



PRESIDENT
ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF
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As Africa's first female Head of State, I know what girls can achieve. I also know how the lives of millions of adolescent girls are beset with obstacles that stifle their potential: they are taken out of school in order to work; forcibly married off while still legally children; pressured to bear children too early, thereby risking their very survival; they are three times more vulnerable to HIV infection; vulnerable to many forms of violence against women – incest, sexual abuse, exploitation, trafficking, rape in conflict situations and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation.

On the other hand, the evidence of the social, economic and political benefits of investing in the lives of adolescent girls is overwhelming. The fight against poverty and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals both depend on equity, on how much and how wisely we invest in our youth, with priority given to the most vulnerable and at risk young women and adolescent girls.

That is why I am so encouraged that the United Nations, through the Adolescent Girls Task Force (UNAGTF), is focusing the expertise of six agencies on improving the lot of adolescent girls, and through them of generations to come. This programme aims to make sure that girls are empowered to delay marriage and childbearing and prevent HIV; that they are safe from violence; that they receive the health care they need; that they attend school – especially secondary school, which has huge pay-offs for breaking inter-generational cycles of poverty; that they are counted in government planning and that they have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

The UNAGTF will enable these six UN agencies to more effectively apply their unique strengths and value-added as they jointly support national governments in implementing effective programming for marginalized adolescent girls. The government of Liberia, including its Ministries of Gender & Development, Education, Justice, and Planning & Economic Affairs, as well as key NGOs, looks forward to working with UNAGTF in making adolescent girls a top priority in future development strategies and programmes.

We call on all other developing countries to follow the example of Liberia in wholeheartedly embracing support for the future of adolescent girls. Their future is ours.



ACCELERATING EFFORTS TO ADVANCE THE RIGHTS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS: A UN JOINT STATEMENT

3 MARCH 2010

As leaders gather for the fifteen-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action, we, the members of the United Nations Adolescent Girls Task Force, jointly pledge to intensify our efforts to fulfil the human rights of adolescent girls. During the next five years, we will increase our agencies' support to developing countries to advance key policies and programs that empower the hardest-to-reach adolescent girls, particularly those aged 10 to 14 years.

Many of the 600 million adolescent girls living in developing countries remain invisible in national policies and programs. Millions live in poverty, are burdened by gender discrimination and inequality, and are subject to multiple forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, such as child labour, child marriage and other harmful practices. The full potential of these girls and their contribution to their communities have yet to be realised.

We are convinced that educated, healthy and skilled adolescent girls will help build a better future, advance social justice, support economic development, and combat poverty. They will stay in school, marry later, delay childbearing, have healthier children, and earn better incomes that will benefit themselves, their families, communities and nations. Investing in their rights and empowerment will help accelerate the achievement of internationally-agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

We will work with governments, civil society, communities, adolescent girls and boys on five strategic priorities:

- Educate adolescent girls:** Ensure adolescent girls have access to quality education and complete schooling, focusing on their transition from primary to post-primary education and training, including secondary education, and pathways between the formal and non-formal systems.
- Improve adolescent girls' health:** Ensure adolescent girls' access to age-appropriate health and nutrition information and services, including life skills-based sexuality education, HIV prevention, and sexual and reproductive health.
- Keep adolescent girls free from violence:** Prevent and protect girls from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation, and ensure that girls who experience violence receive prompt protection, services and access to justice.
- Promote adolescent girl leaders:** Ensure that adolescent girls gain essential economic and social skills and are supported by mentors and resources to participate in community life.
- Count adolescent girls:** Work with partners to collect, analyse, and use data on adolescent girls to advocate for, develop and monitor evidence-based policies and programs that advance their well-being and realise their human rights.

We will work in a coordinated manner with other relevant global initiatives. We call on Member States to join us in accelerating efforts to protect the rights of adolescent girls. Together, we can build a future of gender equality and social justice.

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ADOLESCENT GIRLS HOLD THE KEY TO THE FUTURE

Missed opportunities vs. the promise of investing in girls

Despite their huge potential, adolescent girls face discrimination and multiple rights violations on a daily basis. A typical adolescent girl in a developing country is taken out of school, married before she is ready and pressured to bear children before her body is fully developed, thus risking her health and even her life. Highly vulnerable to HIV, she is often the victim of violence, with limited power to negotiate her own safety. She often works long hours under dangerous conditions. She has few opportunities and choices and no say in decisions that affect her. She is the silent target of many forms of violence – from incest to sexual abuse and exploitation, to trafficking, rape and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation.

