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Annual report on the implementation of the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021

Summary

The UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021, the organization's road map for promoting gender equality throughout its work, is closely aligned with the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021. The present document is the final annual report on the implementation of the Gender Action Plan and includes an update on progress on the Plan's priorities, indicators and performance benchmarks.

* [E/ICEF/2022/9](#).

Note: The present document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.



I. Overview

1. The year 2021 marked the final year of the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021, which specifies how UNICEF promotes gender equality, in alignment with the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and in support of its contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. The profound effects of socioeconomic upheaval caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic continued to be severely felt by women and girls in many countries, and more so by those living in humanitarian crises. Disruptions were most pronounced in areas such as girls' learning and safety, and social protection, compromising earlier gains in gender equality outcomes. More than 11 million girls may never return to school after the pandemic and an additional 10 million girls are at risk of child marriage over the next decade. At the heart of these challenges are discriminatory social norms and structures, which, combined with the pandemic's service disruptions, have resulted in heightened violence and discrimination against women and girls. Unemployment rates have affected women much more than men,¹ and more women than men have left their jobs to care for others, a gap that has only worsened over the course of the pandemic.²

3. In response, UNICEF and partners focused on mitigating the effects of disruptions, prioritizing ongoing service delivery, while also reorienting and redesigning regular programming. Despite COVID-19 impacts, UNICEF achievements for the period 2018–2021 are significant when compared against the baseline.³ The percentages of women receiving postnatal care and giving birth with skilled attendants surpassed overall targets, as did nutrition support for women and girls. There were notable advances in the number of out-of-school girls accessing education through UNICEF support, in provision of menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) services, and in providing adolescent girls with the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. Compared with 2020, UNICEF-supported prevention and care interventions related to ending child marriage reached 1.6 million more adolescent girls, and almost five times more adolescent girls benefited from UNICEF-supported empowerment and skills training in 2021. Gender-based violence in emergencies programming expanded exponentially since 2018, as did support for gender-responsive social protection interventions. Institutionally, continued investment in making its organizational systems and work culture more gender-responsive contributed to UNICEF meeting 88 per cent of the benchmarks of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in 2021, compared with 76 per cent in 2018.

4. Building on these gains, UNICEF must urgently scale up efforts to promote gender equality in 2022. Lessons learned over this implementation phase, and from the COVID-19 response, have shaped the new Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025, which sees UNICEF taking a bolder approach to achieving transformative results for women and girls in all dimensions of their lives. Investment will spur action especially in areas that have lagged, prioritizing health-related results for women and girls, particularly during adolescence, including on HIV, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, and mental health. Support to empower adolescent girls will be substantially expanded, prioritizing their agency and leadership, and emphasizing their quality education and skills development to tackle widening learning disparities.

¹ International Labour Organization, "An uneven and gender-unequal COVID-19 recovery: update on gender and employment trends 2021", Policy Brief (Geneva, 2021).

² Luisa Flor and others, "Quantifying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality on health, social, and economic indicators: a comprehensive review of data from March, 2020, to September, 2021", *The Lancet* (March 2022).

³ Unless otherwise noted, the baseline is 2017.

Programming on ending gender-based violence is now an organization-wide priority, and new targets have been set for gender-responsive social protection, in recognition of the increased disproportionate care work borne by women and girls. UNICEF is also committed to expanding partnerships with women's and girls' rights organizations. Lastly, UNICEF will redouble efforts to enhance gender data generation, analysis and usage, and to address lingering gaps in internal gender capacity, leadership accountability and resourcing, so that gender equality becomes the responsibility of everyone at UNICEF.

II. Introduction

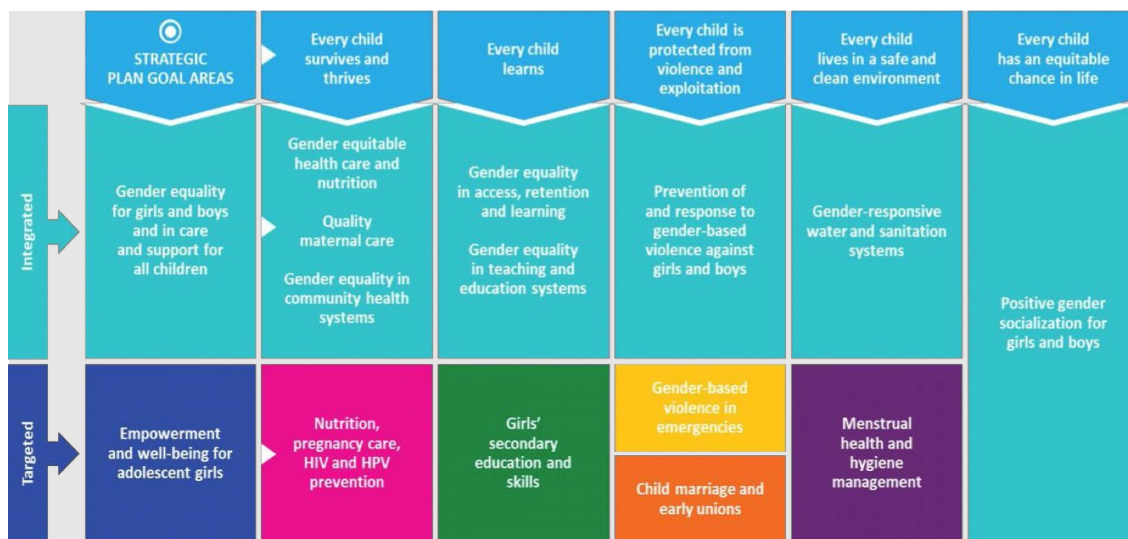
5. UNICEF commitments to advancing gender equality in its programmes and the workplace are articulated in the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021. This report reflects overall trends in UNICEF successes and challenges in achieving gender results since 2018, with emphasis on programming interventions in 2021, including those related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

III. Programmatic results

6. The programmatic framework of the Gender Action Plan follows a twin-track approach to gender programming by integrating gender across the Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, with a specific focus on five targeted priorities concerning adolescent girls.

Figure I

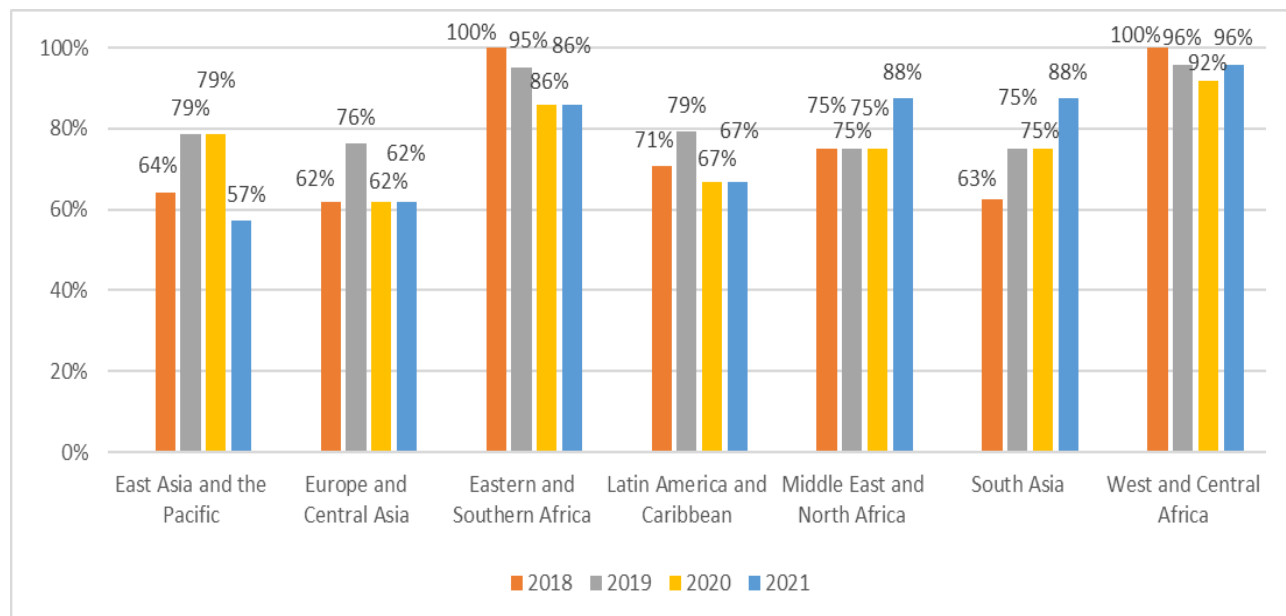
Gender equality outcomes across the Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021



A. Integrated gender results

7. In 2021, a total of 99 UNICEF country offices out of 128 included at least one or more integrated gender results in their programming – seven more than the baseline.

