



Adolescent Girls – The Investment Case

The advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women are central to UNICEF’s mandate to ensure every child is protected, healthy, and educated. By adopting its most progressive and forward-looking [Strategic Plan](#), [Gender Policy](#), and [Gender Action Plan \(GAP\)](#) ever in 2021, UNICEF committed to advancing bold, transformative change toward a more gender equal world.

Recognising the need for accelerated action so we do not leave girls behind, in 2022, UNICEF developed a new vision for programming with and for adolescent girls: the [Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy](#). Together with girls and other partners, UNICEF is harnessing its existing work in 190 countries to promote **evidence-informed, holistic action to deliver more deliberate, girl-centred programming** - placing the rights, wellbeing, voice, agency, and leadership of adolescent girls at the very core of our work. The Strategy includes targeted, measurable actions to advance the health, nutrition, learning, skills, opportunities, and overall wellbeing of adolescent girls, as well as to protect them against violence, exploitation, abuse, and harmful practices. It encourages a shift of power and resources to adolescent girls, including to girl-led organisations, which requires deliberate support for strengthening girls’ capacities as leaders and changemakers, while simultaneously working with them and their communities to create more supportive, enabling, gender equitable environments.

The Strategy sets a goal of supporting, at minimum, girl-centred programmes in **30 countries that directly impact 20 million adolescent girls**, with partners and policymakers in every country working to expand evidence-based, multi-sectoral programming at scale, with and for adolescent girls.

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The Strategy is premised on the evidence that investing in girls during adolescence can help them realize their rights and potential, advance gender equality within societies, and disrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty and deprivation, while also helping economies to grow and countries to thrive. In other words, investing in girls is not only the right thing to do for girls, it will also have positive impacts on their families, their communities, and their societies - now, in the future, and even into the next generation. Indeed, the economic benefits of investing in adolescent girls far outweigh the costs. For example:

- **EDUCATION: Recent 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.**¹ These gains would be achieved in part through increased employment, earnings, and consumption patterns. On average, an educated girl will earn almost twice as much over her lifetime as a girl without schooling, and every additional year of schooling for a girl increases her future earnings by up to twenty per cent.^{2,3} The knock-on effects of education on improved health, decision-making, and civic participation; reduced morbidity and mortality; lower child marriage, early childbearing, and total fertility rates; and reduced risk of intimate partner violence, among other outcomes, will also contribute significantly to individual, family, community, and national welfare.⁴

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

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

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

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

- HEALTH AND NUTRITION:** At just over \$5 per adolescent per year, interventions to improve adolescents' physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health can lead to economic and social returns of up to ten times their cost, making them "among the best investments that can be made" to achieve the SDGs.⁵ Appropriate health and nutrition investments, such as those recommended in UNICEF's Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy, can help save more than 12.5 million lives, prevent more than 30 million unwanted pregnancies, and greatly reduce maternal and newborn deaths and injuries – notable given that maternal mortality is a leading killer of adolescent girls.⁶ Eliminating anaemia, as well as addressing undernutrition and the growing challenges of obesity and overweight, will not only save hundreds of thousands of lives, it can also increase economic productivity by up to seventeen per cent.^{7,8}
- CHILD PROTECTION:** Sexual exploitation, gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) and female genital mutilation (FGM) disproportionately affect girls and women. Preventing GBV and harmful practices will not only promote the health, wellbeing, and human rights of adolescent girls, it will contribute substantially to reducing costs to society. For example, **due to the multiple health complications of FGM for girls and women across the life course, the practice is estimated to cost health systems \$1.4 billion per year, with costs rising to more than \$2.1 billion per year by the year 2047.**⁹ Eliminating FGM would reduce this burden significantly - to approximately \$800 million per year in 2047, with associated gains in quality of life and economic productivity, among other areas. **CEFMU is estimated to cost countries many times more - up to hundreds of billions of dollars each year - due to the negative impacts of the practice on health, nutrition, fertility, education, employment, earnings, and other areas, making the eradication of this practice hugely cost effective.**¹⁰ And while there is limited evidence pertaining to the economic impacts of intimate partner violence (IPV) on adolescent girls specifically, studies suggest that the costs of foregone economic activity due to IPV for

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all women may be up to 2 per cent of GDP.¹¹ Addressing the harmful norms underpinning violence is positive for children of all genders, their families and society at large.

- ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND INNOVATION:** When girls are educated, healthy, and skilled, they can contribute more effectively to the workforce and the consumer base, driving economic growth and development. Numerous studies prove that investing in their health, wellbeing, education and skills development can lead to higher incomes, increased productivity, and a more skilled workforce. **Further, adolescent girls have immense yet widely untapped potential for innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship, given that globally, almost twice as many adolescent girls as boys are not in any form of education, employment, or training**¹². Ensuring that they have the information, education, services, and opportunities they want and deserve enables them to become more productive members of society, which can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, foster innovation, and drive economic progress. And when girls have equal access to education, employment, and decision-making, they become agents of change, fostering social cohesion and reducing inequality.

In sum, investing in the health, nutrition, wellbeing, education, and economic opportunities of adolescent girls brings substantial economic, social, and developmental benefits that can transform communities, drive economic growth, and contribute to a more equitable and prosperous world for all. **UNICEF stands ready to support countries and all partners to make that investment.**

5 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)

6 Deliver for Good Network: *The Investment Case for Girls & Women.* No date.

7 Horton, S., Ross, J., *The Economics of Iron Deficiency.* Food Policy. 2003.

8 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.

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10 Cumulative costs between 2015-2030, as estimated by the World Bank and International Center for Research on Women. See: Wodon, Q., Male, C., Nayihouba, A., Onagoruwa, A. Savadogo, A., Yedan, A., Edmeades, J., Kes, A., John, N., Murithi, L., Steinhaus, M. and Petroni, S. (2017). *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis.* Washington, DC: The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women.

11 Ouedraogo R. and Stenzel D. *The Heavy Economic Toll of Gender-based Violence: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa.* International Monetary Fund. 2021.

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