Adolescent girls' vulnerabilities increase in times of natural disasters, armed conflict, displacement, migration, and domestic work. Stripped of the protection of their homes, governments and family structures, girls are frequently victims of harassment and sexual abuse – for example, in refugee camps. Unfortunately, a lack of awareness on the part of policy-makers, combined with a lack of data documenting these realities, have rendered these girls invisible when policy and budgetary priorities are defined.

Failure to invest in adolescent girls results in missed opportunities for the girls, their communities and millions of people living in poverty.

But, when adolescent girls are empowered, they become a potent force for positive change. Not only is this a human rights imperative; it is one of the smartest investments any country can make.

There are 500 million adolescent girls in the developing world, however their full potential has yet to be seen. When educated, healthy, equipped with the right skills and opportunities and living in safety and dignity, they hold the key to unlocking many of the world's most pressing problems: reducing poverty, advancing gender equality, propelling countries' social and economic development, halting the spread of HIV, reducing maternal mortality and ending violence against women, to name just a few. As educated mothers, they will invest in the survival, education and success of the next generation. As leaders of both today and tomorrow, they can be a force for social cohesion, progress and peace.



The United Nations Pledge: Empowering Adolescent Girls

The UN Adolescent Girls Task Force supports governments and civil society in the developing world in advancing the rights of adolescent girls. Building on the successes of existing UN initiatives, the Task Force promotes key policies and programmes that empower the hardest-to-reach girls, particularly the 10- to 14-year-old age group – crucial years for breaking the cycle of exclusion and exploitation. The UN Adolescent Girls Task Force focuses its efforts on strategic areas that have high impact on the lives of adolescent girls, on their communities and on their countries' development. The Task Force aims to show that targeted investments combined with political will produce measurable results. Up to now, many adolescent girls have been invisible to development efforts because they are out of school, married or working. This invisibility is what the UN hopes to change.

UNFPA and UNICEF serve as co-chairs at the global level, with other members of the Task Force – ILO, UNESCO, UN WOMEN, WHO and UNHCR – leading or contributing in their areas of expertise. At the country level, comprehensive programmes are to be led by a variety of actors, depending on the focus of activities that best respond to the national priorities and context. As part of its sustained commitment to adolescent girls, the United Nations Foundation is providing financial support to country-level activities of the UN System in support of the health and development of adolescent girls. Since its founding, the UN Foundation has invested more than US

\$44 million in programmes to address the rights and needs of adolescent girls and has provided vital leadership to a community of girl advocates and champions. Currently, the UN Foundation is leading an awareness and fund-raising campaign in the United States -Girl Up – which will, in a first phase, raise \$2 million for UN-supported activities in four countries.

Building on girls' strengths

Programmes will focus on increasing the knowledge, skills and capacities of adolescent girls by investing in their education, health, protection and participation. This will enable them to discover, develop and express their talents, not only for themselves but for their countries' development as well.

The UNAGTF promotes and protects the rights of adolescent girls through:

Advocacy to make adolescent girls a priority in national policies

Promoting investments in programmes that support adolescent girls' rights

Focusing on equity approaches that aim to reach the most vulnerable

Working with governments, civil society and communities on the following five strategic priorities:

1 Educate adolescent girls: Ensure that adolescent girls have access to quality education and complete schooling, focusing on their transition from primary to post-primary education and training, including secondary education, and pathways between formal and non-formal systems.

2 Improve adolescent girls' health: Ensure that adolescent girls have access to age-appropriate health and nutrition

information and services, including life skills-based sexuality education, HIV prevention, and sexual and reproductive health.

3 Keep adolescent girls free from violence: Prevent and protect girls from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation, and ensure that girls who experience violence receive prompt services and access to justice. Specific attention will be paid to girls in displacement, as they are increasingly prone to abuse.

4 Promote adolescent girl leaders: Ensure that adolescent girls gain essential economic and social skills and are supported by mentors and resources to enable them to participate in community life.

5 Count adolescent girls: Work with partners to collect, analyse, and use data on adolescent girls to advocate for, develop and monitor evidence-based policies and programmes that advance their well-being and realize their human rights.