Figure II
Percentage of UNICEF country programmes that included an integrated gender priority in their country programme document, 2018–2021



1. Quality and dignified maternal care

8. UNICEF continued to prioritize the treatment of mothers and the quality of perinatal care, especially in light of ongoing COVID-19-related disruptions. In 50 high-burden maternal mortality countries supported by UNICEF, gains were noted in quality maternal care services. These countries reported 38.9 million live births in health facilities through UNICEF-supported programmes in 2021, rising from the baseline of 25 million live births in 2016. By the end of 2021, a total of 180 million births were delivered in health facilities through UNICEF-supported programmes. The percentage of live births attended by skilled personnel rose to 80 per cent in 2021 from 78 per cent in 2020, surpassing the overall target of 79 per cent.

9. There was also an improvement in perinatal care compared with previous years. The percentage of mothers receiving postnatal care increased from 60 per cent in 2020 to 65 per cent in 2021, compared with an overall target of 62 per cent and a baseline of 48 per cent. The percentage of mothers who received at least four antenatal visits also rose – from 60 per cent in 2019 and 2020 to 64 per cent in 2021, and compared with a baseline of 51 per cent. Taken together, these improved outcomes in perinatal care represent more than a 25 per cent increase from the baseline.

10. UNICEF continued to scale up programming in support of caregivers' mental health and well-being, not only as an essential part of the continuum of quality care, but also as an opportunity for transformative interventions – such as promoting equitable parenting and male involvement in childcare – that address the root causes of gender inequalities. Efforts in 2021 continued to be framed in the context of COVID-19, which heightened stressors disproportionately on female caregivers. In Europe and Central Asia, a UNICEF-supported mobile application was scaled up to reach 11 countries in 2021 promoting gender-equitable caregiving and supporting fathers' engagement in their children's upbringing.

2. Equal health care and nutrition for girls and boys

11. UNICEF continued to support government partners to develop more gender-responsive adolescent-related health policies. By the end of 2021, 81 countries had an inclusive, multisectoral and gender-responsive national plan to achieve targets for adolescent health and well-being, increasing from 50 countries in 2018.

12. Interventions in several countries are addressing demand and promoting health-seeking behaviour among adolescents in areas such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, HIV and, increasingly, mental health as a response to COVID-19. A joint UNICEF-United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) programme in the United Republic of Tanzania initiated a radio programme that reached 4 million adolescent girls and boys with age- and gender-appropriate comprehensive knowledge on sexual and reproductive health, HIV and gender-based violence, to increase demand for services and promote positive gender norms. In Belarus, UNICEF supported the creation of a national mental well-being school curriculum in 2021, benefiting 3,000 adolescents; an online mental health platform that offers remote counselling; and safe spaces to promote peer support and health-seeking behaviour among at-risk adolescent girls.

13. School closures due to the pandemic threatened girls' access to nutritious and safe diets and nutrition services. Countries were supported to design and implement school reopening strategies that addressed the nutrition needs and well-being of school-age children and motivated parents to send children, especially girls, to school. In 2021, with UNICEF support, 40.4 million adolescent girls benefited from services and support for the prevention of anaemia and other forms of malnutrition.

14. In 2021, 73 countries integrated nutrition counselling in their pregnancy care programmes, compared with 50 at baseline. UNICEF supported Ethiopia, Mexico and the Philippines to develop plans to introduce multiple micronutrient supplements to strengthen the quality of nutrition services in antenatal care. In terms of infant and young child feeding, UNICEF provided counselling and support to benefit more than 57.5 million caregivers of children under the age of 2 years globally. To accelerate progress on improving children's diets, UNICEF is prioritizing tackling discriminatory social norms – such as those that limit mothers' autonomy in feeding decisions – by extending services to engage fathers, among other strategies. In Bangladesh, for example, infant and young child feeding counselling reached nearly 3.8 million female and male caregivers of young children.

15. UNICEF continued to expand efforts to scale up proven interventions to ensure that pregnant women living with HIV received antiretroviral treatment. In 2021, 88 per cent of pregnant women in UNICEF-supported programmes globally received such treatment, compared with 85 per cent in 2017. Sao Tome and Principe recorded zero vertical transmissions in 2021, a success partially attributed to UNICEF-supported research, which provided evidence necessary to update national guidelines on prevention of mother-to-child transmission. China became one of the first countries to initiate triple elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, syphilis and hepatitis B.

16. Vaccine hesitancy is currently a major driver of under-vaccination against COVID-19. In some settings, women tend to be more hesitant than men, driven by factors such as women's limited mobility, limited decision-making power and dependence on men in their households, poor access to trustworthy information, and risk of experiencing violence. UNICEF is supporting national efforts to address gender disparities in vaccine uptake. In South Sudan, UNICEF supported government measures to promote vaccine adherence, contributing to an increase in vaccine uptake

among women, from 26.7 per cent in September 2021 to 40.7 per cent by January 2022.

3. Gender equality in health systems and among the workforce

17. Community health workers, the majority of whom are female, are at the forefront of efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in 2021, by distributing public health information, providing life-saving emergency health services, and administering and dispelling misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine. In 25 target countries with high burden of childhood illnesses, UNICEF supported the integration of community health workers into national health systems, and professionalization of their skills. All 25 countries now have policies that define worker roles, tasks and relationships with the health system. In the period 2020–2021, several countries also developed policies related to budgeting, compensation and supervision.

18. UNICEF-supported community-based service delivery is a key feature of the health strategy in Eritrea, where community health workers, through mobile services, reached 64,000 children and pregnant women in 2021 with routine immunizations, micronutrient supplementation, and maternal and newborn care. By the end of 2021, a European Union-UNICEF programme in Yemen trained a total of 2,900 female community health workers from remote areas to deliver primary health-care packages and COVID-19 information in hard-to-reach communities, benefiting an estimated 2 million people.

4. Equality in education for girls and boys

19. After two years of the pandemic, education gaps for girls have widened significantly, a serious risk to progress made over the past two decades. Out of 133 countries surveyed by UNICEF, only 14 reported some success in implementing remote learning support for girls.

20. To ensure continued education, UNICEF and partners invested in distance learning in diverse modalities to promote learning, and in advocacy for reopening schools. Globally in 2021 through UNICEF-supported programmes, 48.6 million out-of-school children accessed early learning, primary or secondary education, about 600,000 more than in 2020, and compared with 17 million in 2019. Of these children, almost 21 million were girls (compared with 8.4 million in 2019). In humanitarian situations, about 15.9 million out-of-school girls participated in early learning, primary or secondary education across 93 countries. Some 6.4 million children on the move accessed education through UNICEF-supported programmes across 51 countries. In Malawi, more than 8,700 vulnerable girls received scholarships to complete their secondary education, while more than 1 million community members were reached with back-to-school messages, including keeping girls in school. In Afghanistan, education access for disadvantaged girls was ramped up through more than 7,000 community-based education classes that benefited nearly 240,000 students (just over 50 per cent girls).

