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for every child

WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

For UNICEF in West and Central Africa, adolescent girls are a priority, and their leadership is recognized as transformative.

1. Context: What is at stake?

Of the 70 million adolescent girls¹ who overcome barriers every day and contribute to their communities in West and Central Africa (WCA), **45 million** live in the Sahel. Demographic projections indicate that these numbers will grow to 83 million and 52 million (respectively) by 2030.² Many, if not all, deprivations that girls experience are compounded from their early years through adolescence and into adulthood and are based on common root causes such as restricted

access to key social, cultural and political entitlements that are fundamental to the transformation of their lives.³ While the adolescent girl population in WCA accounts for approximately **11 per cent of the global adolescent girl population**, several outcomes disproportionately affect the lives of adolescent girls in this region⁴.

All these issues are interconnected and worsen in conflict or crisis settings.

For example, with each tenfold increase

in conflict-related fatalities, child marriage increases by 7 per cent, while with every 10 per cent change in rainfall due to climate change, child marriage increases by 1 per cent.⁵ The good news is that all of these outcomes **can be prevented** through multisectoral, multidimensional and girl-centred responses that not only address the vulnerabilities that girls face, but also amplify their leadership, voices and agency.



Six of the top 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are in WCA. Among women aged 20–24 years, 11 per cent were married by the age of 15 and 32 per cent by the age of 18.



WCA has the second-highest adolescent birth rate in the world. Twenty-four per cent of young women aged 20–24 gave birth before the age of 18, and maternal conditions are among the top five causes of mortality for adolescent girls aged 15–19.



One in every two adolescent girls of secondary-school-age is out of school, amounting to **20.6 million girls**. Literacy rates



are among the lowest in the world and are lower for adolescent girls and young women (68 per cent compared with 78 per cent for their male counterparts).



Nine out of 10 new HIV infections among adolescents in WCA are among girls. While new HIV infections among adolescents have decreased by 49 per cent since 2010, the 90 per cent target for 2025 remains out of reach, especially for adolescent girls.



One in five ever-married adolescent girls has experienced **partner violence**, while **one in 16** young women aged 18–29 **report** having had **forced sex in childhood**.



Eighteen out of the 27 African countries where female genital mutilation (FGM) is practised are in WCA; most cases occur before adolescence and affect women and girls throughout their lives.



Gender equality remains out of reach in WCA. Twenty-four of the 25 WCA countries with available information are rated as facing either major or significant challenges on Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) progress, with only six years left to reach the 2030 targets.

2. What is UNICEF doing to support adolescent girls?

UNICEF's mandate around adolescent girls' rights has been clearly articulated since the first Gender Action Plan was released in 2014. For the WCA region, a 25-year review of the Girls' Chapter in the Beijing Platform for Action revealed some progress for girls,⁶ but **at nowhere near the level of our ambition, nor the ambition of adolescent girls.**

In 2022, UNICEF in WCA recommitted to protecting adolescent girls' rights and to 'doing business differently' with and for them, paying increased attention to girls'

decision-making and partnering with local girls' networks.

We have also listened to girls across WCA. **They have expressed concern over their limited access to quality education, inclusive health services and decision-making spaces.** We have heard stories of unimaginable violence and exploitation while they **call for an end** to such violence and they **have no tolerance for continued inequalities or environmental degradation.**

Twenty-five years after the landmark adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, WCA has observed:

- ✓ increases in girls' school enrolment in both primary and secondary levels, including increases in literacy rates
- ✓ decreases in fertility rates among adolescent girls
- ✓ positive indications of reductions in both FGM and child marriage.

3. The WCA girl-intentional approach

The WCA girl-intentional approach outlines five pillars for multisectoral action. Read on for some innovative advances that UNICEF is supporting.

1. Putting adolescent girls at the centre of policy development and multisectoral programmes designed for them

Nothing for them can be achieved without them.

- All **11** country programme documents prepared and/or submitted over the 2023–2024 period⁷ have adolescent girls' rights at their centre, with an emphasis on prioritizing girls in sectoral

policies and programmes in order to ensure that they are consulted, heard and supported to make decisions about their lives.

- **Four Adolescent Girls Advisory Boards (AGABs)** have been created in UNICEF offices in **Cameroon**. To date, 46 adolescent girls have been engaged in strategic planning moments and have carried out four microprojects to contribute to their communities since 2023. AGAB interests include child labour, nutrition, early pregnancies, inclusion in health facilities, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health.

2. Ensuring access to quality services where and when girls need them

It's not about changing girls; it's about transforming systems to ensure quality and equitable services for girls.