The power of partnerships—Delivering as One

The UN agencies working together have partnerships, networks and expertise across programming areas such as women's empowerment and gender equality, child protection, education and skills training, economic empowerment, health including sexual and reproductive health and violence against women, as well as across methodological approaches. This expertise will be pooled to develop programmes that are substantively more effective than the sum of separate interventions carried out by single agencies.

The UNAGTF, working with governments, civil society, communities and adolescent girls themselves, aims to empower adolescent girls and enable them to reach their full potential.

Investing in adolescent girls is a “best bet” for development.





WHY INVESTING IN GIRLS PAYS OFF

There are some 500 million adolescent girls in the world and most live in developing countries. They are part of the largest generation of young people the world has ever seen, yet their full potential is still to be realized.

Girls experience adolescence and their entry into adulthood with many strikes against them. They are discriminated against as females, and consequently face diminished opportunities and choices. They are often poorly educated, subject to serious health risks and threatened by violence. Their views and concerns usually go unheard.

The most marginalized, vulnerable and hardest-to-reach adolescent girls tend to be “off the radar” of most development programmes. Evaluations of youth programmes consistently found that a majority of programme participants tended to be older, educated, urban young men. Yet investment in adolescent girls – especially those who are marginalized – is urgently needed to accelerate the achievement of all of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).



Identifying these girls, reaching them and implementing programmes that have an impact on their lives requires careful strategies. Up to now, these girls have been largely overlooked, either because they are not in school, they are already isolated by marriage or they are invisible as domestic servants. Information about girls between the ages of 10 and 14 is particularly scarce as data is not routinely collected – even though this age group presents a crucial “window” for making progress in meeting the MDGs and for preventing a number of the rights violations that adolescent girls experience.

The challenges

Education vs. child labour

Girls – more than **70 million** of them – make up more than half of the 143 million children and adolescents who are out of school.

Girls' primary school completion rates are below **50 per cent** in most poor countries. In 19 African countries, the secondary school completion rate for adolescent girls is **below 5 per cent**. Globally, in fact, most married adolescent girls will not complete secondary education.

Many girls leave school early in order to help support their families. Girls under the age of 16 make up more than **90 per cent** of the global domestic work force. Often unskilled and uneducated, many resort to unsafe or exploitative work.

Marriage and motherhood

One girl in seven in developing countries is married before age 15, and **38 per cent** are married before age 18. This means that **82 million girls** in developing countries will be married before their 18th birthday.

Rate of child marriage in rural areas in the developing world are twice the rates in cities. In the least developed countries, **49 per cent** of girls are married before age 18.

Girls from the poorest households are **three times** as likely to be married before age 18 as girls from the wealthiest quintile.

Many young wives become pregnant before their bodies are mature enough to safely deliver a child. **One-quarter to one-half** of girls in developing countries become mothers before age 18.

Married adolescent girls generally are unable to negotiate condom use or to refuse sexual relations. They are often married to older men with more sexual experience, which puts them at risk of contracting STIs, including HIV.



Health

An estimated **100 million to 140 million** girls and women worldwide have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and more than 3 million girls are at risk for cutting each year on the African continent alone.

Complications of pregnancy are the leading cause of death and disability among girls aged 15 to 19.

16 million girls aged 15 to 19 give birth in developing countries each year. Girls aged 10 to 14 are **five times** more likely than women aged 20 to 24 to die in childbirth; girls 15 to 19 are up to twice as likely.

Obstetric fistula, one of the most devastating consequences of early marriage, affects more than **2 million** girls and young women worldwide, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2008, girls accounted for **60 per cent** of the more than 5 million youth living with HIV. In sub-Saharan Africa, some 70 per cent of new HIV infections are among young women.

In 14 African countries, young women are 2.5 times more likely to be infected with HIV than young men.

Malnutrition often affects girls more than other family members and causes serious complications in pregnancy. Malnutrition in girls can stunt growth, increasing the likelihood of obstructed labour. Nutritional anemia affects approximately **50 per cent of girls** in developing countries. It increases the risk for miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and maternal death.

Violence

Across the world, adolescent girls are at especially high risk of violence, abuse and discrimination simply because they are girls. This includes domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse, date rape and violence, marital rape, sexual exploitation, trafficking, incest, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage and forced marriage, as well as female infanticide, so-called honour killings and murder by intimate partners.