21. UNICEF and partners also supported Governments to implement Safe Schools frameworks as part of back-to-school interventions, including to encourage families to send daughters back to school. In countries such as Ghana, Guyana and Namibia, this included advocacy campaigns with traditional, religious and other community leaders, training for education professionals to recognize and prevent school-related gender-based violence, and strategies to address the psychosocial needs of returning learners.

22. In keeping with its commitment to leaving no one behind, UNICEF has increasingly prioritized education approaches that explicitly integrate an intersectional approach, including those related to disability, racism, xenophobia, sexual orientation and gender identity, migration and displacement, among others. In 2021, for example, UNICEF and the Government of Guyana developed a manual and training for school welfare officers that uses a gender-responsive approach to address gender-based violence in schools, including victimization of children with diverse gender identity. In India, in Uttar Pradesh state, nearly 50,500 girls with disabilities were enrolled in formal education, and 550 girls with severe and multiple disabilities were given tablets with accessible software and learning materials to ensure continuity of education.

5. Gender equality in teaching and learning systems

23. UNICEF and partners helped to improve girls' access to education and enhance the gender responsiveness of countries' education systems. This led to notable progress by 2021. Forty-eight programme countries (45 per cent of targeted countries) had gender-responsive teaching and learning systems, increasing from 15 countries (18 per cent) in 2017. Forty-seven countries (or 38 per cent) had improved systems for access, a 50 per cent increase from the baseline of 26 countries (25 per cent).

24. In Viet Nam, UNICEF advocated for inclusion, especially for ethnic minority girls, by supporting the revision of the national early childhood education curriculum and teaching materials to eliminate gender stereotyping, benefiting almost 7,800 preschool children from ethnic minority groups. UNICEF and government partners collaborated with Microsoft in Egypt and Honduras to implement the Learning Passport platform, providing digital content, including on gender equality. In Kyrgyzstan, as part of the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF helped to build the capacity of 870 government officials, leading to revisions of the national curriculum to emphasize inclusion and remove gender stereotyping, and engagement with male caregivers on child development.

25. The emphasis on skills development has gained momentum in many countries. By 2021, 28 per cent of UNICEF-supported countries (31 countries) had systems that institutionalized gender-equitable skills for learning, personal empowerment, active citizenship and/or employability, rising from 6 per cent at baseline (5 countries). Furthermore, 33 million children (51 per cent girls) participated in skills development programmes, increasing from 7.7 million in 2020 and 3.2 million in 2017. Through UNICEF-supported learning-to-earning interventions in Jordan, nearly 37,400 young people (62 per cent female) received training in life and employability skills in 2021. In Bangladesh, despite pandemic restrictions, more than 49,300 adolescents (70 per cent girls) received life skills training, and more than 218,100 adolescents (70 per cent girls) learned online safety skills.

6. Gender-based prevention of and response to violence against girls and boys

26. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for increased investment in multisectoral services to prevent and respond to violence. In 2021, UNICEF reached 4.4 million children experiencing violence with health, justice and social welfare services in 129 countries (52 per cent of the total reach was disaggregated by sex – 53 per cent girls, 47 per cent boys). This number has jumped exponentially from 2.5 million children in 2017.

27. Strategic partnerships with coordinated interventions and targeted, large-scale investment remain instrumental. As a core implementing partner, UNICEF implements the European Union-United Nations Spotlight Initiative in 27 countries

(increasing from 13 in 2019) and across three regional programmes (in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific), contributing significant results to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. In Uganda, for example, a multicomponent, systems-strengthening approach to shift harmful social norms that condone violence involved the creation of a national positive parenting programme, benefiting almost 6,700 caregivers; norms change communication training for more than 2,700 government and civil society partners; community dialogues engaging more than 30,300 people and a media campaign on ending harmful practices and violence, estimated to have reached almost 1.5 million people in 2021.

28. A baseline covering 29 countries was established by UNICEF and partners to measure progress in implementing comprehensive national responses to sexual exploitation and abuse, including its specific digital dimensions. This work has accelerated, partly due to the widespread move to digital platforms during the pandemic, and to a rise in technology-facilitated gender-based abuse, especially targeting adolescent girls and young women. UNICEF is partnering with Governments and the private sector to strengthen legislative and policy frameworks, improve criminal justice responses and victim services, and expand educative and prevention efforts. In Zimbabwe, UNICEF technical support and advocacy contributed to new legislation that criminalizes online violence against women and children.

29. Outcomes around the reporting of violence have remained stagnant, pointing to persistent gaps in law enforcement and justice systems, and barriers associated with deep-rooted social norms that normalize gender-based violence. Adolescent girls remain a high-risk group. From 2018 to 2021, the percentage of adolescent girls who experienced sexual violence and sought help from a professional decreased from 5 per cent to 4 per cent (well below the overall target of 10 per cent). Related to this context, the protective role of schools was brought to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic. Multi-agency commitments were made to include violence prevention and response in the framework for reopening schools, with efforts occurring in such countries as Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, the Niger and Togo to ensure that violence was not a barrier to girls' re-entry into schools.

30. Evidence-based caregiver support has the potential to break the intergenerational transmission of gender-based family violence. UNICEF scaled up programme support in 2021, reaching 3.6 million families across 97 countries, close to a fourfold increase over those reached in 2017. In the Philippines, integration of group-based parenting programmes through the conditional cash transfer system, which incorporated positive parenting messages, reached more than 500,000 families.

31. The UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has entered its fourth phase, with a stronger focus on promoting girls' agency and building strategic partnerships to drive innovation and collaboration. UNICEF and partners continued in 2021 to support the development of national strategies to end FGM, including in Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Somalia and the Sudan. More than 10 million people participated in education and community mobilization activities to promote FGM elimination across 18 countries in 2021, surpassing the 2021 target of 7.8 million by nearly one third. Further, nearly 2,900 communities involving more than 3.1 million people made public declarations to abandon the practice. In Ethiopia, UNICEF-supported interventions led to about 13,200 girls becoming advocates against FGM in their communities.

32. Despite UNICEF programmatic adjustments, the response to provide community-led services to girls and women at risk has slowed in most countries affected by internal conflicts and prolonged COVID-19 restrictions. In 2021,

UNICEF-supported programmes reached more than 105,000 girls and women with FGM prevention and protection services in 18 countries, compared with more than 430,000 reached in 2020 across 16 countries. Despite these setbacks in service delivery, over the past four years UNICEF supported nearly 800,000 girls and women in receiving FGM prevention and protection services.

7. Gender-responsive water, sanitation and hygiene systems

33. UNICEF continued to work in 2021 on supporting water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) service delivery and government systems across more than 100 countries. Through UNICEF-supported programmes, more than 16 million more people gained access to safe drinking water (8.3 million women and girls in countries reporting sex-disaggregated data) and almost 20 million more people had access to basic sanitation services (10.2 million women and girls). In humanitarian settings, UNICEF-supported water programmes benefited 16.7 million girls and women, sanitation programmes reached 4.19 million women and girls, and WASH in Schools services reached 6.5 million girls.

