, donors, civil society, the media, and other actors to the continuing needs of adolescent girls.

In addition to measuring progress for adolescent girls at the country level, UNICEF will *hold itself accountable* for the success of this strategy and its objectives. Change here will be measured by



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the number of country, regional, and headquarters offices that are supporting, funding, implementing, advocating for, and demonstrating progress on multisectoral, girl-focused programming. Each year, examples of successful multisectoral programmes for adolescent girls amongst UNICEF offices will be recognised and rewarded.

Conclusion

Investments in adolescent girls cannot wait. With this Programme Strategy, UNICEF is leveraging technical skills, partnerships across public, private, and philanthropic sectors, as well as core resources, to mobilise rapid scale-up and advances in adolescent girls' wellbeing and leadership. At the heart of these actions are the voices of adolescent girls themselves.

As a result of these investments, by 2025, millions more adolescent girls will have the knowledge, skills, and opportunities to make decisions about their lives and fulfil their potential. In target countries, the environments in which girls live will better promote their rights, including to participate in decisions affecting their lives. New evidence will document ways to best support adolescent girls, where they live, inspiring change in their countries and others in unprecedented ways. The time to invest in adolescent girls is now, and UNICEF is ready to act.

UNICEF's integrated programming with and for adolescent girls will:

- Equip girls with knowledge, skills, and leadership opportunities so they are able to make decisions about their lives and fulfil their potential
- Support adolescent girls, especially the most vulnerable, to access quality services when and where they need them through **multi-sectoral approaches**
- Produce documentation and scale up **effective, evidence-based approaches**
- Enhance partnerships with diverse actors in the public and private sectors for transformative results



Annex 1. Illustrative UNICEF-supported Programmatic Actions and Strategic Priorities

UNICEF-supported multisectoral programmes include direct benefits to adolescent girls and contribute to shifts in their environments. Illustrative programmatic interventions that might be considered and adapted at the country and sub-national level could, for example, include a combination of the following:

Health and Nutrition	Education and Skills	Protection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical advice to governments and other partners for positive, gender-responsive policy and budgetary reforms reflecting increased investments in adolescent girls' wellbeing • Technical advice and support for quality, accessible, and dignified service delivery with diverse partners 		
Menstrual health and hygiene services	School curricula that promote gender-equitable norms and adolescent girls' rights	Survivor-centred services for adolescent girls at risk of, or exposed to violence (legal, health, psychosocial, other)
Age- and gender-responsive adolescent health information and services, including HPV prevention, mental health, and sexual and reproductive health and rights	Girl-intentional, in and out-of-school programmes covering diverse skills (transferable, foundational, STEM, digital, and other) and safe access to mentors, peers, and job training	Community-based social norms programming tackling harmful practices, including engaging female leaders and men and boys as gender equality advocates
Maternal care for adolescent mothers	Subsidies and transfers for education access (e.g., unconditional cash transfers)	Care and protection services for girls at risk of and exposed to FGM and/ or child marriage
Adolescent nutrition services, including to prevent anaemia	Advocacy for gender transformative school policy reforms, such as free, universal secondary education, and school continuation and reintegration of and/or alternative opportunities for pregnant girls and adolescent mothers	<p>Advocacy for unconditional, safe access to education and health services for child brides and mothers</p> <p>Advancing child safeguarding within institutions, such as schools, to increase adolescent girls' safety and enhance GBV prevention</p>
HIV prevention, treatment, and care amongst adolescent girls	Advocacy for and modelling of integrated school-based services (e.g., separate WASH facilities, MHH and school-based nutrition)	Gender transformative parenting programmes tackling all forms of violence, including the intersections of violence against women and girls in the home
Partnerships with adolescent girl-led networks and organisations		

Annex 2. Draft Adolescent Girl Scorecard Indicator List

This is an initial draft to be further developed. UNICEF will seek to add indicators that come from adolescent girls themselves. Country offices may wish to supplement the core data with additional indicators and disaggregated data as relevant and available.

Population and enabling environment

- Adolescent girl population (thousands)
- Share of total population (%)
- Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

Outcome 1: Adolescent girls have safe access to responsive health and nutrition, including mental health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to quality menstrual health and hygiene information and services

- Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls 15-19)
- Skilled birth attendant (girls 15-19) (%)
- ANC4 (girls 15-19) (%)
- Demand for family planning satisfied with modern methods (girls 15-19) (%)
- Informed decision making, reproductive health (girls 15-19) (%)
- Menstrual hygiene management (girls 15-19) (%)
- HIV incidence (per 1,000 uninfected girls 10-19)
- Depression /anxiety (girls 15-19) (%)
- Thinness (girls 10-19) (%)
- Overweight (girls 10-19) (%)
- Anaemia (girls 15-19) (%)

Outcome 2: Adolescent girls enjoy freedom from violence, exploitation, and abuse – online and offline, and harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), and child marriage

- Child marriage before 18 (%)
- FGM prevalence (girls 0-14) (%)
- Intimate partner violence prevalence (girls 15-19) (%)
- Acceptability of intimate partner violence (girls 15-19) (%)

Outcome 3: Adolescent girls have safe access to quality secondary level learning and skills building opportunities

- Girls' out-of-school rate, lower secondary (%)
- Girls' out-of-school rate, upper secondary (%)
- Girls' completion rate, lower secondary (%)
- Girls' completion rate, upper secondary (%)
- Girls' reading proficiency (%)
- Girls' math proficiency (%)

Outcome 4: Adolescent girls have the economic security to participate meaningfully in their future economic pathways

- Child poverty (1+ deprivation (girls 0-17) (%)
- Not in education, employment or training (NEET) (girls 15-19) (%)
- Engagement in unpaid domestic and care work (girls 10-14) (%)



for every child

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