The World Health Organization estimates that **150 million girls** under the age of 18 experienced forced sex or other forms of sexual violence in 2002.

Up to **50 per cent** of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16.

Physical or sexual violence to girls over 15 is most often at the hands of an intimate partner.

Approximately **30 per cent** of women report forced sexual initiation. The percentage is even higher among those who were under 15, with up to 45 percent reporting that the experience was forced.

Married girls are also at higher risk than women who marry later for sexual and domestic violence at the hands of their husbands. They are also more likely to believe that a husband might sometimes be justified in beating his wife.

The opportunities

The impact of girls' education and empowerment on health and family wellbeing

Despite the inequities adolescent girls face, a growing body of evidence indicates that respecting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of adolescent girls has a positive catalytic effect on societies as a whole and contributes to the achievement of gender equality and poverty alleviation as outlined in the MDGs.

When women and girls over 16 earn income, they reinvest **90 per cent** of it in their families, as compared to men who invest only 30 to 40 per cent.

Each year of secondary schooling increases girls' future wages by **10 to 20 per cent** (significantly higher than the 5 to 15 per cent rate of return on an extra year of schooling for boys).

A World Bank study of 100 countries found that every 1 per cent increase in the proportion of women with secondary education boosts a country's annual per capita income growth rate by about 0.3 percentage points.

Educated women are more likely to **resist abuses** such as domestic violence, traditions like female genital cutting and discrimination at home, in society or the workplace.

The positive impact of girls' education has been shown to carry on to future generations, resulting in better health outcomes among women, their children and eventually their grandchildren.

Each extra year of a mother's schooling cuts infant mortality by between **5 and 10 per cent**.

If mothers have a primary school education, the mortality rate for their children under 5 is halved: they provide better nutrition and health care and spend more on their children.

Young women who are educated delay childbearing, thus avoiding child and maternal mortality. They are better able to ensure the health and education of their children. They are better managers of resources and custodians of their environment. In addition, the girls' rights to postpone marriage and childbearing has a positive impact for the global population.

The solution

The impact of girls' social and economic empowerment

Adolescent girls are a priceless resource the world can no longer afford to waste. This is why the UN Adolescent Girls Task Force (UNAGTF) is working with governments and civil society to correct the inequities girls face in education, health, vulnerability to violence and participation. The goal is to enable girls to realize their potential to lead empowered, healthy, productive lives and to expand their opportunities and choices to fulfill their rights, plan their future and employ their untapped abilities for the development of their countries.





Paving the Way to a Brighter Future

UN agencies take action to meet adolescent girls' needs

In much of rural Malawi, a girl who is considered “marginalized” is not the exception; she is often in the majority. “This is a girl who lacks opportunities,” says Emmily Kamwendo of UNFPA. “At 12 or 13, she is vulnerable to gender-based violence, but she has no idea how to protect herself. She may come from a disadvantaged background, she may be an orphan in a child-headed household or she may simply have no support, even if she has parents.”

If there is a school in her village, this girl may not be able to attend because she cannot afford school supplies or a uniform. Her parents may keep her at home to do chores, or send her out to work in a neighbour’s fields to earn income for the family. “Many people in these communities don’t value education,” says Ms. Kamwendo, “especially for girls.”

Risking pregnancy, HIV for pocket-money

And if she does manage to go to school, she may fall behind because she stays home each time she has her period for lack of sanitary supplies. Or her teacher may force her to have sex in exchange for small amounts of money and gifts which are welcomed by her family. In a country where rates of HIV are very high, she risks infection but she cannot ask the man to use a condom. “She’s not likely to have any negotiating power,” says Ms. Kamwendo. “The person with the resources has the upper hand.” In any case, she may feel the pocket money she receives is worth risking HIV because it enables her to go to school.

However, if she gets pregnant she will drop out. Her family hopes the man will marry her, but he is already married and does not even acknowledge her baby. In the meantime, because her body is not yet fully mature, she risks serious complications in childbirth, such as fistula. At this point her prospects look bleak indeed.

UN agencies team up to serve adolescent girls

The UN Adolescent Girls Task Force (UNAGTF) is bringing together the diverse expertise and successful programmes of UNICEF, UNFPA, WHO and UNESCO to support government efforts to address each obstacle in the path of adolescent girls, especially those between the ages of 10 and 14. The programme will begin by focusing on two districts where adolescent girls are most disadvantaged, and will later expand to other districts.