34. By the end of 2021, UNICEF reached almost 16,700 health-care facilities (up from 1,600 at baseline) with WASH services, a critical intervention to reduce incidence of both infant and maternal mortality. In addition, since 2017, UNICEF has supported improved gender-segregated sanitation facilities and programmes in a total of 21,112 schools in 94 countries (against an overall target of 20,000). For example, in 158 schools in the Syrian Arab Republic, nearly 83,900 students (about 39,400 girls) were provided with gender-responsive, child-friendly and accessible WASH facilities. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, the Niger and Sierra Leone, 8,000 adolescent girls with disabilities accessed improved gender-responsive services in schools.

35. Environmental impact and the effects of climate change have emerged strongly as critical considerations in programme design and implementation, with young people, especially girls, leading climate activism for more sustainable solutions. In 2021, UNICEF supported the Burundi Ministry of Education to roll out Creatable, a project focusing on entrepreneurship through technology and climate change mitigation. As part of the project, adolescent girls and boys from 10 provinces were trained to build a water purification system using solar energy and to use rocket stoves that reduce wood use for cooking.

8. Positive gender norms and socialization for girls and boys

36. In 2021, 94 UNICEF country programmes implemented interventions to transform gender-discriminatory roles and norms, and promote positive gender socialization, compared with 76 at baseline. The percentage of countries with at-scale programmes addressing gender-discriminatory roles and practices among children saw a sizable increase, from 36 countries in 2018 to 64 countries in 2021.

37. UNICEF invested in family-friendly policies and positive parenting; engaging men and boys; addressing gender discrimination in school curricula, and norms related to harmful practices; and integrating gender within social protection programmes. In Egypt, UNICEF scaled up the National Girls' Empowerment Initiative, which engages communities and policymakers to address girls' multiple socioeconomic vulnerabilities. In 2021, community dialogue in partnership with faith-based organizations engaged 53,000 people on issues related to harmful practices. UNICEF supported government efforts in Madagascar to engage men and boys, through interventions with traditional and religious leaders, to address dominant masculinity and its impact on gender-based violence and child marriage. In Greece,

UNICEF partnered with the Research Centre for Gender Equality on a teen fiction book that tackles gender stereotypes, toxic masculinities and sexual violence, reaching 10,000 adolescents.

38. Momentum on family-friendly policies continued to grow in 2021, when more countries than ever adopted strategies to enhance policies to support parents and caregivers, and to promote shared gender-responsive parenting. Fifty-six countries (up from 46 in 2020) were engaged in supporting Governments to adopt policies around parental leave; breastfeeding support; childcare; and provision of child benefits and adequate wages. In Croatia and Mongolia, UNICEF supported government and private sector partners to implement more transformative family-friendly policies. A UNICEF partnership with the private sector in Kenya led to 48 companies establishing breastfeeding rooms in 2021.

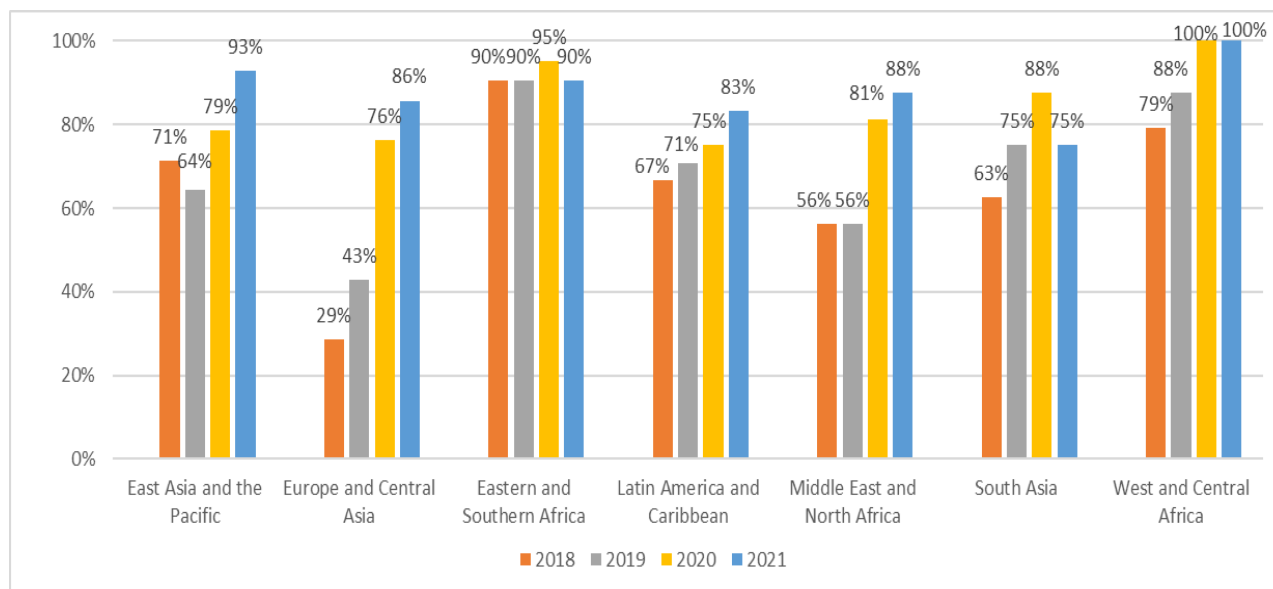
39. UNICEF work on gender-responsive and transformative social protection continued to expand in 2021, driven in part by the cascade of social protection measures undertaken in many countries in response to COVID-19. The number of UNICEF country offices with specific gender objectives in their social protection work grew to 100, up from 29 in 2019. For example, 43 UNICEF country offices are now prioritizing increasing girls' education through their social protection work, 40 offices are targeting gender-based violence prevention, and 36 offices are promoting women's and girls' decision-making power. In Angola, with national and provincial government partners, UNICEF facilitated a social cash transfer programme in six municipalities as a response to COVID-19, targeting caregivers of children (98 per cent female recipients) and benefiting almost 20,000 households and 40,000 young children.

40. The growing UNICEF portfolio in gender-responsive social protection, including family-friendly policies, is encouraging, but greater attention is needed to ensure that these expanded efforts help women, girls and families meet their immediate needs, as well as help to transform underlying structural barriers.

B. Targeted priorities on empowering adolescent girls

41. UNICEF continued to emphasize targeted approaches and strong partnerships to address the interlinked challenges faced by adolescent girls, with promising gains over the past four years in the areas of MHH, HPV prevention, skills development, and tackling harmful practices and gender-based violence. In 2021, 114 UNICEF country offices included dedicated results from one or more of the targeted priorities, 5 more than in 2020 and 41 more than the baseline.

Figure III
Percentage of UNICEF country programmes that included results on adolescent girls' targeted priorities, 2018–2021



1. Girls' nutrition, pregnancy care, and HIV and HPV prevention

42. Since 2018, UNICEF has broadened its health programming for adolescent girls, particularly in relation to pregnancy and maternal care, HPV prevention, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and anaemia prevention.

43. Progress in quality care for adolescent mothers (aged 15–19 years) saw modest increases in 2021 compared with the previous year, although gains were notable against baseline data. UNICEF continued to support 46 high-burden countries, contributing to 73 per cent of live births attended by skilled health personnel, compared with 67 per cent at baseline, and just falling short of the overall target of 75 per cent. The percentage of young mothers receiving at least four antenatal visits has stalled at 52 per cent, while the percentage of those receiving postnatal care increased slightly from 59 per cent in 2020 to 60 per cent in 2021, compared with the baseline of 48 per cent.

44. Anaemia prevention among girls continues to lag, with grave impacts for adolescent mothers and their children related to mortality risk, reproductive health and cognitive development. The percentage of girls (aged 15–19 years) with anaemia was 48.3 per cent in 2021, higher than the baseline of 46 per cent, and above the overall target of 38 per cent. UNICEF is supporting integrated strategies to address girls' access to iron folic acid supplementation, such as in Malawi, where coordination with the departments of school health, nutrition and HIV/AIDS led to 257,000 school-age adolescent girls receiving such supplements to reduce their risk of anaemia.