- In **Mali**, UNICEF and its partners are supporting front-line workers and parents to promote gender equality and adolescent girls' rights through **gender and age competencies** aimed at eliminating bias towards girls in service delivery and parental support. To date, 250 front-line workers and 110 parents have participated in the programme. The initiative has also supported 5,345 girls to access gender-based violence prevention and response services by providing information about where, when and how to seek services.
- In **Côte d'Ivoire**, public–private partnerships have given rise to **Girl Power**. Five centres (Abidjan, Guedipko, Guingereni, and Bouake 1 and 2) are functional, providing services for over 1,000 adolescent girls around skills acquisition, income-generation activities and personal autonomy. In **Sao Tome and Principe**, UNICEF and the Youth Institute supported 600 girls in 2023 to obtain life skills and participate in digital-skills learning initiatives to support their transition to adulthood and paid work opportunities.





3. Transforming gender norms that leave girls behind

Breaking the intergenerational transfer of gender inequalities

- In **Benin**, 75xElles matched 52 women from diverse sectors with 75 young women to provide them with tailored mentoring on leadership and personal and professional development. In **Senegal**, Ailes pour Elles connected 32 young women with 16 women champions to improve their confidence and enhance their leadership, communication and decision-making skills. Both programmes will be refined and replicated to expand

intergenerational partnerships for girls.

- In **Burkina Faso**, gender norms are shifting through multisectoral actions. Through the gender-responsive parental support component of the CASH+ programme, reaching 6,336 parents, shifts in the distribution of household tasks were observed as boys became increasingly involved. Male engagement in girls' schooling at secondary level has contributed to an increase in non-traditional fields of study among girls such as industrial mechanics, electricity and/or scientific disciplines.

4. Strategic partnerships with adolescent girls' networks/groups and partner influence

Being the change we want to see

- In six provinces across **Chad**, a network of over 200 Super Banat (translated as Super-Girls) are committed to peer education, community action and influencing decisions to lead the changes they want for themselves and their communities. Developed with the Ministry of Culture, the Super Banat also engage national and other actors for change in the areas of gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and climate action. Girls' clubs have been established in **The Gambia** to address issues of climate action and the prevention of all forms of gender-based violence.
- **Adolescent girls and young women are leading climate action in WCA.** In **Guinea**, girls are leading reforestation efforts and climate advocacy, while girls in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** contribute to decision-making around climate policies. The Youth Climate Council in **Ghana** includes young women leading advocacy, most notably around single-use plastics and other climate-mitigation strategies.





5. Generating, using and sharing evidence to monitor progress on adolescent girls' rights and resilience

Measure what we treasure.

- An ongoing mixed-method **multi-country study on adolescent girls' resilience in Mali, Mauritania and the Niger** will contribute to a regional model on girls' resilience in the Sahel developed with girls, parents and community members.
- In **Nigeria**, girl-led research on social and gender norms has been conducted in Katsina and Sokoto states. Thirty girls and young women were trained on data-collection methods to enable them

to survey 548 girls and conduct in-depth interviews with 40 girls and key stakeholders. Co-creation workshops with girls were held to identify solutions to the challenges identified in the data.

Girls are calling upon governments, community leaders, parents and their peers to realize their potential, take action in removing obstacles in laws, policies and services, and work to eliminate discriminatory practices. **Girls in WCA are ready and willing to lead a new era for equality and equity.** UNICEF in WCA is proud to accompany them. We will continue to stand with them and ensure that NO girl is left behind.

- 1 Aged 10–19 years.
- 2 Aged 10–19 years, based on data from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2023. Available at <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.
- 3 UNICEF, "A bolder vision for and with adolescent girls: advancing a girl-intentional approach," Background paper in Being Intentional about Gender-transformative Strategies (Florence, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2021).
- 4 Data sources on adolescent girls are drawn from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) (2014–2022), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics' (UIS) school population estimates and other national surveys as compiled and presented in the *UNICEF Adolescent Data Portal, The State of the World's Children 2023* and *UNICEF Statistics, 2024*; the *UNICEF 2023 Snapshot on HIV and AIDS: West and Central Africa*; Sachs, J.D., LaFortune, G., Fuller, G. and Drumm, E. "Implementing the SDG Stimulus," in *Sustainable Development Report 2023*; UNICEF, *Early childbearing and teenage pregnancy rates by country*; UNICEF, "Female Genital Mutilation: A global concern. 2024 Update."
- 5 UNICEF, *Is an End to Child Marriage Within Reach?* (New York, 2023).
- 6 UNICEF WCARO, *Forging Forward for Adolescent Girls in West and Central Africa* (Dakar, Senegal, 2022).
- 7 Benin, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

Let's stand with Girls **#Power4Girls**

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