Reversing a Dead-end Adolescence

For girls in Malawi, life consists mostly of drudgery with few opportunities. Fewer than a quarter of girls graduate from primary school. More girls than boys drop out due to factors that undermine girls’ education, including secondary school fees, economic pressures, early marriage and early childbearing.² By the time girls turn 15, more than half are not in school; only 54 per cent of girls between the ages of 15 and 24 can read and write³ and 26 per cent of girls are engaged in child labour.⁴

Nearly half of all girls in Malawi are married by the age of 19⁵ and in some communities, the proportion is even higher. In the country as a whole, one in four girls between the ages of 15 and 19 already has a child.⁶ Girls who marry young tend to have more children than women who marry later.⁷

In 2007, nearly 10 per cent of girls between the ages of 15 and 24 had HIV.⁸ Girls and young women of this age group account for 58 per cent of all HIV infections in Malawi,⁹ and girls are four times more likely to be HIV positive than boys.¹⁰

Approximately 65 per cent of girls experience some form of abuse during their lifetimes, compared to 35 per cent of boys.¹¹

¹ UNICEF (2010).

² Ibid.

³ UNDP (2005).

⁴ Girls Discovered: Global Maps of Adolescent Girls (2010).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The Guttmacher Institute (2005).

⁷ Malawi National Census (2008).

⁸ UNICEF (2010).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ WHO (2005).

¹¹ UNICEF (2010).

The programme's **education** component, led by UNICEF, will offer scholarships to enable girls to pay the incidental costs of school, making them less vulnerable to the enticements of older men. If girls fall behind by missing years of school – perhaps because of pregnancy – a “second chance” education programme has an accelerated, nine-month course designed to bring them up to grade level. If they still fail to meet the standard, vocational training will be offered to teach them marketable skills such as tailoring, bricklaying or animal husbandry. Because girls often fail to excel in math and science, UNESCO provides “Science Camps” where girls can improve their skills in these areas, which are highly desirable in the job market. If they need extra help in school, mentoring will be offered so that girls can learn from their more successful peers.

The UNAGTF programme's **health** component will expand an existing “stop early marriage” campaign with support from WHO and UNFPA. These agencies will also provide life skills-based sex education and information about preventing HIV, as well as access to youth-friendly health services that target adolescent girls and include family planning and access to condoms.

Through Victim Support Units and the Ministry of Gender, the programme will equip girls to develop essential skills to protect them from gender-based **violence**, as well as strengthening safe school campaigns. And since youth clubs usually attract only boys, UNFPA will provide a “safe space”: girls-only clubs where girls can share their concerns and mount their own campaigns to combat gender-based violence. The goal is for activities to be carried out by the girls themselves. UNFPA will fund an NGO that can mobilize the girls to carry out campaigns against gender-based violence and early marriage, reaching out to other girls, community members, boys and local leaders on these issues. And since girls in Malawi rarely speak up in public settings, the clubs offer an opportunity for them to gain confidence and develop their **leadership** skills.

UNFPA and UNICEF will generate **data** on adolescent girls along with best practice models to be disseminated at the national level to make the situation of adolescent girls more visible in the public debate.

The programme will work closely with the Ministries of Youth and Gender, District Executive Committees and school committees that have intimate knowledge of local populations and can identify those girls who are most in need of support. “This programme is holistic because we’re creating a package of interventions,” says Ms. Kamwendo. “We’re using the different comparative advantages of the various UN agencies to bring together all the services required by these adolescent girls. Some of these services might even save lives.”



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Young Girls at the Center of Action

UN Agencies Joins Hands to reach a ‘Lost Generation’

“Our understanding of vulnerability,” says Fadumo Qasim Dayib of UNICEF Liberia, “is a girl who is out of school, working on the streets forced to earn money for her family; a girl who lives with a single mother who may not be able to send her to school and may actually be exploiting her; a girl who is sexually exploited either by strangers or her own relatives; a 12-year-old who is pregnant with her second child; girls of 13 to 16 who are married; orphans, girls living on the streets and daughters of commercial sex workers.” Ms. Dayib also identifies “at-risk” girls who are engaging in high risk behaviour, such as transactional or commercial sex.