45. There has been only muted progress in addressing HIV among adolescents, particularly girls. Despite more girls getting tested and knowing their status than before – 15 million in 2021 compared with 10.6 million in 2016, and above the overall target of 13.8 million – and more so than boys, they continue to bear the brunt of new infections. In the 35 HIV-priority countries where UNICEF works, adolescent girls account for four fifths of all new HIV infections among adolescents. UNICEF and partners are responding by identifying the gender-related barriers to comprehensive testing, counselling and treatment, and targeting specific at-risk populations. For

instance, UNICEF is supporting the Governments of Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria to scale up combination prevention for the most at-risk adolescents through a digital interface approach that expands access to education on HIV self-testing and pre-exposure prophylaxis. In 2021, more than 500,000 adolescents were reached, with scale-up expected to benefit more than 2 million adolescents by the end of 2022.

46. Another strategy with promising results engages young mothers living with HIV as critical peer-support leaders in their communities. In Zimbabwe, young mentor mothers work alongside health-care providers to support adolescent and young mothers at health facilities, and through home visits and digital health. By July 2021, 97 per cent of mothers participating in the programme had achieved viral suppression; the rate of mother-to-child-transmission was less than 2 per cent; and 99 per cent of sexual partners who tested positive initiated treatment.

47. Progress in HPV prevention has been exponentially increasing. In 2020, 2.8 million adolescent girls in target countries received the final HPV vaccine dose, almost triple the overall target.⁴ Through the support of UNICEF and partners, by 2021, 18 countries had introduced the vaccine into their immunization schedules, which, while less than the overall target of 24 countries, still represents a significant advance from the baseline of 4 countries. In Uzbekistan, UNICEF reached 304,000 teachers with information about HPV, and more than 300,000 adolescent girls were vaccinated through UNICEF support.

2. Girls' secondary education and skills-building

48. The education gains for girls made over the past 25 years – particularly in enrolment and learning outcomes – are under threat. An estimated 11 million girls⁵ may not go back to school after the COVID-19 crisis, with adolescent girls at particular risk. Underlying barriers related to harmful norms, violence, poverty, distance and disability, already challenging before the pandemic, were exacerbated during COVID-19-related school closures, social isolation and economic upheaval. In 2021, the percentage of lower secondary school-age girls who were out of school was 20 per cent (the same as 2020), missing the overall target of 16 per cent. The percentage of adolescent girls not in employment, education or training was 38 per cent in 2021, compared with 16 per cent among adolescent boys.

49. In response, UNICEF and partners are scaling up gender-transformative strategies to empower adolescent girls. Through the UNICEF Skills4Girls initiative, implemented in partnership with the private sector, nearly 330,000 adolescent girls and young women have been reached across 19 countries since 2020 with girl-focused learning opportunities, including linkages to peer support, mentors and job placements. In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, science, technology, engineering and math education interventions focusing on robotics influenced the establishment of a National Digital Agenda for Girls. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, UNICEF scaled up the UniSat nano-satellite education programme for girls in 2021, building girls' knowledge and skills on frontier technology, aerospace and data analytics.

50. Some 12.4 million adolescents (58 per cent girls, in countries reporting disaggregated data) across 125 countries participated in or led civic engagement activities through UNICEF-supported programmes in 2021, well above the 3.2 million in 2020. In Jordan, UNICEF helped to mobilize youth climate action, in particular by

⁴ Global data on this indicator are reported with a one-year time lag.

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Keeping girls in the picture: over 11 million girls may not go back to school after the COVID-19 crisis", web page, 2021.

engaging young women to discuss various climate action strategies and encouraging youth to join global efforts through social media. In Kyrgyzstan, 989 female peer educators who received life skills and leadership training subsequently conducted peer training, engaging almost 12,900 adolescents (more than 7,100 girls) on issues around gender equality, stereotyping, gender-based violence, child marriage and sexual harassment.

3. Gender-based violence in emergencies

51. UNICEF continues to be at the forefront of responding to crises, including COVID-19 and its impact on the safety and security of girls and women. Ninety-eight per cent of all UNICEF Humanitarian Appeals for Children in 2021 had a specific gender-based violence in emergencies indicator and funding ask, testament to the life-saving urgency of this area of work. UNICEF reached nearly 13.9 million people across 89 countries (58 per cent female, 42 per cent male of nearly 60 countries that reported disaggregated data) with gender-based violence response, prevention and risk-mitigation programmes. This was 18 times the number in 2017, and an expansion from 43 countries. Through improved outreach by UNICEF, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than 50,000 women and children – both survivors of violence and those at risk – accessed prevention and response services, a fivefold increase since 2020, while in Iraq, more than 2,400 women and girls with disabilities received prevention services. In Bangladesh and Iraq, UNICEF reached almost 40,800 and 53,000 survivors, respectively, through safe space programming, gender-based violence case management and psychosocial support. In Afghanistan, dignity kits distributed in partnership with women’s community organizations were a vital entry point to raise awareness about gender-based violence and child marriage, especially for the most marginalized women and girls, and those living in remote areas.

52. As the agency leading the global roll-out of the Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, UNICEF continued to ensure that risk mitigation is embedded within its sectoral work as well as within the clusters it leads. This investment in risk mitigation benefited almost 144,000 people in Benin, 99,200 people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and more than 5 million in Yemen.

4. Child marriage and early unions

53. In 2020 and 2021, the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage rapidly developed innovative programme approaches to mitigate the potential backslide in progress – due to COVID-19 – in ending child marriage. A gender-transformative accelerator tool that assesses structural barriers to gender equality, leading to the development of actions across the gender continuum, was field-tested in Ethiopia, India, Mozambique and the Niger, and will be scaled up in 2022. Increasingly, services were also made available virtually given school closures.

54. UNICEF continued to support countries to develop and resource national plans to end child marriage – 44 countries have developed national plans of action since 2018, out of which 32 countries now have a costed action plan, compared with 8 in 2017. UNICEF also continued to advocate with Governments to enact legal reform. In the Philippines, the Anti-Child Marriage Act was adopted in 2021 and a bill was ratified to raise the minimum age of statutory rape from 12 to 16 years; this represents a major achievement, as the country formerly had the second-lowest age of sexual consent in the world.

55. In 2021, UNICEF-supported child marriage-related prevention and care interventions – delivered through safe spaces, mentorship, literacy, sexual and reproductive health services, and livelihood skills – reached 7.6 million adolescent

girls across 47 countries, nearly four times more than in 2017. This included more than 11,000 adolescent girls with disabilities across 20 countries, a tenfold increase from 2017. Through the Spotlight Initiative, UNICEF engaged the African Council of Religious Leaders to advocate for the safe reopening of schools in Eastern and Southern Africa as a critical prevention measure. In Ethiopia, prevention and care services benefited 204,000 adolescent girls who participated in life skills initiatives. In Bangladesh, a UNICEF-supported digital platform reached more than 28,000 adolescent girls with messages related to online safety, sexual and reproductive health, and child marriage, and more than 8.7 million adolescent girls were engaged in related social media messaging on ending child marriage. In Turkey, where child, early and forced marriage rates are high in both refugee and host communities, UNICEF helped scale up social and behaviour change interventions to promote women's and girls' empowerment and gender-responsive parenting, engaging nearly 30,000 people (about 22,000 females and 6,000 children).

