

## Adolescent girls at the fore: UNICEF's Gender Action Plan



In the face of multiple intersecting challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, persistent humanitarian crises, and stubbornly entrenched inequalities, UNICEF recognises the unprecedented opportunity the world has to build back in a more just, equitable, and inclusive way—one that offers our children the prospect of a truly gender equal society.

In September, 2021, following on commitments made at the Gender Equality Forum,<sup>1</sup> and after a year-long highly consultative process with UNICEF staff, governments, civil society partners, and young people worldwide, UNICEF introduced a new, collaboratively produced, evidence-driven, and rights-based Gender Action Plan (GAP).<sup>2</sup>

The GAP, 2022–25, alongside a new Gender Policy, 2021–30, recommits UNICEF to gender equality as a core value and an accelerator towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The GAP and Gender Policy recognise that, although many countries have made progress, the aspiration of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030 remains far out of reach.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many of the gains made to date have proven to be quite fragile.

The GAP describes time-bound, targeted actions to advance gender equality across all sectors and in all contexts in which UNICEF works—health, nutrition, education, social policy, child protection, and water, sanitation, and hygiene. In addition to these time-bound targets, the GAP focuses on adolescent girls aged 10–19 years.

Adolescent girls and young people who do not conform to traditional gender norms and expectations face particularly unique and persistent barriers to fulfilling their potential.<sup>4</sup> For example, child marriage, HIV, and malnutrition continue to disproportionately affect girls, especially girls living in poverty and conflict.<sup>5</sup> Violence and discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity remain pervasive inside the home, at school, and across communities worldwide. Fundamental disparities exist between girls and boys in accessing the quality education, skills training, and employment opportunities, which young people need to become fully productive members of society. The heavy burden of unpaid care work, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, stifles

opportunities for girls to participate equally in their economies and societies.<sup>6</sup> The effects of these disparities are felt intergenerationally (eg, early pregnancy can increase the risk of low birthweight, stunting, and other negative outcomes for the children of adolescent girls).<sup>7</sup>

The new GAP thus aims to improve the wellbeing of girls, by supporting their access to quality nutrition and health care, including fulfilment of their sexual and reproductive health and rights; skills training for the future; freedom from gender-based violence and child marriage; dignified menstrual health and hygiene; and social protection and care, all in line with UNICEF's new strategic plan.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond addressing these needs, the new GAP positions UNICEF to play a greater role in promoting girls' leadership, recognising their tremendous capacity and desire to create change.

Adolescent girls are leading a generation that has used the opportunities and challenges of the recent past to spotlight both ongoing systemic injustices and the need for institutions, including UNICEF, to embrace the opportunity to build back better. Adolescent girls are demanding action against sexual harassment and abuse, racial injustice, climate change, inequality, violence, stigma, and discrimination, in addition to demanding action for a reimagined world, in which every child, regardless of gender identity, can fulfil their potential. The voices of these children are central to lasting change.

In solidarity with these young leaders and brave activists, and in response to the pervasive disparities girls face, the new GAP commits UNICEF to supporting and amplifying girls' leadership towards a more equal world. This aspect of gender transformative programming aims to confront the persistent barriers that girls face, by understanding gendered power dynamics and norms at all levels of society and stages of life. Specifically, the GAP sets targets for increased partnerships with girl-led and girls' rights organisations and networks, and it includes mechanisms to hold UNICEF accountable for change. Well established sectors at UNICEF have also committed to include new girl-focused efforts. For example, within the education sector, UNICEF will invest in girl-centred skills and learning, supporting girls to define how and where they learn best, and connecting them with peer networks, mentors, and other services.



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With this gender transformative approach guiding the GAP, UNICEF is also committing to promoting policies and budgets that prioritise investments in gender equality, focusing specifically on adolescent girls. Evidence-based solutions include skills programming for girls to transition from school to a safe workplace with equal pay; supporting fathers and male caregivers to take on increased responsibilities for care work in the home; supporting a new generation of boys as allies and champions in the fight against child marriage and female genital mutilation; and using school-based platforms to educate children about consent and non-violence.

Change starts from within, and UNICEF, through the GAP, recognises that it is not exempt from the pervasiveness of gender inequality. Feminist leaders Joanne Sandler and Anne Marie Goetz wrote that most UN agencies “are long overdue for updating... the tools, incentives, and consequences for non-performance when it comes to clarifying expectations for gender equality”.<sup>9</sup> UNICEF agrees. Therefore, even as the organisation expands its support for gender transformative programming and for the rights, leadership, and wellbeing of adolescent girls, the GAP commits UNICEF to ensuring that its workplaces and practices enable the agency to be a diverse, inclusive, and gender-equal institution. Actions include leadership accountability, through annual reporting to UNICEF’s Executive Board, and governance from an internal steering committee of senior leaders; making gender analysis a mandatory component of programmatic action in all settings, including humanitarian response; investing in a dynamic research agenda that contributes to the global marketplace of ideas regarding adolescent girls and gender equality and to building the agency’s gender capacity; and requiring gender parity at all levels of UNICEF’s workforce, including senior management. Further actions include supporting a core group of gender specialists to provide technical assistance and leadership, while expanding dedicated gender expertise in UNICEF country offices and within sectors (eg, gender and social protection experts in social policy; girls’ education specialists across education teams; and specialists in tackling gender-based violence in protection, emergency, and health sectors).

With UNICEF’s global reach and mandate to uphold the rights of all children, the organisation is positioned to advance gender equality across the life course, in addition to promoting the rights, leadership, and wellbeing of adolescent girls. However, success is not guaranteed. Investments and gender expertise inside UNICEF are currently insufficient to achieve the aims of the GAP. The promises made in these new frameworks require substantive leadership not only within UNICEF, but also the support of governments, donors, civil society, and private sector partners. The new GAP and Gender Policy require UNICEF to think and act in a more innovative, catalytic, and participatory way. These changes should include providing support to girls so they can be innovators and solution makers at the forefront of change, with opportunities to access and control their own resources. The GAP and Gender Policy documents will help guide UNICEF, along with the broader global community that the organisation serves, towards a more gender equal future.

We declare no competing interests.

\**Lauren Rumble, Suzanne Petroni, Omar Abdi, Sanjay Wijesekera, Rosanne Wong, Chernor Bah*  
**lrumble@unicef.org**

UNICEF, New York, NY, 10017, USA (LR, OA, SW, RW); Gender Equality Solutions, Arlington, VA, USA (SP); Purposeful, Freetown, Sierra Leone (CB)

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