UN agencies target “invisible” girls

Girls like these have often been overlooked in development programmes, but that is about to change. In 2011, the UN Adolescent Girls Task Force (UNAGTF), a global initiative of six UN agencies working together to advance the rights of adolescent girls, is supporting groundbreaking programming in four countries, including Liberia. In its first year, the Liberia programme will target highly vulnerable girls aged 10 to 19 in two counties, with special focus on girls 10 to 14.

These critical, formative years present a window of opportunity for helping girls delay early marriage and childbearing; protecting them from violence and enabling them to continue their education. At least 10,000 girls will be reached through an awareness-raising and information campaign on radio and in print. The programme will also support the government in developing a national social welfare policy designed to benefit millions of vulnerable girls. In Liberia, the overall programme is led by UNICEF working with UNFPA, WHO, UNESCO and UNWOMEN.

The programme’s multi-faceted package of interventions targeting these girls consists of activities in five priority areas:

1. **literacy**, access to schooling and life and livelihood skills, including HIV prevention (led by UNESCO with UNICEF)
2. sexual and reproductive **health** and HIV-prevention (led by WHO and UNFPA)
3. **protection** from harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and early marriage (led by UNICEF working with UNWOMEN)
4. **participation**, empowerment and adolescent leadership (also led by UNICEF with UNWOMEN).

Liberia’s Vulnerable Girls

Because of Liberia’s 14-year civil war, today’s young people grew up without basic education, health services, skill-building or employment opportunities. By the end of the conflict in 2003, it is estimated that more than 80 per cent of displaced Liberian girls under 15 had had abortions. In 2008, rape was the most frequently reported crime in Liberia, with girls aged 10 to 14 the most frequent victims.² Today in Monrovia, the capital, only 67 per cent of girls are enrolled in secondary school, compared to 91.3 per cent of boys.² In rural areas, 46 per cent of girls are married by age 18. Each of these statistics hints at the real lives of thousands of young girls who are facing adulthood unprepared, unprotected, without support, voiceless and unseen.

¹UNFPA. (2010). Fact Sheet

²UNICEF (2008). State of the World’s Children Report 2009.

³ María Elena Ruiz Abril. (2008). Girls Vulnerability Assessment. Government of Liberia.

5. a cross-cutting **public information** initiative on data collection and advocacy is designed to reach 10,000 girls with information about their rights. (UNICEF will consolidate data collected by the other UN agencies.)

Working with government and civil society partners

The programme will work closely with the Ministries of Gender and Development, Education, Justice and Planning to ensure that support for marginalized adolescent girls is a long-term priority at the forefront of national planning. At the community level, the programme will be implemented on the ground by NGOs with a proven track-record of reaching this frequently inaccessible group: Samaritan's Purse and Population Services International, as well as local groups such as Children's Assistance Programme and Family Planning Association of Liberia.

"The NGOs will implement activities in a holistic fashion, targeting individual girls," says Ms. Dayib of UNICEF. "With every girl we will not only look at health, we'll look at protection, empowerment, participation and education, with HIV-prevention as a cross-cutting issue. We plan to follow each girl from before the interventions until the end so that we can see the difference each intervention has made. Several UN agencies working together can be far more effective than each agency working alone."

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Combating Harmful Practices

UN Agencies Boost Action for Adolescent Girls

In Ethiopia's Afar region, an 11-year old girl stands alone on a parched hillside, tending goats. When she was nine she underwent the most severe form of female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), which has left her in constant pain and barely able to urinate. In addition to preserving her marriageability, one reason for the procedure is to protect her from rape – a common threat to girls like her who work alone outdoors. When she marries – probably soon – the circumciser will use a knife a few days before the wedding to reopen the stitches.

Of all the harmful traditional practices that affect women, FGM/C takes the lead in bringing long-term psychological, physical and social devastation. According to the 2005 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey, FGM/C prevalence in Afar is 91.6 per cent.

The UNFPA/UNICEF Joint Programme on the accelerated abandonment of FGM/C began working in six districts in Afar in 2008. Initiatives are in place to promote social change within practicing communities through the deployment of trained FGM/C community dialogue facilitators, health workers and community members, including religious and clan leaders, law enforcement bodies, circumcisers, women and youth of both sexes.