56. Gender-responsive social protection schemes are a critical entry point to reach at-risk girls and vulnerable communities. UNICEF provided technical support to include social and behaviour change messaging for Lesotho's safety net programme, with an outreach of 910,000 girls in vulnerable households. Similarly, in Zambia, where girls' education is a key prevention strategy, UNICEF advocated with the national cash transfer programme for bursary support to increase school attendance, reaching 28,000 marginalized girls.

57. In 2021, communication and advocacy efforts reached large audiences, especially young people. UNICEF produced its first fictional mini-series on child marriage, called *Vaillante*, for the West and Central Africa region. To date, more than 16 million people from 101 countries have watched the three episodes since the online launch in November. In Malaysia, the UNICEF-supported *Chup! Jom Sembang Seks* digital campaign on sexual reproductive health and rights, which targets youth as change agents in support of national strategies to address child marriage, recorded a viewership of 20.6 million.

5. Dignified menstrual health and hygiene

58. In 2021, partly in response to COVID-19 and other crises, UNICEF was able to reach 1.3 million women and girls with emergency MHH-related services – distribution of dignity kits, provision of private washing and disposal facilities and MHH information – compared with 1 million in 2019.

59. UNICEF continued to support government partners to institutionalize MHH into national systems. For example, UNICEF supported the Government of Kenya to develop and cost a WASH in Schools plan that scales up gender-responsive and disability-inclusive interventions, including MHH teaching. Sustained UNICEF advocacy in Peru contributed to the enactment of specific legislation that provides for MHH education in all schools, and service delivery of free MHH supplies to the most vulnerable girls.

60. UNICEF direct support to schools for MHH services cumulatively reached about 59,000 schools over four years, against the ambitious target of 50,000. Gender-separated WASH services in Papua New Guinea, including measures such as incinerators to dispose of MHH materials, were provided in 116 schools in four districts, benefiting more than 37,200 students. In Somalia, UNICEF-supported MHH education for 1,500 girls, aimed at preventing girls' absenteeism and dropping out of school, was incorporated into broader WASH services, reaching 35,000 children.

IV. Institutional strengthening

61. Over the past four years, there have been pronounced shifts in the way that UNICEF works and within its organizational culture, towards becoming more gender-responsive, inclusive and, ultimately, more transformative. Additionally, the past two years of the pandemic climate have required necessary institutional adaptations, innovations and reorientation of priorities in the way that UNICEF conducts business.

62. The Gender Action Plan prioritizes strategic areas for investments in institutional strengthening, emphasizing (a) gender equality in programming at scale; and (b) capacity and accountability on gender results.

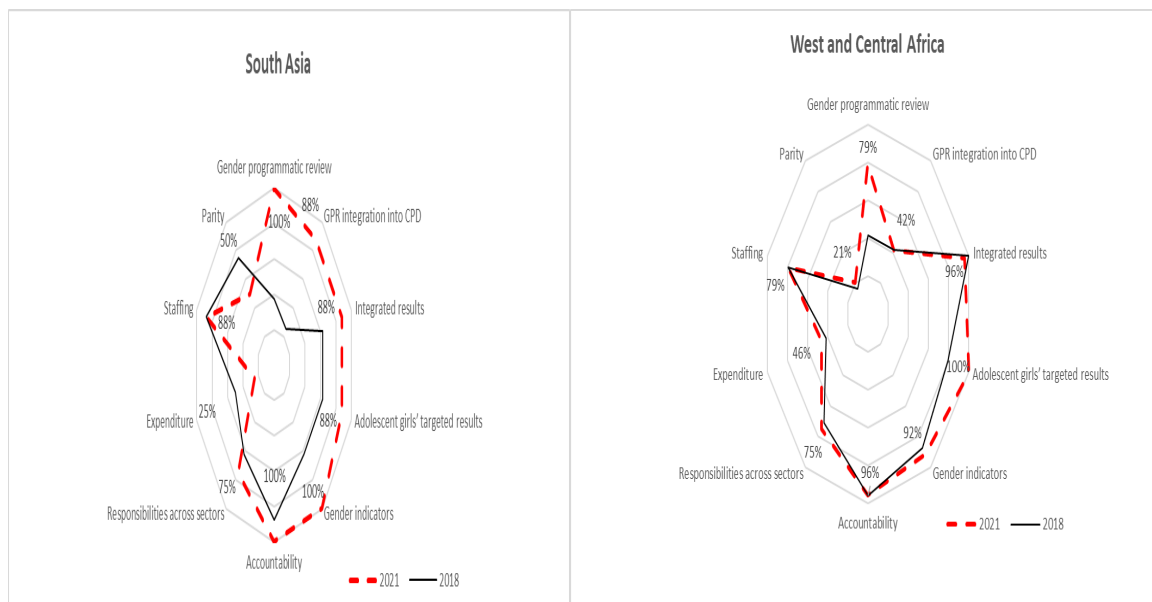
A. Gender equality in quality programming at scale

1. From gender-responsive to gender-transformative programming

63. UNICEF uses the Gender Action Plan institutional standard, a composite indicator with benchmarks for country offices to track their efforts to programme in increasingly transformative ways. The benchmarks, which include use of gender analysis in country programme design, monitoring, resourcing, capacity and accountability, show that since 2018, country offices have been moving from simply responding to or fixing the manifestations of gender inequality to more deliberately addressing the underlying bottlenecks and barriers to gender equality. In 2021, 98 UNICEF offices met the standard, compared with 63 in 2018. Almost every region saw a marked improvement over the previous year. Improvements on meeting benchmarks were driven largely by stronger monitoring and accountability systems, dedicated gender expertise, and the critical role played by regional gender advisers. Globally, more country offices are also conducting gender analysis as part of their programme planning. By 2021, 109 countries (85 per cent) had completed a gender programmatic review as part of their country programme planning, compared with 55 in 2018. Persistent bottlenecks around gender capacity and resources, however, prevent the translation of gender analysis into clear results and outcomes across many offices.

Figure IV
Percentage of UNICEF country offices that met institutional benchmarks globally and across regions, 2018 and 2019





64. In 2020, UNICEF revised the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action to include clear gender equality standards and benchmarks to ensure more deliberate gender integration throughout UNICEF humanitarian action. Given the pandemic, this timely move has helped to highlight the centrality of gender considerations in the emergency response as this has evolved. An inter-agency effort between UNICEF, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the United Nations Development Coordination Office and the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund helped to raise about \$14 million to fund gender-related programmes for United Nations country teams to address the impact of COVID-19.

2. Gender data and evidence

65. UNICEF continued to apply innovative methodologies, gender analyses, technical support and data dissemination to improve the evidence base for gender policy and programming. In 2021, to respond to critical gaps in gender data, methodologies were applied to develop a module to measure norms related to care work, and to further strengthen the measurement of adolescent empowerment and children's time use related to unpaid work. An extensive evidence review assessed the links between gender equality and migration, especially related to children on the move and the pandemic.

66. To inform gender-responsive strategies, UNICEF produced summary findings of socioeconomic impact surveys conducted with country offices since the start of the pandemic to assess the level of service disruption affecting women and children, and government response measures.

67. UNICEF inter-agency participation remains significant in this area. UNICEF serves on the Steering Committee of the Making Every Woman and Girl Count programme on gender statistics and is a member of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics, the coordinating and guiding body of the Global Gender Statistics Programme implemented by the United Nations Statistics Division. UNICEF is also a member of the technical advisory group to Equal Measures 2030, a global partnership of civil society organizations that developed the SDG Gender Index to connect gender data and evidence with country-level advocacy.

68. To enhance social protection programming, the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti carried out an evidence review of gender mainstreaming within social protection policy across 74 countries. In addition, it partnered with the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage to provide structured research support to country offices to catalyse efforts to end child marriage through high-quality evidence generation, synthesis and uptake, including in social and behavioural change and gender-transformative research.