To date, 135 trained health workers have been educating communities about the harmful health consequences of the practice. Sixty Traditional Birth Attendants, trained to enhance their reproductive health skills and increase their awareness of the risks associated with the practice, have been equipped and deployed to the communities to serve as agents of change. The programme also trained 1,340 Community Dialogue Facilitators who have conducted 3,900 community dialogue sessions reaching more than 150,000 people. As a result of this campaign, more than 200 circumcisers have publicly vowed to stop the practice. Two of the six districts have formally announced the abandonment of FGM/C. More than 4,000 girls have so far been saved from FGM/C in the six districts – an unprecedented success in the history of Afar region.

The dangers of early marriage

In Ethiopia's Amhara region, half of the girls are married before they are 15, usually to an older man whom they have never met. They are under pressure to bear children as soon as possible, but their bodies are not ready. Many die in childbirth or suffer serious injury or complications such as obstetric fistula, which leaves them incontinent, leaking urine and feces. Once this happens, many girls are ostracized or driven from their homes. The condition is reversible with surgery, but few know this or have access to medical care. Also, once the girls are married, their education is at an end. They have little contact with anyone outside

“This is an opportunity for all the agencies to come together in the spirit of “One UN” and of recent UN reforms and to map out who’s doing what, so that we can coordinate better, increase effectiveness, avoid duplication and scale up successful programmes,” says Helen Amdemikael of UNFPA in Ethiopia.

their husband's family. To avoid being married, many young girls run away to the city, where they are usually snapped up as house servants or sex workers. Many contract HIV.

Since 2005, UNFPA has supported two highly successful programmes in Amhara aimed at decreasing the incidence of child marriage and helping its victims. Using incentives, reward mechanisms and community dialogue to change traditional attitudes about girls, Berhane Hewan has offered safe spaces, knowledge, skills and resources to some 11,000 high-risk girls so they can delay marriage and continue their schooling. Another programme, Biruh Tesfa, provides trained female mentors for girls who work in urban slums. Girls' clubs offer a support network and teach functional literacy, life and livelihoods skills and HIV-prevention to more than 10,000 girls.

UN agencies expand successful programmes

Now these and a range other UN programmes for adolescent girls in Ethiopia are about to be scaled up, strengthened and harmonized as they are brought under the umbrella of the United Nations Flagship Programme on Gender. To maximize the impact of all these initiatives, the UN in Ethiopia is helping the government to develop a broad strategy to address gender perspectives (or disparities) in general, with a focus on girls in particular. The Flagship Programme, with a component dedicated to advancing the rights of girls, is designed to directly engage and benefit at least 15 per cent of the estimated ten million adolescent girls in Ethiopia.

Gender-focused activities that up to now have been supported unilaterally by various UN agencies will henceforth be coordinated under the Flagship Joint Programme on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, which has components to improve the lives of adolescent girls in all regions of the country. The UN Country Team, with support from the UN Adolescent Girls Task Force, will increase economic opportunities for girls, step up their access to secondary education and mobilize communities to reject harmful traditional practices.

The girl-centred programmes will be grouped under the following priority areas:

Economic empowerment, including business development services, accessible and affordable financial services and initiatives to enhance the profitability of female-owned businesses (lead agencies: ILO, UNDP)

Literacy, secondary and tertiary education, including support to increase female enrolment (lead agency: UNICEF)

Making gender equality and girl's empowerment priorities in all programming; building capacities and collecting data (lead agency: UN WOMEN)

Community mobilization against practices such as early marriage, gender-based violence and FGM/C (leads: UNFPA and UN WOMEN with UNICEF).

“This is an opportunity for all the agencies to come together in the spirit of “One UN” and of recent UN reforms and to map out who's doing what, so that we can coordinate better, increase effectiveness, avoid duplication and scale up successful programmes,” says Helen Amdemikael of UNFPA in Ethiopia. “Under the priorities of a joint programme for adolescent girls, we will be able to mobilize additional resources through the one-fund mechanism and have a broader impact, improving many girls' lives.”

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A Lifeline for the Most Vulnerable

UN Agencies Join Forces to Expand Choices for Adolescent Girls

For indigenous girls in Guatemala, childhood and adolescence are painfully short. A typical 12-year-old girl in a remote Mayan village is too busy to go to school. She spends her days helping with the housework, fetching water, collecting firewood, cultivating the family field, making tortillas and caring for her younger siblings. But even if she did not have so many chores, her parents don't see the point of sending girls to school, so her brothers are given priority. She has no say in this decision.