3. Strategic partnerships and communications

69. Partnerships with other United Nations agencies, national partners, global organizations, civil society and the private sector remain crucial for UNICEF to fulfil its mandate on gender equality.

70. UNICEF continues to be a member of the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, the United Nations Sustainable Development Group Task Team on Gender Equality, the United Nations Task Force on Violence Against Women and the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics, among others. At the country level, UNICEF is an implementing partner in all Spotlight Initiative countries and works with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, on HPV, gender and equity, and is represented in the United Nations Joint Global Programme on Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control. In 2021, as part of the Gender Equality Task Team of the United Nations Development Cooperation Office, UNICEF and UN-Women co-led the development of guidance on gender theme group standards and procedures, which was rolled out to all United Nations country teams.

71. UNICEF continued to expand its partnerships with grass-roots women's and girls' organizations. In 2021, 125 countries reported engaging women's and girls' civil society organizations across sectors. Of these, 59 countries reported working with women's groups and 49 with adolescent girls' groups on gender-based violence, including in countries such as Belize, Malaysia and Maldives.

72. Momentum within private sector partnerships accelerated in 2021. UNICEF partnered with the LEGO Group to publish a new playbook for businesses to increase diversity in their creative content and products for children. Across the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Jordan, Morocco, Nepal and Tajikistan, UNICEF partnered with Pandora and Chloé to foster leadership by adolescent girls and support their social innovation and entrepreneurship skills. In addition, through the Generation Unlimited global partnership, UNICEF strengthened its collaboration with PwC, to leverage its skills, expertise and resources to expand opportunities for young people to successfully transition from education to decent work.

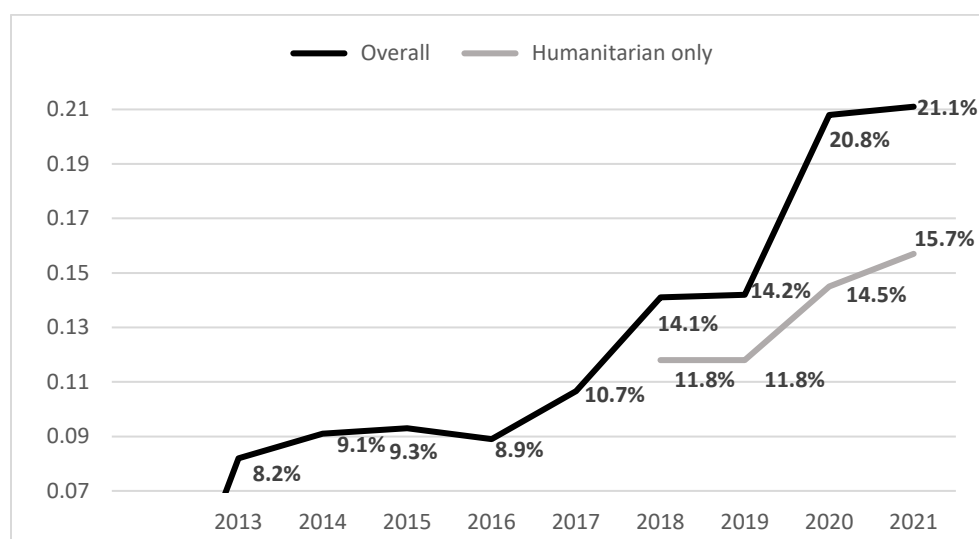
73. Communication and advocacy efforts saw a huge uptick in use of online channels to spotlight gender equality issues and the voices of adolescent girls. A mental health video series about harmful gender-based norms on the UNICEF YouTube channel received more than 6 million views since it premiered in October 2021. There was a 2,045 per cent increase from 2020 on total engagement across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, with the top 15 Twitter posts related to gender equality viewed 982 million times. Further, compared with 2020, 140 per cent more visitors engaged with content focused on women and girls across the UNICEF website, such as the Girls' Education page, which saw a 193 per cent increase in visitors.

4. Resources

74. In line with the United Nations System-wide Action Plan benchmarks, UNICEF has a target of 15 per cent of programme expenditure on advancing gender

equality. This expenditure is calculated by measuring activities and outputs having gender equality as the principal or a significant objective. In 2021, expenditure on gender-transformative results was 21.1 per cent, slightly higher than the 20.8 per cent in 2020, and significantly more than the 14.1 per cent in 2018. Further, it is estimated that 64.4 per cent of total expenditure (approximately 3.9 billion; 4.4 percentage points higher than in 2020) contributes to gender mainstreaming, as measured by outputs where gender equality is either a significant or a marginal objective. The higher reported expenditures are mostly due to better country reporting capabilities as a result of sustained technical capacity provided to country offices. Since targets have been met, UNICEF will tighten the formula in the next gender results cycle to only reflect gender-transformative expenditures that have gender equality as a principal objective.

Figure V
Trends in gender expenditures, 2013–2021



75. As a new feature, UNICEF tracked gender expenditure for programming happening exclusively in emergency contexts. For 2021, the percentage of gender-transformative expenditures in emergency contexts was 15.7 per cent, also above the 15 per cent benchmark, largely the result of significant advocacy and capacity building at the country level.

B. Capacity and accountability on gender results

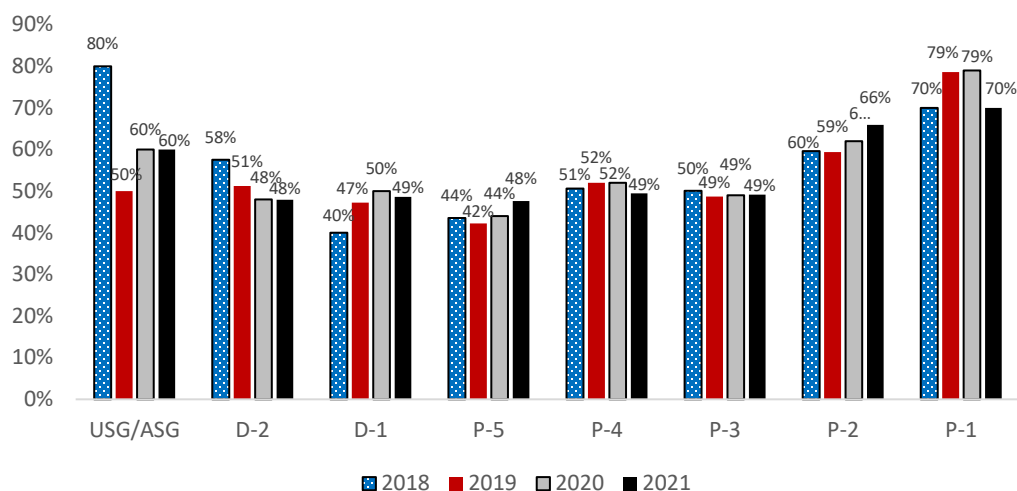
1. Gender capacity and gender parity

76. UNICEF commitment to achieving the Secretary-General’s System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity has met progress over the past four years, including in recruitment, career progression and access to opportunities, and in promoting a safe and healthy work environment. In 2021, UNICEF came closer than ever before to reaching gender parity in staffing, with 48.7 per cent women and 51.3 per cent men, in line with “virtual parity” (53/47) in the United Nations System-wide Action Plan. Efforts to tackle persistent gaps at the P-5 level, including implementing temporary special measures, successfully resulted in virtual parity of 48 per cent women at that level, highlighting the importance of targeted measures to tackle system disparities.

77. Other efforts to address gender disparities and retain female talent are under way. Flexible work, including remote work options, are intended to counter the

negative impact of mobility and relocation on women’s retention. At the country level, UNICEF offices are using strategies to recruit more women that include, among others, targeted talent outreach, improvements to workplace culture and, in emergencies where talent is especially scarce, the creation of junior positions as paid trainees and the recruitment of United Nations Volunteers to build pipelines of female talent. One example of such initiatives is in Nigeria, where UNICEF has hired women drivers (typically a male-dominated position). To promote female leadership, mentoring initiatives exist for both junior and senior staff, such as a programme for women in the WASH sector, and the Female Talent Initiative in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, which welcomed its third cohort in 2021. Much more work is needed, however, to recruit and retain female talent in humanitarian contexts – currently just 30 per cent of staff in emergency duty stations are women (39 per cent if only international professionals are counted).

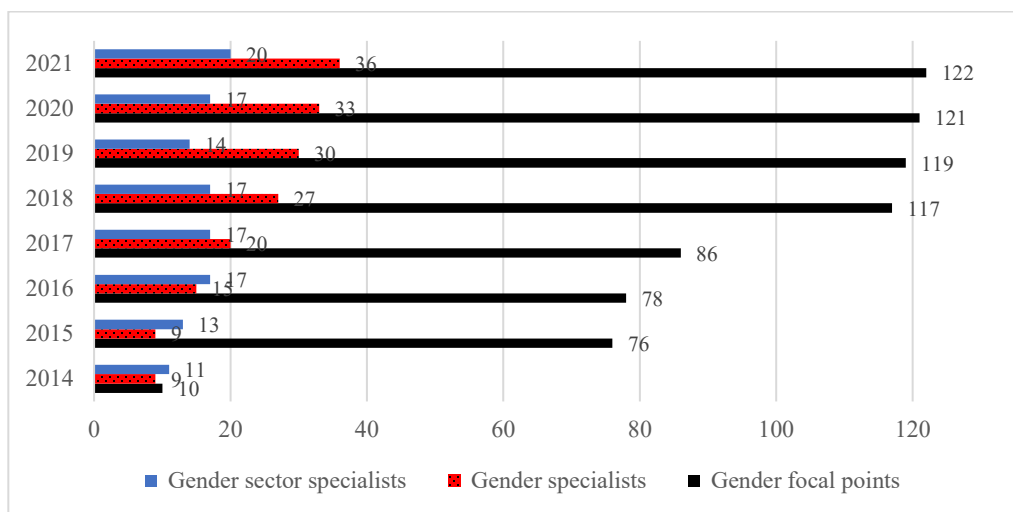
Figure VI
Percentage of female staff at professional and senior management levels, 2018–2021



Note: P-1 to P-5 = Professional level; D-1 and D-2 = Director level; USG/ASG = Under-Secretary-General/Assistant Secretary-General.

78. UNICEF focused on learning priorities identified in the organizational learning plan in 2021, including developing new resources and assets to build staff capacity, rolling out gender, diversity and inclusion training for senior leadership, and updating credentialing for GenderPro (the UNICEF globally accredited course on gender equality) for gender focal points. In 2021, while 122 country offices (out of 128) had an appointed gender focal point, just 36 had dedicated gender expertise, and 20 had sectoral gender expertise. Investment in dedicated capacity, which was integral to establishing a base gender architecture, has not kept pace with the demands of programming and institutional systems to achieve gender priorities. At the end of 2021, UNICEF released new staffing guidance, outlining the minimum gender expertise required in all offices and encouraging the recruitment of gender sectoral expertise. Partnerships with key donors will be central to implementing this guidance.

Figure VII
Gender staffing in UNICEF country offices, 2014–2021



2. Organizational culture, leadership and accountability

79. Driven by strong senior leadership support, UNICEF continued to take action to become a more inclusive, gender-responsive workplace, emphasizing gender-equitable family policies, flexible work modalities, work-life well-being, and zero tolerance for harassment and abuse. An organization-wide survey – the Pulse Check on Workplace Culture – was introduced in 2021 in each UNICEF office, establishing a mechanism to hold heads of office accountable. Responses, which revealed less-positive reactions by female staff relative to male staff in most offices, are informing follow-up actions in 2022.

80. Country-level leadership accountability for delivery of gender results – another factor fundamental to driving gender equality progress overall – has also lagged since 2018. By 2021, still only 62 per cent of country offices had full oversight, leadership and accountability at the appropriate management level to support implementation of gender results. In country management plans, accountability for gender implementation was fully integrated in only 24 countries (with 78 just mentioning it). The Afghanistan Country Office offers an example of good practice: its gender strategy is a standing item in all country management team discussions, and accountability is defined across all sectors under the leadership of the Deputy Representative.

81. In the past two years, UNICEF has ramped up efforts to address these institutional challenges, including strengthening corporate monitoring and accountability systems, and the ability of staff to use them; instituting clearer requirements for gender integration in programme design, execution and monitoring; and providing extensive technical assistance on demand. To cement progress and advance more decisively, the new Gender Action Plan will require all country offices to develop their own gender strategy/action plan, to be overseen by a Gender Working Group that tracks progress and learning.

V. Lessons learned and the way forward

82. Despite pandemic-related disruptions, UNICEF progress towards gender equality overall – both programmatically and institutionally – has been on a positive, if uneven, trajectory. This has been driven by supportive senior leadership and an

Executive Board committed to championing gender equality as a critical development goal.

83. Since 2018, marked advances in such programme areas as menstrual health, girls' learning, preventing child marriage, gender-responsive social protection, WASH and maternal health illustrate the importance of deliberate gender results with clear indicators and targets, and of gender-targeted resourcing. At the same time, resourcing flexibility and expanded partnerships, particularly with the philanthropic and private sectors, have allowed innovation to flourish and catalyse solutions, as demonstrated by results relating to girls' skills and agency, MHH and positive gender socialization. Yet other priorities, such as gender-based violence and harmful practices, girls' secondary education, and girls' HIV vulnerability, remain underresourced and plagued by deep-rooted, stubborn bottlenecks. It is these areas especially where the effects of COVID-19 have led to alarming risks of setbacks. Resources – which have largely trailed need – will have to be stepped up substantially to meet both persistent and emerging challenges, including to effectively confront the urgent disparities facing adolescent girls. Core resources allocated to the UNICEF Gender Action Plan implementation have decreased substantively, from \$19 million for the Gender Action Plan, 2014–2017 to \$4.4 million for the Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021.

84. Institutionally, UNICEF has made considerable advances in gender integration within its internal structures and systems. There have been important shifts in resource allocation and the equal representation of women; developing a gender architecture; promoting a more family-friendly workplace; and cultivating a more inclusive and diverse organizational culture. Looking forward, the key gaps needing attention include accountability shortcomings, particularly at decentralized levels; shortfalls in dedicated gender expertise and resources; and challenges in comprehensively mainstreaming gender equality so that it fully permeates all UNICEF core programming areas and work culture. Ownership of gender equality is a linchpin – although leadership overall is strong, field-level ownership is lacking, with gender concerns still “silo-ed” to gender staff, instead of the collective responsibility of all staff. Similarly, efforts to improve gender parity must also account for intersectionality – between gender, race/ethnicity, age and disability – to properly cultivate a truly inclusive workplace.

85. In response, the Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025, which operationalizes the UNICEF Gender Policy 2021–2030, will take a more ambitious approach to achieving the collective vision of gender equality in UNICEF programmes, workplaces and practices, in order to achieve transformative results for women and girls. This needs more intentional action and investment that go beyond *responding* to also *changing* the underlying barriers that perpetuate inequality. As the effects of the COVID-19 crisis continue to manifest, UNICEF will seek out opportunities for transformative outcomes to “build back better” for every child in need. Keeping attention on the disproportionate impacts on girls and women will remain paramount, to maintain momentum and stay on track to meet the gender equality targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.