Risking pregnancy and violence

Early marriage is common in her village. In all likelihood she will be pregnant soon. There is also a real danger that she may be raped by a relative or friend of the family. She suffers violence on a regular basis – physical, verbal, sexual – from family members and neighbours alike. There is a health clinic a two-hour walk from her village, but she has never gone for a check-up. She would not be allowed to go alone, and she is afraid to ask her parents to take her. Anyway, she doesn't know she is at risk of getting pregnant: the “facts of life” have never been explained to her. When she has her period she stays in the house for days on end. If she were attending school she would stay home on those days and her risks of sexual abuse would increase. There are no sanitary napkins in her village.

UN agencies aim to reach marginalized girls

To improve the lives of Guatemala's adolescent girls, the UN Adolescent Girls Task Force has come together to support a joint programme focused primarily on girls between the ages of 10 and 14 and designed to address those areas where they are most disadvantaged. Five UN agencies will pool their expertise, each one developing and implementing specific activities within the joint programme, including:

Formal and non-formal **education**, literacy, accelerated learning initiatives (to enable girls who have not been in school to catch up to their grade level) and entrepreneurship training will be supported by UNESCO and UN WOMEN. Sexuality education in schools, including how to avoid unplanned pregnancies and HIV, will be led by UNFPA. Education programmes on radio will be supported by UNICEF.

Health programmes will be led by WHO with UNFPA focusing on reproductive health. Health professionals will be trained by WHO to work with adolescents, and young girls will be trained by UNFPA, WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO as peer

Indigenous Girls Left Behind

Guatemala has one of the largest indigenous population in Latin American. Indigenous people are especially marginalized, and 86 per cent live in poverty. The lives of indigenous girls are often stunted by lack of education, early childbearing and violence. Only 5 per cent of indigenous girls have completed primary education, and only 1 in 10 girls are enrolled in secondary education.² Nearly one third of all girls in Guatemala are engaged in child labour³ and by age 18, almost 40 per cent of Mayan females are married.⁴

Fifty per cent of teenage girls – 75 per cent of those with no schooling – enter a union (not always marriage) before age 20.⁵ Half of Guatemalan girls who are sexually active have a child before the age of 19. The proportion is highest among young women with no education (68 per cent) and among indigenous women (54 per cent).⁶ High infant mortality rates reflect poverty and low educational attainment, factors for which adolescent mothers are at high risk.⁷

And risk is present in other forms. Approximately two women or girls are murdered every day in Guatemala.⁸

¹ Minority Rights Group International. (2009).

² UNFPA. (2010).

³ UNICEF. (2008).

⁴ Population Council, 2006.

⁵ Guttmacher Institute. (2006).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ghazaleh Samandari and Ilene S. Speizer. (March 2010). International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health.

⁸ BBC and CBC London. (2006). Killer's Paradise.

educators in reproductive health. They will help ensure that all girls have access to check-ups and preventive measures such as condoms, supplied by the Ministry of Health.

Violence prevention programmes will be conducted by UNICEF and UN WOMEN. UNFPA and WHO will lead programmes addressing concepts of masculinity with boys between the ages of 10 and 14 in order to change attitudes about “machismo” and head off violence before it erupts. UNESCO will implement a programme on peace in the family and community.

Participation and leadership activities will be conducted by UNICEF and UN WOMEN. Spaces for conversation, reflection and dialogue will be created where adolescent girls will have an opportunity for the first time to come together, discuss common problems, learn about their rights and share their views. The goal is to reinforce a girl’s sense of identity, self-worth and ability to speak up and participate in the life of her community. Local government bodies will be actively encouraged to include adolescent girls in their membership and incorporate their concerns, views and proposals into local development plans.

Public information, communication and training of youth communicators will be supported by UNFPA and UNESCO. Participating agencies will disseminate information on the situation of girls and their human rights in local languages.

Delivering as “One UN”

The programme will focus on rural areas with large indigenous populations, working closely with government institutions and local organizations that are able to identify and reach girls who are most marginalized. “Each of our programmes will be designed and carried out by inter-agency partnerships delivering as one,” says Ana Cecilia Escobar of WHO Guatemala. “Each agency brings its expertise and at least two will be involved in every activity. Because the needs of these girls are diverse and multi-faceted, this will enable us to better address those needs.”

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